

Yom Kippur 5780 Anti-Semitism – Rabbi Alan Freedman

A few weeks ago, one of our congregants sent me an article by a woman named Archie Gottesman entitled “Time to Prioritize the Battle Against anti-Semitism”. It was a compelling article in which Ms. Gottesman writes that the battle against anti-Semitism has become her highest priority. Her commitment to the fight against anti-Semitism is particularly compelling because Ms. Gottesman is no slouch when it comes to being an activist within the Jewish community. She is the founder of a very cool website called JewBelong.org, which provides resources for Jews who might feel alienated from Judaism and the Jewish world. She is also on the Boards of two progressive Zionist organizations, Zioness and the Democratic Majority for Israel. Archie Gottesman is a proud and forthright progressive who has come to realize the seriousness of this tenuous time in Jewish-American history. She is hearing what I am hearing; more and more voices of concern about anti-Semitism being raised throughout the Jewish community. For anti-Semitism no longer resides in the shadows or is a staple of far right nationalist websites; it is alive and increasingly open both on the left as well as the right. As Jonathan Greenblatt, the CEO of the Anti-Defamation League said at a recent luncheon here in Austin, this isn’t about partisanship, it is about values and ideas.

Before diving in, let’s put some context around the issue. We live in the United States of America, a golden medina, a golden land, where Jews have flourished like none else in Jewish history. The sharp increase in anti-Semitic incidents experienced in this country over the past three years does not make this country Nazi Germany; not even close. One has only to study the Nazi era seriously to realize that anti-Semitism was national policy in 1930’s Germany. The

toxic cauldron of economic despair, a long history of institutionalized anti-Jewish sentiment and a population all too willing to embrace hatred of the Jews does not exist here. In fact, according to the surveys done by the Anti-Defamation League, anti-Semitic sentiments are held by only 14% of the US population. In Pittsburgh, it was the police who risked their own lives to save those of the Jews gathered to worship in shul that day; whereas in other countries at other times, it would have been the police who were doing the shooting themselves. We must never forget that distinction. In our country, and in the civilized world, at least there is a consensus that anti-Semitism is wrong. We see that in every document from the US Constitution to the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights.

In order to properly contextualize anti-Semitism in America today, we also need to recognize how far we as Jewish Americans have come in the last 75 years. We no longer experience pervasive social anti-Semitism that placed quotas on Jews in universities, consigned Jewish doctors to practicing in Jewish hospitals, kept us out of hotels and country clubs or denied Jews public office. We are freely and fearlessly integrated into American society to such a degree as to be unique in Jewish history. Moreover, it is important to note what has not gone on in our society. For example, no one blamed Jewish bankers for the Great Recession nor is there any national reaction to the fact that several of the most prominent “#me, too” incidents have been perpetrated by Jewish men.

And yet, in 2018, the ADL recorded 1879 anti-Semitic incidents ranging from the killings in Pittsburgh (the deadliest single anti-Semitic act in United States history) to individual incidents of harassment, of which there were 1066 in 2018, along with 774 acts of vandalism. (In case you were wondering, the killings at Chabad in Poway, CA are not included in this total

since those took place in 2019.) The number for 2018 was the third highest number of incidents that the ADL has recorded over the past 40 years and, although there was a 5% drop over 2017, the number of anti-Semitic incidents was up 48% over 2016 and nearly double that of 2015. And while overall incidents were down last year, assaults on Jews, particularly Hassidim in Brooklyn, nearly doubled. This also does not take into account the pervasive nature of anti-Semitism on extremist websites nor the millions of Tweets or other messaging with anti-Semitic content. And remember that this is only for the US. There is a strong resurgence of anti-Semitism throughout Europe over these past few years. What were once radical right-wing parties have now entered the political mainstream with anti-immigrant messages which emphasize nationalism in the face of supposed immigrant hordes. Anti-Jewish messages have accompanied the rise of the right-wing in Europe, perhaps more subtly, but most definitely nonetheless. A spike in the number of incidents of physical violence and school harassment in Germany over the past year, for example, have been well-reported.

It is important to realize that the rise of nationalism wherever it might be poses a threat to the Jewish people. Part and parcel of nationalism is an effort to define who is a legitimate member of the society and who is the "other". Jews will never win in such a scenario. We are always the "other". History proves this again and again. No matter how comfortable we might be in any given society or how protective that society might be of our rights as citizens, we exist outside of the majority. I felt this most keenly on our trip last year to Central Europe, where it was clear that Jews particularly in Hungary, Austria and the Czech Republic continued to be tolerated rather than fully accepted. In the midst of the Brexit mess, the opposition Labour Party under the leadership of Jeremy Corbin, has been increasingly been the subject of protests

from the British Jewish community for Corbin's own anti-Semitic statements and his tolerance for those of others in his party.

