

Yom Kippur 5780
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There were two people walking down the street in New York City. There were trucks rumbling by, cab drivers honking their horns, people talking on their cell phones, bicycle messengers blowing their whistles. Abruptly, one friend turned to the other and asked, “Did you hear that sound?” “What sound?” asked the friend.

“The sound of a cricket,” said the first. “A cricket?”

“There’s a cricket in that window box across the street,” the one friend told the other.

“You’ve got to be kidding! There’s no way in the midst of all this noise—trucks, horns, people shouting, whistles—you could hear the sound of a cricket in a window box across the street. No way!”

“No? Well, let’s go look.” The two friends crossed the street, looked in the window box, and sure enough there was a cricket!

“That’s unbelievable,” the friend said. “How in the world did you do that?”

“It’s easy,” said the one friend. “Watch this.” The friend reached into her pocket and took out a quarter, then purposefully dropped it onto the sidewalk.

At the sound of the quarter hitting the pavement, everyone stopped: the trucks, the cabs, the bike messengers and the people on their phones. The air was still as everyone turned to see where the coin had fallen.

The friend who dropped the quarter looked at the other. “See,” she said to him, “it all depends on what you’re listening for.”

Two years ago, I was invited to give a presentation on Chanukah to high school students. The student club hosting the event had made potato latkes and had purchased jelly donuts. I also brought some chocolate coins we call by the Yiddish word for money: “gelt”. After my presentation, there was a Q & A. What do you think the very first question was? Surprisingly it wasn’t anything about Chanukah. Nor was it: Do Jews believe in Jesus as the messiah? It wasn’t even: *Why* don’t Jews believe in Jesus as the messiah? Both of which are commonly asked first questions. The very first question was, “Why are Jews considered to be greedy?” I was a little taken aback. What prompted this of all questions? What did this student hear? Maybe it was the explanation of the chocolate gelt?

In that moment I responded that surely Jews *aren’t* any greedier than anyone else. Some teachers and an administrator who were standing to the side nodded their heads. I then went on to reframe the question: why have Jews been associated with money? The Q&A went on a little longer and then the students enjoyed the refreshments, but that question has been nagging at me ever since.

I don’t know how many of you have had to face this or related comments: Jews are greedy, Jews are stingy, all Jews are rich, Jews form a secret cabal that holds the purse strings of the worldwide financial systems. This nefarious association of Jews with money has an incredible shelf life.

By way of example, last year Republicans in at least five states (AK, WA, CT, NC, CA) published ads showing Jewish democrats clutching money. The particular ad disparaging state Rep. Matt Lesser of Connecticut shows a cartoon of him holding up \$100 dollar bills, wide-eyed and maniacally smiling as if entranced by the money.¹

Democratic Representative Ilhan Omar criticized AIPAC by tweeting “It’s all about the Benjamins, baby.” This past month, three city council members in Trenton, NJ defended their use of the phrase: “jewling someone down.”² Please don’t be distracted by any party affiliations. Wittingly or unwittingly, these politicians all further an age-old nefarious association of Jews with money that at different times in our history have played star roles in our persecution. “Anti-Semitism is fueled by the malicious but often feeds on the ignorance of the well-intentioned,” says Bari Weiss in her book *How to Fight Anti-Semitism*. And in order to call it out, we need to be “able to accurately recognize and describe it.”³

For many millennials, the shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh last October was the first time they realized that anti-Semitism exists at all in the U.S. Yet, as we witness a rise in anti-Semitism around the world and a more vocal and emboldened anti-Semitism here in the U.S., it’s important to have a conversation on how to identify anti-Semitism when we see it and respond to it in ways that will shut it down or transform it. As part of this effort, this morning I’d like to peel back the layers of the stereotype of the greedy Jew and its related tropes.

Abe Foxman, former National Director of the Anti-Defamation League in his book *Jews & Money*, details the history of this stereotype. I have chosen to emphasize three discrete historical developments that contributed to the rise of this particular class of anti-Semitic tropes. While parts of this may be familiar to some of you, in bringing this history to your attention I hope to empower us in calling out and responding to instances of anti-Semitism when we face them.

