

Choose Life - Responding to Antisemitism

Anat Hoffman, director of the Reform movement's Religious Action Center, is one of the strongest, most confident individuals I know. When she last visited our community, however, she told me a story that touched on one of her darkest fears. A few years ago, she went to rent an apartment. Entering a room with the realtor she glanced at one particular corner. "My eyes lingered a few seconds longer than necessary at a little cubby hole, thinking," she said, "'that would be a good place to hide.'" The realtor saw her staring at that spot and said, "You're having a 'Shoah (a Holocaust) moment', aren't you?"

Anat replied, "How did you know?"

"Because," the realtor said, "Everyone has it here in this spot."

Anat went on to say that there is no Israeli Jew she knows who does not, from time to time, have a "Shoah moment" – seeing hair on the floor at the barber shop or a pile of unclaimed suitcases at the airport. As she spoke, I realized that I, too, have had more than my share of *Shoah* moments. Driving across the border into Canada at an out of the way crossing in Vermont last year the thought crossed my mind, "If we had to get out, this would be a good place." I used to dismiss thoughts like that ("If the antisemites¹ come, where would I hide?" or "How would I fight back?" or "Where would I flee?") as a bit of unfounded paranoia. I was certain the old hatred was disappearing.

Not so long ago we here could point an accusatory finger at the antisemitism in Europe – the anti-Israel rhetoric of England's Labour Party; the xenophobic and anti-immigrant right in Hungary and France that blames Jews for Europe's problems; the anti-democratic, authoritarian tendencies in Russia that has led to a recent uptick in Jewish emigration from there; the rise of Muslim antisemitism in Germany – and pretend it was so much worse there.

¹ Instead of the more common way to write this word – that is, anti-Semite – I purposely write it as a single word, based on the thinking of Deborah Lipstadt, *Antisemitism Here and Now* (Schocken Books, 2019), pp. 22-25, in part to not give any sense that this illogical hate is deserving of capitalization

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But that was before the past three years. No longer can we be so smug. Not after Charlottesville when neo-Nazis and white supremacists shouted, "the Jews will not replace us." Not after this past year, and a horror we could never have imagined – Jews murdered in their synagogue – not once, but twice.

Two years ago, I wondered during the Days of Awe whether "never again" ought still could be considered a reassuring slogan of Jewish determination. With the old hate buffeting us from all sides, it's time to admit the painful truth that we may have to read the words differently: "Never? Again?!"

It all reminds me of a dark joke. Ben goes to see his doctor because he wasn't feeling too well. After examining him, the doctor takes some samples and asks Ben to come back the following week for the results.

When he returns, his doctor says, "Well, I have some good news and some bad news. What do you want to hear first?"

Ben replies, "Let me know the good news first."

"Okay," the doctor says, "They're going to name the disease after you."

Sadly, we have had a disease of hate and violence named for us – and its name is antisemitism.

Why is anti-Jewish hate a topic for this sacred day – a time focused on for self-reflection and turning to God? Our traditions suggest that it is because Yom Kippur is actually closely related to another Jewish holiday – one that may surprise you ... Purim. In the Torah this day is called **יום הכּפּוּרִים** *Yom ha-Kippurim*.² Later Jewish traditions noted that this could be read as **יום כּפּוּרִים** *Yom k'Purim*, which means "a day like Purim".³ At first glance these holidays seem to be polar opposites – one somber, self-reflective and serious; the other filled with physical pleasures, abandon and merriment. Looked at more deeply, however, they have much in common. On Purim we hide and pretend; today we know that we cannot hide

² Leviticus 23:27

³ Vilna Gaon

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but have to face the truth. Purim's very name is about the uncertain "lottery" of life, and the precariousness of living amongst others. This is also at the heart of Yom Kippur, as we say during the *u'nitaneh tokef* ונתנה תוקף, acknowledging the awesome and dreadful truth that so much is random, beyond our control.

What, then, does this have to do with antisemitism? The answer comes from the great mystical text, the *Zohar*, which compared the entrance of the High Priest into the "Holy of Holies" in the Temple on Yom Kippur pleading on behalf of his people with Esther entering into King Ahashuerus' inner chamber to defend the Jews of her time.⁴ In this, the *Zohar* seems to be teaching that since each day our fate hangs in the balance – as both Purim and this day "like Purim" say it does – the best response is to be like Esther, who clothed herself with courage, girded herself with faith and stood before those with authority to speak on behalf of her people. Her actions serve as guide for how to respond to antisemitism:

- First, do not be silent.
- Second, let your compassion for our people be stronger than your personal, political or partisan self-interest, and
- Third, be proudly Jewish.