The indisputable rise of an "us v. them" mentality in our national politics and throughout our society in recent years is not good for the Jews. If you think that if such a scenario is fully played out, that the Jews will be an "us" then you are bucking all of Jewish historical experience. At the meeting with Jonathan Greenblatt that I referred to earlier, he recounted conversations that he had with both his grandfather, who fled Nazi Germany, and his father-in-law, who is an Iranian Jew who left after the Iranian Revolution. Both in independent conversations, said that as young adults they could not have imagined that their grandchildren would not be German or Iranian. We must realize that, without vigilance, things can change.

I also want to emphasize that I no longer try to figure out whether a given individual who utilizes an anti-Semitic trope really hates Jews. Frankly, it doesn't matter; the anti-Semitism lies not in the person but in their words or actions. I know nothing about the speaker's heart; the only thing I know is that they have uttered or acted on an anti-Semitic trope, which I would assume encourages others to perpetrate that particular canard as well. I was deeply disturbed by the president's remark that if a Jew votes for a Democrat "it shows either a total lack of knowledge or great disloyalty." In doing so, President Trump, knowing of course that Jews vote overwhelmingly for the Democrat in presidential elections, raised the central canard against the Jewish people...disloyalty. He was not clear about to whom or to what Jews who vote for a Democrat are disloyal, only that they are. I have no idea whether Donald Trump is an anti-Semite, I only know the power of what he said and can only imagine how it was heard by white nationalists, whether that was his intended audience or not.

But the president has far from a monopoly on accusing Jews of being disloyal. The American Jewish community is caught in a historically significant vice between charges of disloyalty both from the political right and from the left. And sadly, a few years ago I would have said the far right and the far left; but no more. In the past year, two left-wing sitting members of Congress have played the disloyalty card in regard to advocacy for Israel. Speaking about senators who backed a piece of anti-BDS legislation, Rep. Rashida Tlaib tweeted that “they forgot what county they represent.” And in a reference to AIPAC, Rep. Ilhan Omer tweeted, “it’s all about the Benjamins baby” deftly combining the twin canards that Jews are both disloyal and motivated solely by money. While Rep. Omer issued a statement recognizing the inappropriate nature of her remarks and condemning anti-Semitism, both she and Rep. Tlaib as well as many others on the left are unrepentant about their support for BDS, the movement calling for the boycott of Israeli products, divestment from Israeli companies and the imposing of sanctions on Israel of all kinds.

I want to be clear, the BDS Movement is per se anti-Semitic. It is an attempt to deny the legitimacy of the State of Israel, the homeland of the Jewish people. It subjects Israel to a dangerous double standard that somehow Israel (not China, Russia, North Korea, Iran or any other nation) must be punished for alleged civil rights violations. It seems that only Israel makes disputed territorial claims and that Israel, created by United Nations mandate, somehow is not a legitimate state when most of the countries in the Middle East and Africa came about as a result of backroom deals among imperialist powers. It is an attempt to equate Israel with apartheid South Africa which seems a little odd for a country that just elected 13 Arab-Israeli (Palestinian Israeli) members of the Knesset who are playing a key role in the selection of the

next prime minister. The stated goal of the BDS movement is to destroy Israel as the home of the Jewish people and, in a world that remains threatening for Jews, we need Israel. We need Israel not only as the ultimate bulwark against persecution against Jews but also because the Jewish people need a place to live a singular life, not the bifurcated life of the Jewish Diaspora.

There has somehow grown up this myth that there is a good BDS and a bad BDS; that the good BDS is simply an extension of legitimate criticism of the Israeli government. As one who has been highly critical of the Netanyahu government, often from this very pulpit, there is no such thing as good BDS—there is just BDS. We need a reality check. There is no question that there is much to be critical of in terms of Israel's treatment of Palestinians or that as Jews we have the right to advocate for Palestinian rights. The BDS movement, however, is simply the wrong vehicle for doing so. Whether we like it or not, Jewish support for the BDS movement is viewed by the rest of the world as Jewish support for the de-legitimization of the State of Israel. It means boycotting not just companies that take advantage of Palestinian workers but all companies doing business on the West Bank regardless of whether they are helping or hurting Palestinians. It means making life impossible for Israeli academics both here and in Europe. It gives credence to those forces on our college campuses who ostracize or even threaten our Jewish students. We, as American Jews, have every right to be critical of the government of the State of Israel just as we have the right to be critical of the government of the United States. There is much that is in both societies that fall far short of our stated values but the answer is to work to fix those societies; not to destroy them.

We live in the real world and in the real world BDS undermines Israel. And in a real world with a rising tide of nationalism, if not overt anti-Semitism, a threat to Israel is a threat to

the Jewish people. Worse yet, being anti-Israel has become an article of faith among many factions on the left. This is perhaps most apparent on our college campuses. For example, while Jewish students are perfectly comfortable living openly as Jews at UT, something that might not have been said not too many years ago, there have been moments of discomfort and antagonism around support for Israel. Although formal BDS efforts have been defeated at UT, anti-Israeli remarks on social media or in classrooms are not uncommon. The portrayal of Palestinians as an oppressed people linked to other disadvantaged minorities in our own country has called into question the extent to which the support of Jewish students is welcome in some quarters. While we as Jewish-Americans have long been advocates for the rights of other minority groups, we do so because we believe that our own position in American society is strongest when the rights of all minorities are protected. But a pre-requisite to that support should be a recognition of the interests of the Jewish people as well.