If you know the familiar summary of many of our holidays: They tried to kill us, we survived, let's eat, then you know that we have had to face anti-Jewish sentiment since ancient times. This enmity, however, took on its "full, tragic proportions," says Foxman, "with the rise of Christianity."⁴ This is the first development. Why must we bring Christianity into the picture? Because the early Christians defined themselves as the new Jews: God's new chosen people replacing the old. This replacement or supersession as it has been called was based on the belief that the Messiah had come and would come again. In the Christian view, the Jews were Messiah deniers. And so for this, the Jews couldn't just be ignored, they needed to be discredited. As part of this discrediting enterprise, in the second century, Bishop Melito of Sardis accused the Jews of deicide: that is, of killing Jesus. What was his proof? The New Testament story of Judas's betrayal. Judas, one of Jesus's twelve apostles, betrays Jesus to the authorities who were looking to arrest him. Judas betrays Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. Because Judas accepts money for his betrayal, his treachery is also seen as greedy. The stereotype of the disloyal, greedy Jew gets its start.

Though reputable historians "have demonstrated that the execution of Jesus was instigated not by the Jewish people but by the Roman authorities," this libel became the dominant interpretation of Jesus's death for centuries, and a common motive for persecuting Jews.⁵ It wasn't until 1965 that the Vatican rescinded the accusation of deicide⁶ and in 2011 Pope Benedict the XVI reiterated that there was no basis in scripture for holding the Jews responsible,⁷ but still today, our children can hear this accusation from their classmates. To be sure and let me be clear, many Christians do not hold this view and would find it horrifying, offensive and anathema to who they are, which is

certainly attested to by the many interfaith families in our congregation. Nevertheless, despite praiseworthy attempts by Christian religious leaders, not everyone has gotten the memo. For those grasping for a way to bully Jews, it's still a false charge of disloyalty and greed in the anti-Semite's arsenal.

Second, Foxman argues that the specific stereotype of Jews with money became more sinister and dangerous in the Middle Ages. "By the thirteenth century, Jews were forbidden to own land in virtually all of Europe, which meant in practice, that they were unable to take part in agriculture (which had been their chief occupation in biblical times). They were also increasingly barred from participation in crafts and manufacturing—for example, the Jews of southern Europe, who had pioneered techniques for the making of glass and paper, were gradually driven out of these businesses and displaced by Christian owners."⁸ The occupations open to Jews were international commerce and the much despised moneylending, which is the forerunner to today's financial sector. Centuries of social and economic exclusion made Jews vulnerable to attacks from the masses and to extortion by those in power.

And third related to the second: the practice of charging interest on loans, also called usury, a common practice today, has been central to the condemnation of the Jews. What does Torah say about lending money at interest? In two places (Ex 22:25, Lev 25:35-7), Torah forbids the Israelites from charging interest to a fellow Israelite who is poor. Presumably, then, at one time fellow Israelites who weren't poor could be charged interest. One other verse forbids charging interest to all Israelites while permitting it to non-Israelites (Deut 23:20). The salient point of these verses is to state the exceptions to what would have been the rule, which is to loan money at a fee, for otherwise the risk of

lending any money is too great and economies grind to a halt. Indeed, as economies became more sophisticated, the Torah prohibition against charging interest even to other Jews proved to be a stumbling block to healthy economic activity and eventually demanded reinterpretation.⁹ For all practical purposes earning money on a loan within the Jewish community has been regularly practiced since the second century.¹⁰ The church, however, outlawed charging interest in the twelfth century, and the economies of Europe subsequently suffered. Further discussion of the role of debt and credit in society would be fascinating and relevant but better to be offered by someone else and at another time. Suffice it to say even the church authorities came to recognize the need for charging interest, and so they made an exception for non-Christian business people. Foxman says the unspoken rationale was, “Since the Jews are condemned to hell anyway, they might as well commit one more sin—and provide the rest of us with a valuable service in the process.”¹¹

