

Yitro 5782 - Words Matter
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He threw a chair at the hostage-taker, then ran for the door. Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker and the other two remaining hostages at Congregation Beth Israel were not “freed” or “released” after the 12-hour standoff last Saturday. They escaped. Words matter.

This is the image I keep coming back to again and again. I am angry. I am frustrated. I am shaken. And I’m sure many of you feel these emotions, and others, too - the vulnerability, the violation, the fear, the relief that the hostages escaped.

This was an act intentionally targeting Jews and the Jewish community. The initial reporting that, “There is no indication that the synagogue attack in Colleyville, Texas, was specifically directed at the Jewish community,” was ill-informed and negligent. Words matter.

The hostage-taker thought that Jews ran the world, or at least the American government, and that they could arrange for the release of a prisoner he wished to be freed. His rationale for entering a synagogue, however flawed or misguided or desperate, was deeply rooted in some of the oldest antisemitic, anti-Jewish tropes that span millenia. That Jews control the world, or the media, or the money. Indeed, it sounds terrifying when coming out of the mouth of a hostage-taker, but what about the jokes or the casual anti-Jewish sentiments that often go unchecked? The subtle and accepted ways these stereotypes creep into our culture. Words matter. Language matters.

I’ve had a nagging feeling this week that perhaps we need some new words. The terms we use to describe these sentiments are complicated and rooted in the ever-shifting landscape of our history. The term antisemitism is itself a product of modernity. It was coined in 1879 by German writer and agitator (and anti-Semite) Wilhelm Marr, who needed a new term to explain his new, “scientific” and racially-based form of Jew-hatred that was largely a product of the broader rise in nationalism at the time. Prior to this new concept espoused by Marr and his colleagues, an older form of hatred of Jews, dating back to the earliest days of Christianity, often referred to as anti-Judaism, focused mainly on religion - the Jews and their Judaism threatened Christians and Christianity - but this hatred was mainly tied to one’s religion and could be overcome or escaped through conversion. If someone left their Judaism behind, they could become part of the broader society. Antisemitism, in contrast, was a form of hatred of Jews in which one’s Jewishness was understood as a fundamental, inseparable part of a person - it was in our blood, and therefore could no longer be escaped through conversion.

Words matter, and I think we need a new term for what’s going on right now. The term antisemitism feels like it may be too vague, too technical, too far-removed from what it’s really about: Jews, or rather, a fear and misunderstanding of Jews and Judaism. I’m starting to get the sense that the term antisemitism doesn’t evoke the sense of outrage in our broader culture in the way I need it to. I wonder if we ought to explore some new terms. Let’s call it what it is:

Jewphobia, or anti-Jewish fear. I know the term anti-Jewish hatred is still used sometimes in reference to these kinds of attacks, but I think “hatred” is already too far along the spectrum that ends with violence. If we call it “Jewphobia,” we address and confront the fear and misunderstanding of Jews and Judaism that leads to hatred and violence. There is a troubling increase in the rise of fear of those who are not like *us*, whoever the “us” is, and in the frequency with which those fears bubble up into hatred and boil over into violence. We are seeing, again and again and again, acts of violence and hatred and intolerance towards so many “others” in our society. Asian-Americans being attacked, acts of police brutality towards black people and other people of color. In a seemingly random act of violence, a young Asian-American woman was pushed in front of an oncoming subway train in New York City on Saturday morning. A rhetoric of hatred and anger seems to be permeating the very fabric of our society. There seems to be an increasingly prevalent feeling that success and opportunity are a zero-sum game, that my success threatens yours. I appreciated the title of Bari Weiss’ article this past week, “Being Jewish in an Unraveling America.” In it, she wrote,

The attack in Texas, the reaction to it, and the widespread willingness in our culture to judge violent acts based on their political utility, augurs a darkening reality for the six million Jews living in what the Founders insisted was a new Jerusalem..”¹

There seems to be an increasing occurrence of stories in the news that demonstrate the dangers of unaddressed fears and unchecked hatred. But if we confront the fear, if we understand it and address it head on, then perhaps we can interrupt the cycle. I don’t suspect that antisemitism will ever really go away, in so many ways, we Jews are the world’s oldest “others,” but I don’t see that as defeat, I think it just means there is more work to be done. As Rabbi Tarfon teaches in *Pirkei Avot*, the Ethics of our Ancestors (2:16), “It is not upon you to complete the task, but neither are you free to avoid it.” We are obligated by our tradition to try. Even when the task at hand feels enormous, we have to start somewhere.

