

## What a Difference One Year Can Make!

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In my file for Shoftim, one of the summer Torah portions, I found several articles written around the time of the announcement of the choice of Joe Lieberman as candidate for Vice President of the United States in 2000.

I had forgotten how excited the Jewish community was back then. His wife was the daughter of Holocaust survivors, and the image of going from the death camps to Blair House in one generation was stirring. He himself was a publically observant Orthodox Jew. Reading what people wrote at the time, you would have thought we had achieved nirvana, *mashiachzeit*, the fulfillment of the American Jewish dream.

And then I uncovered, in the same file, for the same Shabbat, just a little farther back, reflections from the year before, 1999, twenty years ago. It was the year when five people were shot at the Granada Hills JCC in Los Angeles. Not as lethal as the attack on Congregation Tree of Life in Pittsburgh but still it shocked the Jewish community. The shooter, motivated by white supremacist ideology, went on to kill an Asian American postal worker. This was the same summer that on July 2 a white supremacist shot at six Orthodox Jews in suburban Chicago and went on to kill an African American basketball coach and a Korean graduate student. It was also the summer of the firebombing of the synagogues in Sacramento, again motivated by the same ideology. Anti Semitism reared its head in 1999, but the American dream reasserted itself in Lieberman's nomination, and we mostly moved on to other concerns.

Recent events have been harder to put aside. They have tarnished the dream of America in many Jewish minds, and the optimism of earlier times is harder for us to recall. Our mantra through the over 365 years of American Jewish history has been that America is different. The United States' embrace of diversity, the separation of Church and State enshrined in the constitution, the almost complete absence of government sponsored anti-Semitism: All of

these have lead us to conclude that our history here would not follow the lachrymose path of other Jewish communities.

And yet in recent months some scholars of Jewish history have sounded an alarm. Most concerning has been the reemergence of Jewish stereotypes and of conspiracy theories, not just in the dark fringes of the body politic, but front and center, dog whistles that parallel the worst of historical anti-Semitic propaganda. As one commentator on contemporary anti-Semitism observed, anti-Semitism is like a virus. It is there all the time but when societies are healthy, our immune systems are strong and it doesn't become an epidemic. At times of societal breakdown, though, when democratic norms fall away, it becomes a serious problem. For students of history, all of this seems way too familiar. And though the anti-Semitic violence has come from the right, some of us have also had the experience of being misunderstood, maligned, or excluded by those we work with as allies because of our Jewish concerns.

The Reform Temple in Poway was for many years a sort of older sister to Shir Hadash. Located in a similar community, it was just a little larger, and the woman who served as their rabbi was just a little older than me—and so it was sometimes our go-to . . . to see what we should be thinking about next, or even where our salaries should be heading. So for me, and perhaps for others, the shooting at the Chabad in Poway seemed a lot closer than Pittsburgh, and anxieties began to rise. Synagogues and other Jewish institutions in our community began to get more serious about security, devoting time and financial resources to this issue.

What we discovered here at Shir Hadash was that there were some things we could do and we have done—including those items that will come into play with the grant we received this fall from Homeland Security and with the advice of professionals from several different organizations and agencies. But the bottom line about this kind of security is like that of airplane travel. I cannot guarantee you, one hundred percent, that the airplane you get on next will not fall from the sky. Still the odds are very much in our favor and so we fly, for work, to see grandchildren, to be part of the world.

When people become fearful of flying, as sometimes happens, and as some people have become fearful of entering Jewish communal spaces, there are ways of addressing those fears.

This summer, with the help of a member of the congregation who is a professor of psychology at Palo Alto University, I took a class in CBT, Cognitive Behavior Therapy for Anxiety. You might also be familiar with the analogous Dialectical Behavior Therapy.

As a community we are anxious, and with good reason. Jews have been targets of anti-Semitic attacks at various levels of seriousness both locally, nationally. Less than two years ago we had to evacuate our local Jewish Community Center for a bomb threat, though we later learned that this was the work of a disturbed young Israeli sitting at his computer in Ashkelon. Still, history makes any incident alarming, hate crimes against Jews are on the rise in America and around the world, and terrible events occurred in Europe recently enough that the memory lives on in our families. As Joseph Heller wrote (though it is often credited to others), "Just because you are paranoid, doesn't mean they aren't out to get you."