These three historical developments: the attempt to discredit Judaism, centuries of social and economic exclusion, and consigning the Jewish population to moneylending for which they were simultaneously needed and despised created the perfect scapegoat. So, when people today use these stereotypes, wittingly or unwittingly they are keeping the tools of scapegoating alive. Scapegoating lies either inchoate and under the surface ready to be ignited at some later time, or it is dangerously overt. Scapegoating is never good. Yet that is at heart the implicit or explicit threat contained in the stereotypes, and why they need to be called out, even if it means disrupting the dinner party. A respectful, “I don’t mean to embarrass you, but what you just said is not okay. If you like at some point I can explain to you why,” will do in a pinch.¹² The power of an unchecked anti-

Semitic trope is such that the clink of a chocolate coin will always draw more attention than the inviting smells of fried potato latkes and jelly donuts. And while some comments are more threatening than others, even the offhanded anti-Semitic remark serves to keep the stereotypes simmering. Furthermore, they are demonstrably false.

The Jewish community of the first century did not kill Jesus. Jews who were dominant in the financial industry in the Middle Ages, were replaced by Christians in the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries, ending any dominance in that field by the early modern period.¹³ There are powerful Jews in business but the vast majority in real numbers of US business leaders are not Jewish. Most banks in the United States are owned by non-Jews. Jews were excluded from Wall St. firms until the 1970s. Not to be deterred, Jews started their own firms using their own names in company logos. Like the quarter sounding on the pavement, Jewish names draw attention while other names are just noise.

Casually stating that all Jews are rich, even if you think you're simply stating a fact, or even if said in admiration, is simply untrue. Fourteen to twenty percent of Jews live on or near the poverty line, a percentage in line with other ethnic groups. Furthermore, perpetuating this myth has potentially fatal consequences. In 2006 Ilan Halimi, a 23 year old, working-class Frenchman was kidnapped by gang members for extortion. His attackers assumed that since Halimi was Jewish his family *would* have money. When Halimi's family couldn't meet their exorbitant ransom request they tortured and killed him.¹⁴ Halimi was killed because he was *not* a rich Jew, demonstrating the perversity and potential brutality of this kind of hate-filled stereotype.

Part of the staying power of this particular trope, of associating Jews in nefarious ways with greed and money, is a pervasive yet unspoken and unexamined ambivalence that our society harbors toward money, profit and lending in general.¹⁵ We as a society send many mixed messages about wealth and we would do well to address in a thoughtful and extended way the role of money in our lives. Jewish tradition, for one, does not idolize nor demonize money. We teach that greed is a universal human temptation, an evil urge that we are expected to master. We value hard work, fair business practices, and the giving of *tzedakah*. Money is a tool that can and should be used in the service of good. Jews in fact are among the most philanthropic demographic in American society.¹⁶ Universities, symphonies, hospitals and museums receive the largest gifts from Jewish donors reflecting the high value placed on contributing to civic culture and institutions.¹⁷

Foxman makes the point that given the successes of the modern world, and if one approves of our modern economies, then being associated with finance should be a source of pride not cause for prejudice. But people hate to feel dependent on others or vulnerable, and when economically stressed, the association of money with Jews is revived and updated for the purpose of blame and condemnation. Says Foxman, “At times, we all dislike some aspects of contemporary life; anti-Semitism makes it easy to blame all those problems on a single group.”¹⁸

So, to recap: For most of European history, Jews were discredited and accused of deicide by the early and medieval church, directed into the moneylending business by those in power while simultaneously being barred from owning land or joining trade guilds. Finance and commerce, whether we liked it or not, became for many the family business. How did we respond? Well, with a humor of the absurd, for one.

Sam Glickman was having lunch with his friend, Roth. “The garment business is so bad,” kvetched Glickman. “The last two years, I’ve been losing \$3,000 a week.” “Then why don’t you give up the business?” the friend asked. “So, how am I going to make a living?”

The uptick in anti-Semitism may be new for some of us, but it is not new. Much Jewish humor stems from it, which is a healthy response to the unjustifiable, baseless hatred that our people has endured. And there are other healthy responses.

