

In 1920 the famous Yiddish author Sholem Aleichem wrote a Broadway play about the difficulty of Jewish life in the waning days of the Russian empire. It was titled *Schwer zu sein a Yid*, "It's hard to be a Jew". For many Jews a century ago, immigrants or the children of immigrants who left behind lands where Jews were marginalized and discriminated against - if not flat-out persecuted – living as a Jew was often still hard here. Two years after the premier of Sholem Aleichem's play my Uncle Irwin was born, though deliberately *not* given the name of his Uncle Isaac because that name was "too Jewish", just asking for trouble. After all, *schwer zu sein a Yid*, "It's not hard enough to be a Jew?!"

100 years later it would not be difficult to make the case that the situation for Jews has not changed all that much. These past few years has been a wakeup call for many a Jew who thought that somehow this time or this country was different. The tribalism and divisiveness of contemporary America has led to antisemitic expressions on both the right and left, both based in a perspective that define people (and Jews, especially) in a frame of "identity" over ideas.

On the one hand, white supremacists argue that Jews may appear to be white (ignoring, of course, the many Jews of color), but widespread Jewish communal support for blacks, Muslims and refugees show that we are not "really" white. When neo-Nazis and white supremacists marched in Charlottesville, their chant "the Jews will not replace us" was a manifestation of this belief that Jews are engaged in nefarious acts of supplanting whites. Robert Bowers, the man who murdered Jewish worshippers at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, did so because the congregation had recently supported bringing refugees to America. As he wrote in a social media post, "I can't sit by and watch my people get slaughtered." A survey this past year shows that despite the support many conservatives give Israel, nativist anti-Jewish attitudes are not only prevalent on the right but growing.¹

¹ https://www.eitanhersh.com/uploads/7/9/7/5/7975685/hersh_royden_antisemitism_040921.pdf

On the other hand, those on the Left dismiss our claims that we Jews are victims and subject to more hate crimes than anyone else. These progressives deny the reality of the hate claiming that it's impossible for Jews to be considered victims. They point to our success as a community as an indication that we are the *ultimate* white people, a people of privilege, who also support the last bastion of white colonialism in the Middle East. Any support for Israel as a legitimate expression of Jewish liberation and self-defense is rejected in this world view as incompatible with liberal values. As a result, Israeli scholars are prohibited from speaking on college campuses, young people expressing love for Israel are attacked on social media and we see widely held antisemitic attitudes among Blacks and Latinos in this country, as well as a growing number of outright attacks on Jews coming from those on the Left.

Our grandparents and great-grandparents would nod their heads knowingly. *Schwer zu sein a Yid*, indeed. It's always the Jew.

All that being said, I do not count myself among those who only *schrei gevalt*. Yes, antisemitism is real – and a serious problem to address – but let's also have some perspective. There is no large Jewish community in the world that remains oppressed by government sponsored Jew-hatred as there was a generation ago in the Soviet Union, Syria, and Ethiopia. Israel is a strong, vibrant, and economically secure country with growingly close ties with an increasing number of Arab nations. And, despite the cynics who predict our demise, the latest study of the Jewish community in the United States shows that we are growing in absolute numbers.² Not only are Jews active at every level of American political life, but antisemitism is condemned by nearly every American politician and support for Israel remains strong across the political spectrum. True, among Americans generally support for Palestinian statehood is growing, but support for Israel remains exceptionally strong across the ideological spectrum.³ And, as one who

² <https://www.pewforum.org/2021/05/11/jewish-americans-in-2020/>

³ <https://news.gallup.com/poll/340331/americans-favor-israel-warming-palestinians.aspx>

supports a two-state solution as the only sustainable choice for Israelis and Palestinians (if not now, then someday) I for one don't think this political shift is so bad.

So, in this "best of times, worst of times" what can we do to ensure things get better?

- First, we must, unabashedly but patiently continually make others aware when a word, article or act is antisemitic. Moreover, other people don't get to define what is anti-Jewish. We do. But just because antisemitism is so evident and visceral to us, we cannot assume it is to others. We need, then, to call out antisemitism even when (or especially when) it comes from our political allies.
- Second, we should work with politicians to advocate legislation, with policing agencies to support efforts to protect Jews and Jewish institutions, and lobby those with legal authority to support strong legal punishments for those who engage in Jewish hate crimes.
- Third, we must continue to educate about where hatred of Jews led in the past. Education alone will never stamp out hate, but it is necessary – and can help others understand that bigoted attitudes and words that define Jews as delegitimate, conspiratorial or "other" inevitably lead (as they ever have in the past) to anti-Jewish violence, if not much worse.
- Fourth, we must affirm that the Land of Israel has been, is and ever will be a core part of Jewish identity. Jews today are safer than at any point in the past 2000 years – and we must know, as should others, that it is only because of a strong Israel. Why, we must ask our anti-Zionist critics, do they say that Palestinians deserve a nation, but not the Jews? Zionism is not some "late in the nationalist game" colonialist expression; it is the just and rightful liberation movement of the Jewish people.

