

Rabbi Lucy Dinner  
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Temple Beth Or  
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### Rise Against Anti-Semitism

God willing, my Dad will be 100 years old in a couple of months. I have often spoken about the legacy of optimism that flows in my veins from his DNA. He hasn't been naïve, rather, he tempers his view of reality with a positive outlook on the state of his own life, and the prospects for the world. And so I was all the more shocked after the 911 terror attacks when he was the one who said to me, "This is not going to be good for Jews." When I probed a little deeper he added: "the anti-Semitism has been there all along just beneath the surface. Peel back the veneer of America, like 911 has done, and inevitably it will rear its head." This from a man who grew up in the deep-south and claims that he did not experience anti-Semitism as a child.

And, now, 18 years since that attack that blew the covering off of the melting-pot of American culture, the truth of my Dad's wisdom is sobering. We are seeing anti-Semitism manifest in incidents that defy even the most ardent of Pollyanna's. Just before the holidays last year our community received threats that caused us to cancel religious school the next day so we could assure the safety of our children. That Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur Ministers, Imams, and members of their congregations, lined our entries to stand in solidarity welcoming us. Then last October there was the horrific massacre at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh. We want to believe the Tree of Life terror was random, similar to individual threats carried out by crazed lone wolves; like what happened in Orlando, Charleston, Las Vegas, and Walmart, perpetrated against other groups. Truly, none of it was random.

The continuing reign of anti-Semitism across this country leaves no room for writing off heinous attacks as one-offs. Last spring there was a second synagogue shooting, this time in Poway, California. In the Triangle there have been swastikas painted on universities and anti-Semitic graffiti painted on a public mural in downtown Raleigh.

If you want to hear from those who know anti-Semitism first hand, have a conversation with a few of our middle schoolers. Anti-Semitism is on the regular menu of bullying in many of their schools. The majority of the schools deal with bullying swiftly when it is reported, but, as in most cases of middle school bullying, our students often don't report. Let's make sure that our youth know that our homes: our personal homes and our Temple home, are safe-places for them to come for help in the face of threats.

And, for my own family anti-Semitism is all too real, as well. Last fall the FBI confiscated our mailbox as evidence in an investigation into an anti-Semitic incident. The

FBI has my mailbox?! Never did I fathom that in the 21<sup>st</sup> / Century this would be part of my own reality.

Hate crimes are on the rise against every sub-group in America. In no way do I minimize the blatant incidents of racism, islamophobia, homophobia, and other hate crimes that stain our country in their own horrifying numbers. Nonetheless, as we condemn the injustices against others, on this Kol Nidre it's time to pay attention to our own house.

We are fortunate to have Temple Beth Or's Security Committee thoroughly focusing on the physical wellbeing of our congregation. Now is the time to look beyond the physical into how we remain strong and courageous: spiritually, emotionally, and communally, in the face of adversity.

*First we look at where anti-Semitism originates so we know what we are facing*

In order to confront anti-Semitism we have to understand what it represents and where it comes from. White Supremacy, clearly underlies the most virulent and violent anti-Semitic expressions. White Supremacy fueled the anti-Semitic threats in Charlottesville, VA., in the 2017 march, where heavily armed neo Nazis stood outside the Jewish congregation for the duration of their Shabbat worship service. White supremacy fueled the hatred in the Pittsburgh massacre, in the Poway murder, and in the firebombing and defacing of Jewish congregations and institutions across the United States this year.

Eric Ward, an African American justice worker, who I spoke with at a rabbinic conference this year, writes: "Antisemitism ... is a particular and potent form of racism so central to White Supremacy that Black people would not win our freedom without tearing it down." (Eric Ward, "Skin in The Game: How Antisemitism Animates White Nationalism" (Political Research, 2017). Ward emphasizes that in order to understand the threat posed by the rapidly growing White Nationalism movement in the U.S., we must first come to terms with the centrality of anti-Semitism. He labels anti-Semitism as "the canary in the room" warning us of the poison that White Nationalism is spreading across the land.

