

Rosh HaShanah 1 2019/5780: AntiSemitism

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The Allegheny. The Pirates. The Steelers. Carnegie Mellon. And as of October 27, 2018, The Tree of Life Synagogue.

The word "Pittsburgh" will never *not* evoke the events of that day, on the Shabbat of Sukkot last year. Jewish communities around the country were at prayer when the news began to trickle in. Active shooter. Synagogue. At first, three victims... then the number rose to an astonishing 11. If it wasn't already obvious, it then became crystal clear: Jewish communities in our country are not immune to hatred or violence. It's not only churches and mosques and Sikh temples. It's shuls, too. It's Tree of Life in Pittsburgh. And it's the Chabad of Poway, California. Shuls just like ours.

For many of us, today is the first time we're here in the synagogue since Pittsburgh. This is, of course, our community's largest gathering since that day. I'm guessing that many of us thought twice about coming to services this year. Or that we avoided coming at other times but felt we had to come for Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur. Or that we checked with the office about the security plan for these holy days. Or that we suddenly noticed the police cars. Or that we decided today to sit somewhere closer to an exit, just in case. Or that we have made a mental note of all of the exits. These thoughts now pervade the minds of Jewish people around our country since Pittsburgh. If any have crossed your mind, you are not alone. I've had them, too.

Indulge me this opportunity to review the steps our security committee has implemented since Pittsburgh on behalf of us all:

Our building remains locked at all times, except when we have an off-duty Norwalk police officer patrolling our campus. We have upgraded our security equipment, and each member now has an individual keypad code to access the building during the week. And

several months ago, 40 of us participated in an active shooter training, including an actual drill. God forbid we ever need to use that knowledge.

I want to thank our security committee for their hard work, our Federation for making the security consultants available to us, and each of you for contributing extra funds to make all of this possible. We're all in this boat together, and we're working as a community to make it safe.

As someone who spends a lot of time here--both weekday and Shabbat, daytime and evening--I want to tell you, I feel a marked difference in the last year. I love bringing my own child here for morning minyan, Shabbat services, and starting in a few weeks, to Nitzan Nursery School, and I know she is safe. Hopefully you feel a positive change as well. Our synagogue building is in fact more secure, and we have fostered relationships with the officers at the Norwalk PD, who have become our friends as they keep a watchful eye while we celebrate inside.

I have to tell you, I grew up learning about antisemitism as a thread in Jewish history; I was pretty darn sure it would not be a part of my own life, much less that of my children. Perhaps you have had similar thoughts. And while Pittsburgh was a wake-up call for many of us, it's clear that antisemitic incidents have been on the rise in our country and around our world. Remember the HyperCacher Kosher grocery store in Paris? Or the Charlottesville shouts "Jews will not replace us!"? No doubt you recall the highly publicized report from the ADL that antisemitic incidents increased by 57% nationwide from 2016 to 2017. In our area, it's been 2 short years since swastikas were etched in the bathroom at Middlebrook Middle School in Wilton; and just 2 weeks since they were found at Staples High School in Westport and at Middlesex Middle School in Darien. And you may have seen the News12 interview just last Monday profiling our own 13-year-old congregant, Alex Frey, bravely talking about antisemitic comments made to his face at hockey practice. It seems every day brings something new to lament.

Friends, today we begin a new year together under this threatening cloud. And while there is much to celebrate this Rosh HaShanah, we must acknowledge that the storm likely won't blow over very soon. We *must* talk about this resurgence of antisemitism. What is it, and where does it come from? What wisdom can our tradition offer us in this time of pain and fear? And what can we do--individually, communally, and nationally--to combat this hatred seemingly directed at us?

What is antisemitism?

The best description I've heard is from New York Times editor Bari Weiss, who grew up in Pittsburgh and celebrated her Bat Mitzvah at the Tree of Life synagogue. She's also the author of a new book *How to Fight Anti-Semitism*. Weiss calls antisemitism the greatest conspiracy theory, boiled down to this scapegoat of an idea: "All begins with the Jew and all returns to the Jew." And in truth, it has nothing to do with actual Jewish people. Weiss asserts that antisemitism in a given culture is like a virus that lives within a human body. It's an idea that's out there and always has been. Just like a healthy body can keep a virus at bay so well that you might not even know you had it, the same is true for antisemitism. A strong culture, a culture that emanates civic duty and communal responsibility, is strong enough to prevent or combat antisemitic slurs and attacks. When a culture begins to break down, the virus of antisemitism flares up.

If you are interested in a deeper dive into the complexity of today's antisemitism, I recommend both Weiss's book and historian Deborah Lipstadt's new book *Antisemitism: Here and Now*.

When we think about why we're seeing a resurgence of antisemitism today, Weiss correctly points out that we need to take the long view. For most of Jewish history, the cultures where our people lived left room for antisemitism to incubate, to spread. It was often contagious, with dreadful outcomes for actual Jewish people. Our experience of relative quiet over the last 2 generations, she argues, has been a lovely bubble during which

Americans placed a high value on civic engagement and on looking out for one another. Our fellow Americans and our local and national leadership worked really hard to make this a place that we have all been proud to call home.

Today, our society strains under its many cracks--social, economic, and political, to name a few. Antisemitism is once again spreading.

Now, unfortunately, there's not much we can do to change the mind of a bigot or an extremist. We can monitor individuals and incidents, as the ADL does so vigilantly. We can protect ourselves in the ways we have put into place.

But we're all feeling emotional stress as a direct result of our people being the targets of hatred, the fear that it might be us next. What we *can* control is how we respond.

