

What We Are For – Rosh Hashana Morning
September 30, 2019 – 1 Tishrei 5780
Congregation Emanu-El of Westchester
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I've never given an antisemitism sermon. I've never given it because I've been blessed to live completely secure, completely accepted and respected in this America that I love so much. But this past year, the ancient ugliness of the longest hatred has seeped into the American experience in nefarious and deadly ways. Let me be clear at the outset: This is not Germany in the 1930s. There is no official state sponsored antisemitism in America or in Europe. But we would be foolish not to take antisemitism seriously. I am no scholar of antisemitism and so, while I will describe various manifestations of it, I do not attempt to give a full history or a wide ranging list of policy prescriptions. But what I do see in my interactions with you and in looking at the world around is that I see the ways that antisemitism impacts how we think about ourselves. And, Jewish self-understanding, Jewish identity, now that is something in which I have some expertise. And so, that is primary focus from which we examine antisemitism this morning.

When considering how antisemitism impacts our personal Jewish identity, the great teacher of antisemitism, Deborah Lipstadt, draws a useful analogy to a simple bit of grammar. Object and subject.¹ When it comes to identity, to how we understand ourselves, we want to be the subject taking action and creating reality rather than being the object upon whom action is taken. When we allow antisemitism – what we are against – to be the main source of our Jewish identity, we begin to see ourselves primarily as objects. Seeing ourselves through the lens of antisemitism, through the eyes of those who discriminate against us, dangerously distorts our self-conception. We must instead derive our Jewish identity from what we are for, namely a Jewish life filled with meaning and purpose. We then understand ourselves as subjects not objects. As subjects we control our destiny, living lives that matter. That is a positive Jewish identity. Having that positive Jewish identity not only adds value and holiness to our lives, it also will allow us to defeat what we are against, to defeat antisemitism. So let's explore what we are against and answer each with what we are for.

We are against the quiet antisemitism that lurks in corners, the kind we laugh off when it comes into view. We are against the “Jew them down” antisemitism, the one that assumes we're all lecherous lenders antisemitism, the kind the makes for non-Jewish clubs and non-Jewish towns and non-Jewish banks and non-Jewish law firms antisemitism. This is the kind that uses terms like “too Jewish,” that makes us feel disquieted by the practice of other Jews, the kind that underlies our concerns when we see a Jewish criminal in the headlines – “Did he have to be Jewish?” we ask, worrying in our *kishkes* that it might change our estimation in our neighbors' eyes. This quiet current trickles near the foundations of our communities, its erosion making it easy for any of us to drift away from Jewish life and Jewish peoplehood. We are against that quiet, ubiquitous antisemitism.

We are for Jewish living in spite of that background antisemitism. You. You sitting here today answer it with commitment. You take off work. You take off school. And we in this sanctuary form a beloved community of pride in tradition and holiness and the communal responsibility to

¹ Lipstadt, Deborah E. *Antisemitism Here and Now*: Schocken, 2019. Print. Page 240.

pass this whole Jewish project on to the next generation. We answer lower affiliation rates with stable and growing membership, a *kehilah kedosha*, a sacred community that people want to support and belong to. Being for synagogues makes for strong synagogues and strong Jewish life, the best antidotes to that quiet, persistent antisemitism.

We are against the age-old myth of a Jewish cabal that controls the world. Patently ridiculous! But it echoes. It echoes when people decry the “globalists”. It shouts with whispers that Jews stayed home on 9-11. Like other core antisemitic beliefs, the theory that we nefariously control the world shifts through the ages. Medieval Christian clergy promoted blood libel. Nazis explained Germany’s post-WWI troubles. In Charlottesville, Unite the Right marchers chanted “Jews will not replace us.” Parts of the progressive left project a conspiracy of outsized power and control onto Israel. Israel does not, in fact, have all the power to end the conflict with the Palestinians. Those claims take antisemitic theories of Jewish control and twist them into overly simplistic responses to the complex and truly heartbreaking Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We are against this theory of Jewish world control applied to Jews and we are against this antisemitic trope poorly disguised as anti-Zionism.

While we can in no way control the world, we are for fixing it. Tikkun olam, repair of the world, gives us avenues for impactful Jewish expression. The mystics teach that sparks of God’s holiness scattered about during creation. Tikkun olam implores us to gather those sparks to bring holiness and light to places of darkness. And you do this! You support charities, help people, volunteer your time, show courtesies to others, smile at strangers. You embody what we are for. And together, too, together as a congregation, we repair the world. We strive to make our society more fair, run drives to provide for the downtrodden, gather across generations to make a difference, and embrace one another in times of mourning. We do tikkun olam as individuals. We do tikkun olam as a congregation. We do tikkun olam because it is what we are for.