Embracing the person who makes the remarks can also prove positive. You may recall the story three years ago about an orthodox Jewish college student in S. Florida, Matthew Stevenson, who invited Derek Black, a white nationalist and god son of the infamous David Duke, to Shabbat dinner. Derek had been outed as a white supremacist and ostracized. Matthew reached out. Two years of regular Shabbat gatherings led to friendship, and Derek renounced his anti-Semitic and racist ideology. You may also recall that two years ago, here in Loudoun, after the dissemination of KKK flyers in Leesburg, BCRC among others sponsored the Love Your Neighbor event. Guest speakers included two co-founders of the group Life After Hate, one a former gang member and the other a former white supremacist. Both men spoke to the power of compassion and forgiveness to soften even the most hardened hearts.

The next time you see or hear Jews being singled out as greedy, invite the accuser to Shabbat dinner. At least know how long-lived and demonstrably false that accusation has been. Remember how Jews were forced into money-lending then persecuted for it by the same societal players. Understand that Judaism views money as a tool not an evil and that associating Jews with philanthropy would be more accurate than associating Jews

with greed. Suggest that we as a society reexamine our attitudes to money, that we become better educated as to how economies thrive and stagnate.

The stereotype of the greedy Jew and anti-Semitism in general are built upon a recognizable pattern of repeated efforts to discredit, exclude, and accuse the Jewish community. Discredit, exclude, and accuse so you can continue to discredit, exclude and accuse. This perverse internal logic becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, a form of shape-shifting conspiracy theory that positions all Jews—or just “some” Jews—as the conspirators, the Nazis, the nationalists, the globalists, the white supremacists, the capitalists, the communists, the colonialists—name your evil—to be found at the center of all that is wrong in the world, the region, the country, and/or the movement. It is in essence character assassination.

Jews by and large are today not downtrodden or marginalized. But neither were the German Jews of pre-World War II Germany. Our success or our failure does not give license to anyone else to denounce us as a group or as individuals in libelous and hateful ways. Take care to identify the pattern of antisemitism, even when it’s couched in the language of social justice as it often is with respect to Israel: the discrediting, excluding and accusing of Jews, *all* Jews or *some* Jews, for an evil ascribed only to Jews. That is the pattern and it serves as a warning.

Anti-Semites assign to us truly superhuman powers: we supposedly control the stock exchanges and the banks, we are behind global warming and 9/11; we are the grand puppet masters of the world. But our true superpowers lie in who we are and what we believe in: that all human beings are made in the image of God, that Judaism is a path that brings goodness into the world, and that hope is stronger than despair.

Hanging on the wall next to the coat room is a copy of the letter that President George Washington sent to Hebrew Congregation in Newport, RI in 1790. In it the first president of the United States pledges that Jews would not be second class citizens as in other times and places. He refers to scripture when he writes, “everyone shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree and there shall be none to make him afraid.”¹⁹ It is anti-Semitism that is the unwelcome party, a toxic import, and it shall not defeat us. So long as we can identify it, we as a nation shall confront and transform it. As long as we continue to nurture and celebrate our Jewish identity, we will survive. And at 5:15 this evening, we will also eat!

Gmar hatima tova. And may you have an easy fast.

Endnotes

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- ¹ *Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA)*, November, 2018 & *Jerusalem Post*, November 7, 2018.
- ² *Washington Jewish Week*, 10/3/19.
- ³ *How to Fight Anti-Semitism*, p. 27.
- ⁴ *Jews & Money*, p. 47.
- ⁵ *Ibid*, p. 50.
- ⁶ *Vatican II (1962-5)*, the assembly of Roman Catholic religious leaders that met in the early 1960s to settle doctrinal matters.
- ⁷ *Jesus of Nazareth, Part II*.
- ⁸ *Jews & Money*, p. 57.
- ⁹ An accommodation called a *heter iska*, found in *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch*, chaps 33-4.
- ¹⁰ See Rabbi Samuel Barth, Jewishvaluesonline.org/328.
- ¹¹ *Jews & Money*, p. 60.
- ¹² See also Bari Weiss, *How to Fight Anti-Semitism*, chapt. 6.
- ¹³ *Jews & Money*, p. 61.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 147-8; also *How to Fight Anti-Semitism*, pp14-15.
- ¹⁵ *Jews & Money*, p. 210.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 90.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 104.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 62.
- ¹⁹ See also *How to Fight Anti-Semitism*, pp. 19-20.

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