- Finally, we need to remind those who claim to stand up for others that their claims of justice will have no moral legitimacy if the price is hating Israel and hating Jews.

In recent weeks a group of congregants have begun to meet to address these issues – to address the rise of antisemitism and anti-Israelism. If you are interested in helping, please contact me – or my clergy colleagues – and we will put you in touch with those who think the time has come to stand up for our fellow Jews ... and ourselves.

All of this, however, is enough. No amount of education, advocacy for legal protections or support for anti-discrimination organizations can ever give us the resilience as Jews to fight antisemitism and anti-Zionism without one more crucial thing. And that is, quite simply, to affirm who we are with pride. Instead of crying *schwer zu sein a Yid*, these holidays we must resolve to build our inner sense of Jewish self-respect. This is my message: *gut zu sein a Yid* – it is a blessed gift and honor it is to be Jewish. As Hillel taught us long ago, “If I am not for myself, who will be?” For if we are not for ourselves, who will *want* to be for us?

This morning we read part of the traditional Torah reading for the first day of Rosh Hashanah, one we rarely read in Reform synagogues. It is a passage that speaks of the relationship between the father of our people, Abraham, and Avimelech, the king of the people among whom Abraham resides.

Abraham is a stranger in Avimelech's land, but he affirms his belief in God without apology. Not only does Abraham conduct himself with dignity and integrity, Avimelech also comes across as a righteous and decent person. Given their mutual respect, when a dispute arises, they find a way to resolve it – making a *brit* (a promise) bound by the esteem each shows the other.

This passage reminds us that while there may be some who hate us, there are also many good people – among them those with power – who are virtuous and will support us. As they honor us, we must reach out to them with a grateful hand

of peace, forging – as did Abraham and Avimelech – a covenant that both diminishes antisemitism and strengthens an open, diverse society for all.

I am not a Jew simply out of spite, to spit in the eye of those who hate me. And so, I refuse to define my identity as simply being an *anti*-antisemite. I want to be part of a Jewish community that has a greater sense of purpose than just survival. We must embrace, then, with pride and honor, that it is *gut tzu sein a Yid*. This, then, is my plea to you this Rosh Hashanah. Do not ask, "what am I against?", but "Why am I *for*?" Do not live only wondering, "Who must I oppose?", but confidently ask, "What Jewish values do I want to affirm that will ennoble me and better our world?"

If you are not sure what to be proud about ... come and learn. Discover your history. Come to our weekly Torah study. Seek to understand why, when empires rose and fell, we Jews did not just survive, but thrived; how Judaism as a faith evolved to foster compassion for others, affirm life, champion equality, pursue justice and love for the stranger. Be proud enough to rebuke the State of Israel for when you think it has abused its power, but aware enough of Jewish history to know the truth history has taught us that while power *does* corrupt, powerlessness corrupts even more.

And don't just *feel* Jewish pride. Show it. Do *mitzvot*. Put a *mezuzah* on your door. Place your *chanukkiyah* in your window for the world to see. Build a *sukkah* – and (since it is a pandemic and it's outside) invite others in. Do not let the haters drive you to hide your *hamsa* or your *magen David*. Defend the stranger and poor who are not Jews, but remember your own. When Jews are in trouble, when Israel is attacked, join in communal protest, write letters, challenge anti-Jewish social media posts. If someone makes fun of Jews, challenge them.

Throughout history our enemies have attacked us most when we seemed weak. So, do not cower. Accept that while we as a people may not be perfect, our teachings and traditions urge us to be noble and worthy, inspiring generations of Jews in the messianic vision of a better tomorrow. Be proud. Be strong. And if

we are, while the haters will hate, most others will respond as Avimelech did to Abraham four millennia ago when we act with collective power grounded in morality, "God is with you in everything that you do."⁴

Gut zu sein a Yid. Or, as the pop 70s Jewish rock band, Shlock Rock sang, "Be Good. Be Cool. Be Jewish."

⁴ Genesis 21:23