We are against antisemitic acts in our schools and on our streets. Our students tell of whispered comments in school hallways, on sports teams, of swastikas carved into locker room walls. They tell of coins tossed at them to taunts of, “Pick them up, Jew.” On our streets we see more antisemitic graffiti, smashed headstones in our cemeteries, and, lately ominous physical attacks against ultra-Orthodox Jews. White nationalist or anti-Zionist, racially driven or ignorant teen impulses, these acts of antisemitism come when antisemitic hate speech goes unanswered or shrugged off. These acts come from ignorance and division. And they come when we allow bonds among Jews to deteriorate so that we do not speak with one voice. We are against antisemitic vandalism and violence directed at any Jew in any place no matter the size of their yarmulke or hat or lack thereof.

And what are we for? We are for forging ties of understanding, ties of understanding that cut the buds of antisemitic attitudes, the buds of division and separation, before they blossom. We are for building relationships, both Jew to Jew and Jew to other. And we do that starting with the golden rule: “what is hateful to you, do not do to others.”² So, as we reject antisemitism, we let our friends and allies know that we reject all forms of discrimination, prejudice, and racism explicit and subtle. As a congregation we create those allies and strive to build bridges of understanding through our ESL program, our refugee resettlement work, the AJC Diversity

² Talmud. Tractate Shabbat 31a

Breakfast, and our interfaith Thanksgiving service. We strengthen bonds within the Jewish community, too. We worship and learn with other synagogues, Reform and Conservative and Orthodox and under Rabbi Ross's leadership our teens now do, too. In my leadership role on the Westchester Board of Rabbis and as a chaplain for the Westchester County Police Department, I bring our vision of pluralism and acceptance to the broader Jewish community and to our county officials and officers. Where there might otherwise be suspicion between congregations and denominations, between Jews and others, Emanu-El leads the way in building trust and relationships.

We are against the politicization of Jews and antisemitism. We are used to the unconditional support of both political parties. Today, more and more, we see both parties using us as political pawns.³ Politicians and their supporters quickly point out the antisemitism of their rivals but all of us are guilty of failing to fight the antisemitism in our own parties.⁴ Too many on the left are blind to the antisemitic creep in the progressive wing of the Democratic party. Some advocates who could otherwise be called true champions of social justice, employ classic antisemitic tropes. Usually they swap out the word "Israel" or "Zionist" for "Jew", but simply doing a search and replace does not change the antisemitic nature of their remarks. On the right, often taking the form of blatant White Nationalism, antisemitism has proven deadly in Pittsburgh and Poway. But it need not kill people to cause damage. We find antisemitism in much of the anti-immigrant rhetoric and right-wing conspiracy theories about people like George Soros and Michael Bloomberg. Too many politicians and pundits, wittingly or unwittingly, traffic in antisemitic tropes that embolden hardcore antisemites in scary ways. If it is unwittingly then they need to be more responsible and we need to hold them to account. If it is done on purpose – then shame on them. When will we focus our energies on antisemitism in our own political parties? When Democrats call out Democrats, when Republicans call out Republicans, we become clear on what we are against rather than who we are against. This brings the issue into sharp relief and lifts it above the noise of politics as usual. We may find – and many of us do find – the antisemitism on the other side more troubling, but I have new for you, outside of the voting booth each of us can make the biggest difference in our own parties. There is no scenario in which using antisemitism as a wedge issue is good for the Jews. We are against politicians and pundits using us as political pawns.

We are for bipartisan support of the Jewish community. For 2000 years, no Jewish community has had it so good. We live here not at the whim of some sovereign who could change his mind at any moment. We live here not simply tolerated as a minority "other". No, America fully accepts us and we participate at every level of society, in every field of endeavor, in every corner of this great land. Pew Survey respondents consistently rank Jews as the most admired religious group in the country.⁵ Politically, we can maintain this incredible standing by building relationships with elected officials of both parties based on shared values and open sharing of Jewish culture and ideas. Outside of politics, we will maintain our standing – as I said – by continuously building bridges with other religious and ethnic groups. And we will maintain it by

³Deborah Lipstadt and Yehuda Kurtzer: Antisemitism Here and Now. Rabbinic Torah Seminar, Shalom Hartman Institute. 2019. <https://youtu.be/YPQiUI2FwPc>

⁴ <https://forward.com/opinion/423474/while-the-left-and-right-point-fingers-no-one-is-fighting-anti-semitism/>

⁵ Americans Express Increasingly Warm Feelings Toward Religious Groups. February 15, 2017. <https://pewrsr.ch/2nzFuvO>

actively continuing to contribute to the civic life of our communities, our schools, and the national organizations that work to make our country great. Finally, we will maintain it by welcoming every Jew at every part of the political spectrum in our congregations. That does not mean being apolitical or avoiding the ways Judaism speaks to the events of our day. The prophetic call from our tradition is too loud to allow for that. But it does mean creating safe places for debate and diversity of opinion.