Though White Nationalism on the far right imposes the most virulent anti-Semitism today, unfortunately, it is not the only source. The national committee for the Women's March recently, and belatedly, removed three of its original board members who have been accused for years of fueling anti-Semitism with their hateful rhetoric. Then the Women's March turned around and added another board member who is known for her anti-Semitic views. The United States Congress has been quick to forgive the anti-Semitic tropes of three rookie congresswomen, writing their statements off as freshman mistakes, and choosing to condemn hatred in all its forms instead of calling out the unabashed anti-Semitism of its members.

So, too, anti-Semitism from the far left leads to the belittlement and exclusion of Jewish groups and Jews at universities. Dion Pierre, research associate with the National

Association of Scholars, shares a few of the specific incidents on campuses: “Stanford University resident assistant Hamzeh Daoud declared in July 2018 his intent to “physically fight Zionists on campus.” In April 2018, professor Kwame Zulu Shabazz of Knox College tweeted that Jews are “pulling the strings for profit”...

In our own back yard a joint middle eastern studies program at UNC and Duke is under scrutiny by the Department of Education for misuse of funds in part because of an event they sponsored that included a musician who began his concert by asking the audience to sing with him so he would not be accused of being the only anti-Semite in the room.

“Stories like these,” concludes Pierre, “make ... the observation that “colleges are becoming the incubators of progressive hatred of Jews” ring true. Higher education is helping to make anti-Semitism respectable again.

(<https://www.dailysignal.com/2019/06/11/how-anti-semitism-became-a-staple-of-woke-activism-on-campus/>Recent events in higher education have led many to conclude that college campuses are hubs of anti-Semitism ).

These actions of intimidation and exclusion do not pose the life-threatening existential threat of White Supremacy, nonetheless, they leave us feeling vulnerable and abandoned.

An especially difficult source of anti-Semitism is the anti-Semitism hiding behind anti-Zionism. Jews express their support for Israel in vastly different ways. Anti-Semites have become expert at using these differences to pit us against one another. *Sinat hinam* -- senseless hatred of Jews against one another was behind the destruction of the original Temple in Jerusalem. Jewish strategist Matt Dorf warns that while we are busy in the minutia of whether one Jew is hurting Israel or another is hurting human rights we are missing real and tangible opportunities to combat anti-Semitism.” (Dorf at CCAR Convention 2019)

Simply and emphatically put, we can no longer risk dividing our community with infighting over Israel or debating whether the political right or left is to blame for anti-Semitism. We play right into the hands of the haters when we allow them to carve our community into factions that pit us against one another. It doesn't matter to the White Nationalist or the anti-Semites on campus what our stance is on Israel; their venom denigrates all Jews.

*Answers to anti-Semitism:*

It's time for us to lean in, to unite against anti-Semitism in all its forms, to speak out against major and minor aggressions against Jews, and to join with allies ready and willing to stand with us. While assimilation seems the most expedient answer to anti-Semitism in a free world, while it is tempting to retreat, history shows time and again that answer leads to Jews' destruction. A recent editorial in the New York Times suggests: "Lasting security for Jews ... was always saved by leaders and movements, from the Maccabees to the Zionists, that urged us to be our fullest, freest selves — even if doing so made us deeply unpopular or despised"

(<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/06/opinion/sunday/anti-semitism.html?> ). Dorf adds to that sentiment: "The labor movement in the 60's didn't open up spaces for Blacks until Blacks leaned in and demanded their rights. The Women's movement in the 70's and 80's didn't include LGBTQ until they stood up and refused to be ignored." It is incumbent on us to unite from the left, center, and the right, to tackle anti-Semitism together.

Archie Gottesman, the cofounder of the group "JewsBelong," responds to the prodding of 95 year old Holocaust survivor Nessa who insists these times are as bad as 1938. He says: "Nessa deserves an answer—not just from me, but from us. ...

He continues: "I answer Nessa with a promise to do the only thing I can: EVERYTHING in my power. I will speak up, speak out, activate, donate, lose sleep and build a strong community of protectors and supporters. And I will keep going until the world feels safe again." (*Jewels of Elul, 2019, Elul 29*).

I wish I had one answer that would wipe away this anti-Semitic cycle we are in. What I do have are a few suggestions and an openness for your ideas on how we can remain strong in the face of this storm.

Suggestion # 1 to fight anti-Semitism is to embrace Judaism: be proud of our rich heritage, uphold its beautiful rituals, and live unapologetically by the teachings of justice and mercy Judaism demands of us.