There's a very famous song that comes to mind, whose words are attributed to Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav, a leading Chasidic master: *kol ha'olam kulo gesher tzar me'od, veba'ikar lo lefached k'lal*/The whole entire world is a very narrow bridge, and the main thing is not to be afraid. Campers at Jewish camps and participants in Jewish youth groups have been singing these words with all their might for generations, and it's not just because of the catchy tune. The message is powerful. It's empowering to consider a life free of fear.

It's also not quite true to Rebbe Nachman's original teaching! He used a different form of the verb *lefached*/to fear--he said *veba'ikar lo lehitpached k'lal*, where the word *lehitpached* is reflexive, referring to oneself. A better translation would be "the main thing is not to make oneself afraid" or "the main thing is not to live in fear". I prefer this version. It may not fit with the melody, but it's truer to life. Because you know what? Fear is a natural, essential response; we can't survive without it. What we can control, to the best of our human ability, is whether we let the fear take over our lives. With Rebbe Nachman's words ringing in our ears, we can make the choice to recognize our fear, put it in its corner, and continue to embrace all of life's opportunities.

But what about practical advice, you ask. What are we supposed to do when we hear of an antisemitic attack or, God forbid, discover one perpetrated against us?

In short: We must respond; we must not overreact; we must not let antisemitism rule our Jewish lives; and we must do all we can to co-create the society we want to inhabit. I'll explain.

First things first, we must call it out. It's obvious *and* it requires vigilance and persistence. We must not ignore antisemitism or accept it. Report it to the ADL, post about it online, write an article. Calling it out, by definition, means that the perpetrator doesn't just get away with it. It also means that we don't have to deal with it alone. Friends, family, the Jewish community, the interfaith community, the press, law enforcement, local leaders and school leaders join together to support victims of antisemitism. If we remain silent, we give an incident power. We must call it out.

The second point is crucial, and it's challenging. Don't overreact. Lipstadt illustrates it with a story. One Yom Kippur, at Emory, where she teaches, Jewish students returned from services to find swastikas graffitied on the Jewish frat house. The students and their parents wanted to call out this awful attack--on Yom Kippur, no less! But Professor Lipstadt advised them to lay low--not a popular opinion among the families, as you can imagine. What happened? First, the university quickly condemned the attack. And, soon afterward, student activists called on the entire campus population to wear blue shirts the next day, to show support for the Jewish students and to marginalize the perpetrators. The next day, the campus was flooded in blue. The Jewish students and their families were enveloped by the support of their friends and colleagues, without having to stand up for themselves as the targets of hate. I love this story because it demonstrates that the Jewish people are not alone.

This same dynamic played out in our area, in Westport after the swastikas at Staples and in Wilton after the swastikas at Middlebrook. All facets of these communities came out to

condemn the graffiti, to offer support to the Jewish students and families, and to strategize about how to help the students understand the terrible impact these symbols have. While Jewish families certainly spoke up and called it out, it was clear that we were not alone.

Number 3: We must not let antisemitism derail our Jewish lives. We are not Jewish in order to be *anti*-antisemites; Judaism teaches us to live joyful, thoughtful, celebratory and supportive Jewish lives. We must continue to do that, no matter what. Because remember, antisemitism isn't about us, and we mustn't let ourselves be lured into thinking it is. In *every* generation, Jews determined they would not be the end of the Jewish people. Our people have made the choice to use their experiences of persecution as the impetus to write a new chapter. Now it's our turn to uphold, to strengthen, and to innovate.

And lastly, and perhaps most crucially: We must work to make our society the one we want for ourselves and our children. Specifically, we must work to build bridges between the Jewish community and those adjacent to and among us. If antisemitism seeps out into a society with fewer connections between its citizens, it would seem that one remedy would be to increase these things. Remember how powerful it was to gather the day after Pittsburgh with almost 1000 people of all faiths to mourn and show solidarity? Or the feeling of being here for #ShowUpForShabbat the week after Pittsburgh? Remember the incredibly powerful campaign from the Muslim community in Pittsburgh, raising funds to cover the costs of the 11 Jewish funerals and numerous medical bills? Unfortunately, in the last year alone, there have been too many occasions that brought the interfaith community together in mourning.

Yes, we know how to mobilize after a tragedy. But it's actually the bridge-building that happens during periods of relative calm that weaves the fabric of a healthy society. We rely on those relationships when tragedy strikes.

I'd like to share 2 particular opportunities for interfaith bridge-building in this new year, and I hope you will find them compelling.

1. I will be co-leading an interfaith study series in February with a pastor and an imam, right here at Beth El. My dream is that members from all of our congregations will form long-lasting connections through our study together. Details are in your Program Brochure.
2. Our Beth El continues to be a member congregation of CONECT, Congregations Organized for a New Connecticut. Hopefully this organization is familiar to you by name. CONECT's 25 congregations span the religious spectrum and work together on issues of social change, including gun safety, mental health, and eliminating discrimination in the public schools. Every event our members have attended has been energizing and relational. If you'd like to learn more and share what keeps you up at night, come to our Beth El CONECT house meeting. Details are in your Program Brochure.

Remember what Rebbe Nachman taught? *Kol ha'olam kulo gesher tzar me'od, veba'ikar lo lehitpached k'lal*. The whole entire world is a very narrow bridge, and the main thing is not to live in fear. It's easier said than done, no doubt. But we have very practical guidance: to call out antisemitism when we see it, to not overreact, to strengthen our own Jewish lives, and to weave a more wholesome, caring society, one relationship at a time.

The vast majority of rabbis in America are offering the same message today, regardless of denomination or political affiliation. Today, the Jewish people are united in rising above hate and we are anxious to forge relationships with anyone who is willing to connect with us in friendship. That gives me hope for this new year of 5780. May this new year bring less hate and more love, less conflict and more peace. May the bridges we build bring healing to our world. *Ken yehi ratzon*, May this be God's will. Amen.