

## Parashat Acharei Mot: The Shabbat after the Shooting in Powey

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I begin with a reminder about the United States as a home for Jews. No home has ever provided us with the safety and security which we enjoy here.

Never before have Jews lived in a place which has given Jews as much opportunity and as many options for study, employment, and for civic involvement. This country gives to us the freedom to express our religious commitments, gain wealth, enjoy freedom and pursue our upward mobility. We live in the US lives as Jews richer and fuller than any that have been imagined, let alone lived, at any time over the past 3,000-plus years of Jewish History.

Never take for granted the blessings of “life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness,” promised to us the moment this country was founded. In fact, we have so many opportunities and advantages living in this country that we have the ability and opportunity, whenever we would like, to do something which Jews could never in history do. We can walk away from our religious affiliations. Who we are as Americans can be, and too often is, separated from being Jewish. Ironically and unfortunately, the US has given us the freedom to step away from our Jewish identities and be simply and exclusively American. But, as ide from that point, the charmed lives we live as Jews in this country must be seen as a “blip on the screen” of Jewish and World History.

Yet, with all that can be said about the full and rich Jewish lives we enjoy, there are times when we still feel as if we are outsiders. Many are still “careful” exposing or expressing their Judaism. Although the laws and stated ideals of human rights, democracy and pluralism, the lofty goals as set down by the Founding Fathers of this country remain on the books, that separation, that sense of standing on the periphery is awakened from time to time, a reminder to us as Jews: don’t get too comfortable. A special place for Jews has been permanently reserved on society’s periphery. And, it is when we are outsiders that we are targeted.

We continue to be the targets, according to the most recent ADL report, the most frequently chosen targets, of those who hate and commit hate crimes. Jews today are attacked as a group more frequently than blacks, Muslims, or members of the LGBTQ community, other groups who are frequently victimized. Although our numbers are a miniscule, compared to other groups, we have the dubious distinction these days of having become #1. The never-ending hatred of Jews accompanies us wherever we go (outside of Israel) and wherever we live. Anti-Semitism has been in the world for as long as there have been Jews. Sometimes it is easily seen, at other times, barely visible, but there nonetheless.

For me, I continue to harbor a sense that our comfortable lives must be viewed through a lens of skepticism. Our security is deceptive, for it resides in “blips on the screen,” in aberrations which time has and, I believe, will rectify. I remember reading a book many years ago, by Dennis Prager and Joseph Telushkin, entitled, Why the Jews?, in which they proposed a dozen different reasons that people have hated Jews. There is not one reason they hate us. And,

hatred has always been there. Here, in this country, when it is not visible or palpable, it is waiting to re-emerge. And, last Shabbat, it re-emerged once again... with a vengeance.

Why has it re-emerged? There are those who have objected to the fact that I have **not** placed a degree of culpability for the rise in anti-Semitic incidents and attacks on President Trump. I have not for two reasons:

1. First, he has so many other problems and can be blamed for so many things, I thought that I would spread the blame in another directions.
2. But, second, and seriously, the President has come out strongly and unambiguously condemning the acts of violence against Jews in San Diego, even inviting Rabbi Goldstein to the White House. This stands in stark contrast to his response to the demonstrations and confrontations earlier this year in Charlotte. I take his "turn-around" as a sign of *t'shuva* which, I believe, we must accept.

Anti-Semitism is routinely pedaled the NYTimes. Unabashed and unrestrained criticism of Israel and her politics is part of the Times' routine. Most recently, the cartoon, of Prime Minister Netanyahu's head placed on the body of a dog which is pulling a fat and blind Donald Trump is a worthy companion to the hooked-nose cartoons which appeared regularly in the newspapers published during the Third Reich. The Times has given us, once again, a reminder. The anti-Semitic images and hateful tropes associated with the regime responsible for the systematic murder of six million Jews remain as legitimate commentaries on the Jewish people. (So much for the belief that anti-Semitism is a thing of the past). I have canceled my subscription in protest. I urge you to do the same.

Last Shabbat, one week ago, many Americans, and Jews in particular, were again shaken by a murderous attack, perpetrated by a young man, a 19-year-old kid who, in his short life had learned and internalized the attribute of unrestrained hatred against Jews.

What caused his hatred? Where does it start? How did we get to this point? What should be our response? All are questions we must ask, knowing there are no good answers.

Part of the answer has been conveyed in the vile "manifesto" written by this unrepentant and evil young man. Jews, he suggests, are still a "fifth column," unscrupulous and predisposed to disloyalty to this country and concerned only about other Jews. He describes Jews as this society's "Judas," the Jew not to be trusted, the Jew who betrays the real, Christian Americans (so long as they are not Catholic). We are the ones who infect this society with the stain of our nefarious financial manipulations and machinations. We intermingle in society in ways which taint and defile the real / white Americans. This we have all heard. It is upsetting. It makes us sick. And, this is the language that fuels the fires of this irrational hatred.