Together with 398 congressional Republicans, Democrats and independents, we are against the global Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Movement and the Israel purity tests it inspires. First of all, we know that not a single university has implemented a boycott policy.⁶ Nevertheless, we see the BDS movement preying on the good intentions of progressive students by bringing them down a path from legitimate critique of Israeli policy to blatantly antisemitic calls for the dissolution of the entire Jewish State.⁷ Sadly, this small but well-organized movement has taken its antisemitic message to other progressive movements. Anti-Israel signs show up everywhere from the Women’s March in DC, to the Dyke March in Chicago, to the anti-Brexit demonstration on Parliament Square Green in London. This creates a purity test that excludes pro-Israel Jews and others from the progressive camp. We are also against the purity tests that demand a strict adherence to Israel-right-or-wrong perspectives. More and more we see politicians on the right demanding this type of uncritical support for Israel.⁸ Every nation has issues that deserve critique, including our beloved Israel. Purity tests? They are a death knell for any inclusive society or movement, and purity tests involving Jews? That can’t lead anywhere good.

We are for bipartisan support of Israel. We will open the eyes of our elected officials to Israel’s vibrant, diverse, if messy, democracy. We will teach our politicians and our neighbors that friends can differ with a given Israeli government on a given policy issue and still be a friend of Israel. We will introduce them to allies in Israeli society and government who share their views and their policy preferences. We will engage in cultural exchanges and travel to Israel and dive into deep nuanced conversation about the full range of issues. Doing so, we will soar above the tweet culture, embracing the complexities and reveling in an optimistic, hopeful future for that little democracy in the Middle East. Doing this on a bipartisan basis, without purity tests, will ensure another generation of broad support for the miracle that is the Modern Jewish State.

We are against succumbing to what Columbia University professor Salo Wittmayer Baron called “the lachrymose conception of Jewish history.”⁹ Yes, we have struggled, there is bitterness. But we will not understand ourselves through the eyes of those who would oppress us. We will not be objects. We will be self-confident subjects who know the sweet with the bitter, who know what we are for.

⁶ Campus BDS threat shifting to academic boycotts. Jewish News Syndicate. August 19, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2HbpO8M>

⁷ Halbfinger, David M., Michael Wines and Steven Erlanger. “Is B.D.S. Anti-Semitic? A Closer Look at the Boycott Israel Campaign” The New York Times. July 27, 2019. <https://nyti.ms/2JTF1fb>

⁸ Vazquez, Maegan and Jim Acosta. “Jewish leaders outraged by Trump saying Jews disloyal if they vote for Democrats” CNN. <https://cnn.it/2Nm1YLj>

⁹ Baron, Salo W., “Newer Emphases in Jewish History,” *Jewish Social Studies* 25 no. 4 (1963): 245–258 Google Scholar.

We are for claiming our link in the 3,000 years long chain of Jewish tradition. We are for pride in our history and hope in our future. We are for Jewish values of honesty and generosity and taking care of one another. We are for caring for the orphan, standing by the widow, and welcoming the stranger. We are for honoring and fostering and celebrating the divine spark in every human being.

We are for our people, those living in our ancient homeland and those in Brooklyn and those in Miami and those just down the street. We are for the affiliated Jews sitting around you in the pews and we are for the unaffiliated Jews who we count as our friends and neighbors. We are for straight Jews and gay Jews, Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist Jews. We are for Ashkenazi and Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews and Jews of color from every corner of the world. We are for our people.

We are for Torah. We are for Torah in the narrowest sense of the scrolls that we keep in our ark and we are for Torah in the broadest sense of the collected wisdom of our people passed down and discussed and debated and cherished through the centuries.

And we are for God. We are for the God that you don't believe in, the God that you question, and the God that you do believe in; the God that you feel walk with you in times of sadness and the God that lifts you higher in times of joy. We are for the God that inspires us to honor and hold close the important people in our lives and the God that peeks out at us from the eyes of perfect strangers.

Yes, we are against antisemitism but even more than that, we are for the whole depth of Jewish life. And when we know what we are for, when we are subjects and not objects, when our source of Jewish identity springs from deep wells of tradition and family and values and community, when we live this way then antisemitism doesn't stand a chance.

כן יהי רצון

May this be God's will