Yet dwelling in our anxiety is not helpful to us nor healthy for our community. It is true to some extent that "the world is dangerous to Jews," but it is more helpful to say, "The world can be dangerous to Jews, and we here and now have a lot of allies and friends." The response of the non-Jewish communities in Pittsburgh and in Poway was immediate and robust. From the support of the Pittsburgh Steelers and the front page Kaddish in the local paper, to the many Christians and Muslims and those of other faiths who responded in our own community, the reality was that these attacks on Jews were seen as an attack on all of us. Recognizing the current climate, our local police department, at the instigation of the police chief here in Los Gatos, required every police officer to receive special training this past summer on understanding the Jewish, Sikh, and Muslim communities.

Some of us can't help but ruminate on the presence of anti-Semites with guns, but it is quite different to say, here and now, "As in other times and places there are anti-Semites with weapons, but this time law enforcement and the FBI are on our side." Several years ago at the beginning of our Shir Hadash Organizing Committee's gun violence reduction campaign, we hosted one of the young women from LA who was a victim of that attack at the JCC. She brought us information on which laws had effectively reduced gun mortality rates. She transformed her pain and trauma into action to help communities pass ordinances to minimize

the dangers of deaths and injuries from guns and to advocate for sensible gun legislation along the lines supported by a vast majority of Americans.

We can't eliminate anxiety—it is a reality of life—but if we allow it to run our lives, we will be prone to bad decision making and I fear we may do ourselves more damage than our enemies are able to achieve.

To some extent that is already happening in America at large, as in response to our anxiety about school shootings, newspapers report that 90% of public schools are doing monthly active shooter training. But pediatricians point out that these drills for students are not well aligned with what we know about child development and that they do little more than terrify already anxious students. The school districts, responding to calls for action, rely on a new cottage industry of trainers that has popped up, who have no professional understanding of kids and how they think and feel. They typically bring the "run, hide, fight" model which was developed for adults, into younger and younger grades. Yet it is in training staff, preparing teachers, and creating a climate where students and community members come forward with information about potential perpetrators that the greatest gains to school safety can be made.

When we experience anxiety, we are tempted to do something, anything, just to reduce our anxious feelings. But that anything might be the wrong anything. Circling the wagons, for example, would be exactly the wrong reaction to anti-Semitism in America, when our security as a minority of 2% of the population depends in large measure on our interaction with other groups, religious communities, and nationalities. Even with those who may express a sympathy to ideas that we consider anti-Semitic, engagement may be a better strategy than containment. Sometimes, with ill-considered actions, we give more attention to anti-Semites who might otherwise be ignored and provide the oxygen for the blaze of anti-Israel activity. There are people who have gotten caught up, for example, in movements like BDS because of humanistic sympathies and without anti-Semitic intent. Talking with them, rather than stigmatizing them, can help them see the full goals of the organizations they are supporting, often without having fully investigated it themselves. We can help them identify other ways of promoting the peace and justice they believe in. Anxiety can also lead us to thrash out unproductively with legislation

that rebounds in negative ways. I think of a community in upstate New York incited to great panic about the threat of the imposition of Sharia law, which was not a real threat. They ended up passing a law that then made the religious *beit din*, rabbinical court—a consensual arrangement that has existed in the US for centuries—illegal. Benjamin Franklin warned that if in seeking security, we destroy freedom, we may end up with neither.

My friend and former HUC classmate James Stone Goodman wrote this poem about our current dilemma.

Knock-knock.

Who's there?

Cohen.

Cohen who. And what's that you're carrying?

A bag, full of Stuff I carry around.

It's heavy.

Full of fear mostly, anger

Trauma, incoherence

What keeps me from G\*d

And everything I love the most.

You can come in Cohen

But you'll have to leave that bag

Outside.

Knock-knock.

Who's there?

Cohen.

Cohen with or without.

Cohen without.

Come in Cohen

Leave the bag.