Deborah Lipstadt, the President’s nominee to serve as the State Department’s special envoy to monitor and combat antisemitism abroad, wrote in an OpEd this week,

Another tragedy had been averted. But the scars remain. They will take a long time to heal. ...We are shaken. We are not OK. But we will bounce back. We are resilient because we cannot afford *not* to be. That resiliency is part of the Jewish DNA. Without it, we would have disappeared centuries ago. We refuse to go away. But we are exhausted.

We Jews are no strangers to fear and darkness. But throughout our history, we have always chosen to focus on the light. To focus on hope. We are both optimists and realists. We know that there is fear and hatred in this world, that there is brokenness and violence, that there is real suffering, but we hope and pray and act to bring about a world that lives up to our highest ideals.

Poet Amanda Gorman, in reflecting this week on almost choosing to *not* deliver the inauguration poem that has since made her famous, wrote of the dynamic between fear and hope:

I’m a firm believer that often terror is trying to tell us of a force far greater than despair. In this way, I look at fear not as cowardice but as a call forward, a summons to fight for what we hold dear. And now more than ever, we have every right to be affected, afflicted,

¹ <https://bariweiss.substack.com/p/being-jewish-in-an-unraveling-america>

affronted. If you're alive, you're afraid. If you're not afraid, then you're not paying attention. The only thing we have to fear is having no fear itself — having no feeling on behalf of whom and what we've lost, whom and what we love. ...On that Jan. 20, what I found waiting beyond my fear was all those who searched beyond their own fears to find space for hope in their lives, who welcomed the impact of a poem into protests, hospitals, classrooms, conversations, living rooms, offices, art and all manner of moments.²

Gorman is a careful and deliberate crafter of words. She understands the power of words to transform fear into hope.

Words matter. In this week's Torah portion, Yitro, we read the Ten Commandments. In Hebrew, they're known as the *Aseret HaDibrot*, literally, the Ten Utterances, or the Ten Words. These words provide a moral and ethical framework for how we ought to conduct ourselves in this world. For how we relate to God and to each other. In Judaism, words are so powerful that it is through words, through speech, that God brings Creation into existence: "God said 'Let there be light' and there was light" (Gen. 1:3). Words have the power to create and to destroy. To lift up and to break down.

Tomorrow morning, Rabbi Cytron-Walker and his congregants will bench *Gomel*, reciting the prayer giving thanks to God for surviving a life-threatening situation. It is often said as a moment of healing, yet it feels like as a Jewish community, we still have so much healing left to do. At his congregation's service for healing on Monday night, Rabbi Cytron-Walker shared these words:

We are not helpless.

We bring healing with band aids and hugs, a cup of coffee and chicken soup.

We are not helpless.

We bring healing with a text, a call, a card; a response that says, "You are not alone."

We are not helpless.

We bring healing with acceptance, patience, and understanding for ourselves and for others.

We are not helpless.

We bring healing with words of compassion and acts of compassion, reaching out with care and love.

We are not helpless.

We bring healing to heart and mind, body and soul. We bring healing every day.

We are not helpless.

We are not helpless. There is much work to be done. Whether it is building bridges with our neighbors who are not like us through [our community organizing and advocacy work](#), or connecting with organizations like the [Anti-Defamation League](#) or [Facing History and Ourselves](#), who call out fear and discrimination and work to educate the next generation. Our words in this

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/20/opinion/amanda-gorman-poem-inauguration.html?searchResultPosition=1>

moment matter. Our actions matter. May we use our voices and deeds to bring healing and hope into our world.