On Rosh HaShanah I spoke about fear, and how easy it is to freak ourselves out in face of others fear or aggression. The Jewish answer to fear is not to freak ourselves out, but to transform fear with its twin, the sacred presence of awe. When others would have us fear our heritage, all the more so dive into its blessings, lift them up and share them. If you want to see how that is done in real time come to a few of our B'nai Mitzvah celebrations this year. Nothing matches the strength of our youth when on their big day they stand before the congregation, including their non-Jewish friends, and talk about the uniqueness of their Jewish heritage.

So, too, join with RALFTY, our senior youth group, where we have seen a surge in youth involvement in the last two years, including the election of our own Lindsey

Fleishman as president of our region of NFTY. RALFTY will be hosting one of the largest NFTY regional events in the country next spring and they will need all of us to help with housing and volunteering.

Our youth don't cower in the face of anti-Semitism. Instead, they embrace their Judaism. If our youth can show that courage, surely we can follow.

Suggestion #2: Build and nourish interfaith relationships: relationships where you are willing to share your heritage and you are open to listen and learn about the beliefs of others. After the Tree of Life massacre, over 1000 people came out from every corner of Raleigh to pray and mourn that tragedy. Governor Cooper spoke, Mayor McFarlane offered her condolences, and over fifty clergy members representing a vast array of religions in the area joined us. That vigil gave us hope. It reminded us that we have myriads who stand with us.

The clergy, elected leaders, and hundreds of supporters outside the Jewish community, joined us because they were horrified at the terror. And they were there because we, religious leaders of the Triangle, have long forged interfaith relationships rooted in years of deep respect, understanding and friendship.

Last year Rev. Nancy Petty, of Pullen Memorial Baptist Church; Imam Abdullah Antepli, Assoc. Prof of Interfaith Relations at Duke; and I, began an endeavor for our communities to expand the type of multi-faith relationships of depth that the three of us share with one another.

Our monthly gatherings, called "Praying in Unity," emphasize teachings or prayers from multiple perspectives, and then ask those gathered to share their own views on the theme in small groups. Our goal is for participants to form organic relationships across differences that expand well beyond our monthly events.

This month's Praying in Unity event will be held at Temple Beth Or on October 27<sup>th</sup>, the anniversary of the Tree of Life tragedy. We will memorialize the 11 victims and we will talk about how we can galvanize the power of our group to fight hatred. Lean in to fight anti-Semitism through meaningful multi-faith partnerships. Join us on Oct 27<sup>th</sup> at our Praying in Unity program, or reach out in your work place, at the coffee shop, or wherever you frequent, to build relationships that transcend differences.

Suggestion #3: Change the vindictive narrative that fuels anti-Semitism and all hate. Bryan Stevenson, founding Director of the Equal Justice Initiative, says that to fight hatred of any form we must change the narrative. In the face of anti-Semitism that means confronting it when and where it happens. It means having uncomfortable and inconvenient conversations that dispel lies and bring humanity back to the center. It means calling out the hate of anti-Semitism and with equal passion calling out the hate of racism, bigotry, homophobia, and greed. It means not remaining silent in private office

room chatter that casually tosses around stereotypical slander. And it means speaking up in protest at larger settings where bigotry is allowed to go unchecked. Change the narrative, by countering the denigration of hatred with a message of the value that different perspectives bring to the richness of humanity.

Suggestion #4: Lean into hope. Stevenson teaches that “Hopelessness is the enemy of justice.” Lean into the blessings that abide and transcend hate. It is so easy for one act of hate to overshadow 100 acts of love. But this need not be so. Focus on the strong supportive relationships that gird our community, be the one who initiates compassion, and acknowledge the kindness of others when it is bestowed upon you.

These are my suggestions. We will need many more ideas. Our congregation is well known in the community for rising against hatred in all its forms. Now is the time to coalesce our wisdom, with the ideas and actions of each and every one of us, as we rise together to answer Nessa the Holocaust survivor’s question “with (the) promise to do the only thing (we) can: EVERYTHING in (our) power ... speak up, speak out, activate, donate, lose sleep and build a strong community of protectors and supporters. And ... keep going until the world feels safe again.” (*Jewels of Elul, 2019, Elul 29*).

*Kein Yehi Ratzon May it be God’s Will, May it be Our Will.*