I will not be silent

Millenia ago the prophet Isaiah railed against the injustices of his fellow Jews and his nation. As upset as he was at the immorality of his contemporaries, he never lost sight that his goal was that they return to God's demands. In the *haftarah* the Shabbat before Rosh Hashanah we read a section from Isaiah where he offers a thunderous refusal to be silenced when it comes to defending our people and our land. Thus, he said:

For Zion's sake I will not keep silent,

⁴ *Tikkunei Zohar, Tikkun 20 and 21*

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for Jerusalem's sake I will not remain quiet ...⁵

The embodiment of Isaiah's call in our times comes from Rabbi Joachim Prinz. Born in Germany, when the Nazis came to power Prinz spoke regularly to his congregants criticizing the government and urging them to emigrate to Palestine. Arrested and facing the prospect of the death penalty for political subversion, he came to the United States as a refugee. Emboldened by his experience in Germany Prinz spoke out against what he felt was the great moral stain in America in the years after the war – this nation's underlying racism. In 1963, Prinz spoke at the Civil Rights March on Washington just before Martin Luther King Jr. uttered his famous "I have a dream" speech. His words are a clarion call to find our moral voice. He said:

When I was the rabbi of the Jewish community in Berlin under the Hitler regime, I learned many things. The most important thing that I learned under those tragic circumstances was that bigotry and hatred are not the most urgent problem. The most urgent, the most disgraceful, the most shameful and the most tragic problem is silence. A great people which had created a great civilization had become a nation of silent onlookers. They remained silent in the face of hate, in the face of brutality and in the face of mass murder. America must not become a nation of onlookers.

On this sacred day my pledge – and I hope yours – is that we do as Esther did, as Isaiah demanded, and Rabbi Prinz warned ... and find our voice to speak up. We can no longer delude ourselves. Anti-Jewish and anti-Israel rhetoric has, these past few years, reemerged with a terrible vengeance. No more can you and I put our heads in the sand. No more can we hope it will just go away on its own. No more can we let the hate go unanswered. No more.

And when we do, let us not make a "devils bargain" with those who say they love us, but just hate others. If align with the far right out of a fear of radical Islam; if we are so angry with Israel that we excuse on the Left who refuse to break ties with Louis Farrakhan calling Jews "termites"; if we are so aligned with the

⁵ Isaiah 62:1

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economic policies of Trump that we ignore his refusal to offer clear condemnation of white supremacists, we have lost our way.

So - cry out. Support groups that challenge anti-Jewish hate and ideologies that cross the line from legitimate critique to questioning Israel's right to exist. Demand of politicians that they act. Shed a light on the lies and perfidy of those who hate us. Do ... not ... be ... silent.

Don't put your partisanship above your people.

Those at the forefront of anti-Jewish attacks in this country have been Orthodox Jews – and the majority of that violence has been perpetrated in Brooklyn, where Hasidic Jews, easily identified, have been assaulted.

Too often excuses are made: "They don't blend in or only vote like their Rebbe tells them or exert undue political power." To seek a reason, however, is simply blaming the victim. There can be no legitimacy given to any violent act against Jews. We, who don't dress differently than others, who can blend in, bear the greatest responsibility to stand up against this surge of hate against our fellow Jews. First, because it is heinous and wrong. Second, because if we don't stand up when other Jews are attacked, we should expect little support when we are. On the local level, then, we must increase pressure on law enforcement and politicians to deal with these issues seriously and to speak, with us, in condemning any violence targeting Jews (as against any group).

As painful and shocking as these acts are, what truly troubles and *angers* me is how anti-Jewish hate has become so politicized.

Republicans speak of a growing problem of anti-Israel rhetoric in the Democratic party and on the Left. And they are right. When Rep. Ilhan Omar tweeted "It's all about the Benjamins", accusing Jews of using their money to manipulate America to support Israel, she tapped into an old antisemitic canard that Jews use money to unfairly game the system. And what of Rep. Rashida Tlaib

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(along with Omar), who shared a cartoon by a cartoonist who frequently promotes hate toward Israel and mocks the Holocaust, which showed Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Trump silencing them, with a Star of David in the center? As *Forward* Editor Batya Ungar-Sargon noted on Twitter, "Jews controlling and subverting world leaders is a classic anti-Semitic trope. So is Jews silencing critics. But no one has silenced the Reps. The ways in which it gets the story wrong fits into an aesthetic designed to give anti-Semites pleasure."⁶ Israel is far from a perfect democracy, but to say of Israel, where Arab citizens just voted in the third largest party, that is an apartheid state equivalent to the most venal of societies, is either a monumental display of ignorance or just what it seems – antisemitism.

And what of the claim of Democrats, that our President fosters anti-Jewish tropes? We should be glad to have Trump's support for Israel, but that should not come as a *quid pro quo* to turning a blind eye to his vicious, divisive rhetoric. As much he says that he "loves Israel" and admires Jews, when he attacks Jews who align as Democrats as being either ignorant or disloyal, his implication that Jews who disagree with him are not trustworthy is reckless, at best, and dangerous, at worst, by. When the President defends white nationalists, who scream "the Jews will not replace us" by saying there was "blame on both sides", he gives cover to antisemites who have long attacked Jews as being engaged in a global conspiracy to take over the world. When he calls immigrants "invaders" and says opponents don't belong here he fosters a climate in which antisemitism grows. In the Purim story the king may not have hated Jews, but he allowed a Jew-hater to flourish. Antisemitic dog whistles left unanswered create a climate where bigotry against Jews flourishes and violence against us becomes more likely.