How irrational is anti-Semitism? We are this little group of people. We represent one half of one percent of the world's population. We could easily be ignored, yet we are not. In countries in Europe, indexes of anti-Semitism are at the levels that were in Nazi Germany before the war. There are even high levels of anti-Semitism in countries in which there are virtually no Jews. Finland and Iceland are good examples. If that is not irrational, I don't know what is.

The rise in anti-Semitism in Europe is a signal that the lessons of the Holocaust are being rejected and ignored. The rise of anti-Semitism in Europe and around the world is a reminder that the Holocaust was not forced upon an unwilling and unsuspecting Europe. What **we** today call the Holocaust was explained, simply marketed, AND ACCEPTED, as a “relocation” exercise:

Who needs those pushy, picky, and pesky Jews? Let them go somewhere else.

And when it turned out that they had been brutally murdered, the non-Jewish population in Germany, Austria and throughout Europe, feigned ignorance.

Who knew? We thought they were just being re-located so that we didn’t have to live with them. We had no idea.

This same phenomenon, the “turning away” from that discriminatory and denigrating behaviors which we all have witnessed, pretending “I didn’t hear” the joke, the name calling, the stereotyping. That is the complicity required for anti-Semitism to succeed. And it is succeeding.

This is how anti-Semitism succeeds on campus. It is couched in terms of thinly veiled political activities and demonstrations. “We are not against Jews, *per se*,” contend those who support BDS and demonstrate for a Free Palestine. We’re not against Jews. We are simply protesting a racist policy against Palestinians:

I don’t hate Jews. Some of my best friends are Jews!” But I hate Israel. I hate the Jewish Homeland. True, I advocate the dismantling the Jewish State. I advocate replacing with a secular, non-Jewish State/bi-national. True, I believe that Israel should no longer exist. Yes, Israel is the incarnation of evil in this world. I simply want the evil to go away. I am not advocating killing Jews. Our plan is simply a program of “relocation”!

How must we respond to anti-Semitism?

1. **Point out the evils of this world:** This country is great because it is founded on principles of goodness, democracy, and the sanctity of all life. We must, as Americans, safeguard that ideal. It is our responsibility to point out the evil in our midst which stains and blemishes this land. We are obligated to point a finger at those who hate. We expose their lies and condemn their arrogance.

Here is how the Talmud says, speaking in God’s voice: Rav Hisda said, (and some say Mar Ukva said): concerning the evil and the arrogant:

The Holy One, blessed be He said: He and I cannot dwell together in the world, as it is stated: “He who slanders his neighbor in secret, him will I destroy; he who is haughty of eye and proud of heart, him I will not suffer... with him I cannot dwell. (BT *Sotah* 5a):

We would like to think that we dwell in a world in which evil does not exist. But it does. When we see a person for whom beliefs leads to the massacre of people who are praying, we look squarely into the face of evil. Like God, we cannot, we must not reside in the company of evil. Evil resides in places where right becomes wrong and wrong

becomes right, where good and evil trade places. Our first response is to look at the world, to see and to remember, much to our chagrin, that evil exists. We must identify it. We must be the ones to point it out to everyone and anyone.

2. **We must stand against evil with all others who face it.** Part of a response to anti-Semitism must be to learn from what has happened through millennia to our ancestors and our fellow Jews; to be guarantors in this world assuring that the we are there to oppose and reject the evils of hatred and bigotry wherever they surface. We do not back down. We do not cower in fear. We do not retreat into the ghettos and enclaves, hiding and disconnected from the world. We stand up and stand with those in San Diego, in Pittsburgh, in Christchurch New Zealand, in Charlotte NC, in Sri Lanka, and in so many places throughout the world. Too often we have we have stood alone. No one should stand alone against evil. We will stand with them.
3. **Be proud of being a Jew.** Today, we must double-down. Today, we must embrace a heritage which teaches love, kindness, and humility. Carry your Judaism with you with pride and with resolve, demonstrating and portraying the values which make us unique, different from the rest.

Yisroel Goldstein was the Chabad Rabbi who was attacked in Powey, CA. After the shooting, the Rabbi, spoke of the finger that he lost when he was shot. He spoke to every Jew, urging us to join him in responding to this tragedy. I think that we should do just that. Here are his words:

I pray that my missing finger serves as a constant reminder to me. A reminder that every single human being is created in the image of God; a reminder that I am part of a people that has survived the worst destruction and will always endure; a reminder that my ancestors gave their lives so that I can live in freedom in America; and a reminder, most of all, to never, ever, be afraid to be Jewish.

Our response to hate must be to stand up to those who hate, to bring to the world our message of mitzvot. Our mission remains: to bring light and goodness to a world too often stained by evil and tainted by darkness.

It remains our ongoing mission to remind this broken, violent, and sullied world that the response to a world in which such evil resides, is to bring into the world more kindness, more compassion, and, as Rabbi Goldstein stated: to spread more light.

In memory of Lori Gilbert Kaye, z"l.