So what to do? This sermon is not a call to always have a bag packed. It is, in fact, quite the opposite. Our times do not call for withdrawal, they call for engagement, so here are few simple suggestions that allow us to remain vigilant while not exaggerating the problem.

First, thank you for wearing your wristbands. They may not have been the most fashionable but the wristbands make it much easier for our greeters and security folks to identify those who should be in this room and potentially who should not. Your compliance with enhanced security measures on campus is much appreciated. Please also remember to thank those who are providing security for us today both law enforcement and those who are brave members of the Shalom Austin security force. The enhanced security measures undertaken this year are simply a prudent response to the events of the last year and, as a

quick reminder, whatever inconvenience we might experience here in Austin is nothing compared to trying to get into a synagogue in South America or Europe.

Next, be an advocate in the fight against anti-Semitism. Be vocal in calling out anti-Semitism when it occurs both in the public and private spheres. Jewish life in America depends on keeping strong those institutions which protect us. As a community, we need to engage with law enforcement (federal, state and local) to ensure that anti-Semitic incidents of all kinds are being taken seriously. We need to demand that our schools not only utilize the “No Place for Hate” curriculum but that they really are institutions where hate is not tolerated. We need to educate our own Jewish children on the reality of anti-Semitism and on their responsibility to recognize it, report it and to demand an appropriate response. We need to be our own advocates in all areas of civic life at the local, state and federal level. Especially, it is incumbent upon us to vote and to be politically active. The interests of the Jewish community are on the political radar precisely because, in general, Jews are politically active. We, the Jewish people, need to take the lead in holding our nation accountable to its stated values of inclusiveness and liberty for all.

Still another way to fight anti-Semitism is to engage more directly in Jewish life and, particularly, in support of Israel. One of the great ironies around anti-Semitism historically is that the more anti-Semitism is present in a society, the more Jewish community is galvanized and engaged. The reason the ADL was formed was in response to the lynching of Leo Frank, a Jewish merchant in Georgia. There was a resurgence of Jewish life and learning in Germany in the mid-1930's. Let's not wait for the next great wave of anti-Semitism to spur us to renew our sense of Jewish identity. The killings in Pittsburgh and Poway, the chants of “the Jews won't

replace us” in Charlottesville and the proliferation of anti-Semitic and anti-Israel memes on the internet should be enough. Find an organization that represents your passion in this regard and join it. Rather than name all of the many Jewish organizations fighting anti-Semitism today, I have compiled a list of such organizations and that list is now on the temple website at <https://www.bethshalomaustin.org/organizations> along with links to the organizational websites. If I left your favorite organization out, just let me know.

In addition, I am asking for those who are particularly interested in this subject to form a Task Force on Anti-Semitism within our own temple and I am offering my help to Shalom Austin in re-establishing a Jewish Community Relations Council here in Austin. The Austin Jewish community is now too large and influential not to have a strong communal voice for our concerns.

I am also renewing my call again this year to become involved in supporting the State of Israel. There are many Zionist organizations (AIPAC, J Street, ARZA, Zioness, T’ruah) with varying points of view so find the one that best expresses the nature of your support. Again, I have compiled a list of such organizations but such a list is not without controversy. I have endeavored to include on the list only those organizations which have rejected BDS and who continue to support a two-state solution. The stakes are too high to continue the feuding within the Jewish community about who can lay claim to be a true Zionist. Just like our Israeli brothers and sisters, American Zionists hold many different points of view about the current government and the future of the State. Our enemy is not differing notions of Zionism, it is apathy about Israel. We must listen and support each other in the ongoing battle to maintain

and build a homeland for the Jewish people. If you know of an organization that I have missed, again, please let me know.

At the very least, make Israel a part of one's Jewish life. Subscribe to an English language Israeli news website such as The Israel Times, Haaretz, Media Line or the Jerusalem Post. Follow coverage of Israel in the American media and respond when you believe it to be inaccurate or unfair. Make a family visit to Israel part of your life's plan and encourage your children to study there.

In short, it is incumbent on all of us in these times to resist the rising tide of anti-Semitism by strengthening our own ties to Judaism. It is time to renew and strengthen our personal ties to the Jewish people. The much discussed Pew Center's Portrait of Jewish Americans found that 94% of Jews surveyed expressed pride in being Jewish, 80% said that being Jewish is very or somewhat important in their life and 75% had a strong sense of being part of the Jewish people. All good sentiments but it is now time to put some substance around those feelings of pride and attachment.

This morning's Torah portion begins with the words *Atem Nitzavim Hayom Culchem*, which is translated as You stand here together this day. But the word *Nitzvavim* means more than to be physically standing together, it means to take a stand together; to stand together for something. This is our challenge this Yom Kippur morning, together to take a stand against anti-Semitism and may God be with us, providing strength in the battle against the scourge of anti-Semitism. *Cain yehe ratzon.*