⁶ <https://jewishjournal.com/news/nation/303241/jewish-groups-criticize-omar-tlaib-for-sharing-anti-semitic-cartoon/>

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I beg you – especially now, when *everything* becomes so political and partisan, to not put your politics above your love for all Jews. When her people were in danger, Esther realized the need to speak truth to power. She did so with deference and respect for the king, but unabashed in defense of her people – *all* her people.

We should do no less. Whichever “side” you are on – be honest enough entertain the possibility that no politician you support deserves unadulterated allegiance. If there is a whiff of antisemitism, do not let it go unanswered. If you are a Democrat – tell those in your party that anti-Israel words and policies cuts to the heart not only of Israel’s wellbeing, but puts Jews there and around the world at risk. If a Republican - do not allow your party to be defined by positions that divide us or words that belittle. And if you are independent, make sure that politicians in both parties understand that you will hold them personally accountable if they do not condemn antisemitic, racist, or anti-Muslim rhetoric and support legislation that unfairly targets Israel.

The Talmudic sages urged us to pray for the welfare of the government, for they understood that a stable government is the best defense against anarchy and the rule of raw power. At the same time, they urged caution when dealing with political authority, for – they wisely understood - governments never befriend anyone except for their own ends.⁷ Since neither party in this country is fully capable of policing itself, it is up to us to stand up for ourselves and our fellow Jews. If we are not for ourselves, who will be?

Be good, be cool, be Jewish – show pride in who you are (who we are)

“Be good, be cool, be Jewish” is the title of a rap by a band called Shlock Rock that I quote regularly with students in our school. The message I want to convey is that being decent and upright, as well as connecting with Jewish life, is

⁷ Pirkei Avot 3:2; Pirkei Avot 1:10 and Rabeinu Jonah to it.

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“cool” and desirable. I want young people to be proud of their inheritance as Jews – a tradition of ethical values and history of resilience. I want them to be proud Jews – “good, cool and Jewish.”

This, it seems to me, is the best response to those who revile us. If we want to show antisemites why they are so misguided, how ignorant they are and how ridiculous are their insults, it is not enough just to *shrei gevalt* (to say how terrible they are). I didn't become a rabbi nor to I connect to Jewish life just to become an anti-antisemite.

I am Jewish – and proudly so - because of all we bring to the world.

We began as the lowest of the low, the degraded and oppressed. In response our traditions speak of justice for all who are debased and that the truest mark of the Jew is compassion.⁸

We were strangers in the land of Egypt, but instead of hating those who are foreigners, we are commanded to love the stranger.

We have been exiled and cast aside, ever the wanderer, too often refugees - and so we know that a decent, compassionate nation embraces all who seek liberty and opportunity, not only the privileged.

We hear in the call of the *shofar* an echo of the cry of the mother of an ancient enemy, and so learn to not allow our fight with some people become a hatred of their nation or faith.

We have prayed, century after century “next year in Jerusalem”, and so we know that Zionism is the legitimate liberation movement of the Jewish people.

We cherish the Bible and Talmud not because they offer a single vision for how to live a sacred life, but precisely because they are filled with multiple voices and competing visions. Thus, we affirm diversity and differences of opinion, eschewing binary thinking (that is, that those who disagree with us are not only wrong, but losers or traitors).

⁸ Babylonian Talmud, *Yevamot* 79a

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We marvel in the return of our people to the land of Israel, knowing that while power corrupts, powerlessness corrupts even more. Israel is the national example of Jewish pride, teaching that redemption comes not when we cower, but only when we affirm ourselves and our values.

Though the world may seem "darkness and void", we are a people that affirms meaning, purpose and joy.

This is our legacy – and one to be proud to learn, affirm and bring to the world.

In a few minutes Torah we will read commands us to "choose life." Is not such a command unnecessary? What *else* would we choose? But if we give into our paranoia, the nightmares of our "*Shoah* moments" we choose despair and death over life. Throughout history others sought to deny and harass us, but our mothers and fathers refused to be defined by those who hate. Instead, they *lived* – forming a tradition that is, in the words of writer Bari Weiss, "generative, humane, joyful and life-affirming."

Come, then, be like Esther. For Zion's sake, do not be silent. Stand before those with power, even those closest to you, and defend your people (and any person wrongly attacked or denigrated). Finally, most important of all - be proud of who you are ... who we are. Despite it all – *am Yisrael chai*, the people of Israel lives. "Choose life."