

Antisemitism: What Do We Do

On Rosh Hashanah I spoke about the complex and frightening landscape of antisemitism in America. I explored the violent, destructive forces of hatred from the far right. I delved into the pernicious anti-Zionism of the far left. I reflected on the stubborn, demoralizing presence of this subterranean cesspool of hate.

In the 20th century, Nazism was endemic in the United States throughout the 1930s and 1940s, as evidenced by Fritz Kuhn's German-American Bund, William Dudley Pelley's Silver Shirts, and the antisemitic ranting of Catholic priests such as Father Coughlin and Father Feeney in Boston. These hate-filled demagogues influenced millions of Americans.

After the Holocaust, over time, antisemitism significantly diminished in America. Violence against Jews, along with antisemitic public pronouncements, became socially unacceptable. Between the rise of interfaith relationships and families and the success of American Jews in virtually every field of endeavor, we felt more and more included, recognized as equals. We believed that antisemitism would continue to slowly wither and die on the vine, poisoned by its own illogic.

We were wrong. The rhetoric of antisemitism is increasingly present in our world, and in our own lives. Despite the enormous advances of Jews in America today, we're looking over our shoulders. We worry about the reach of antisemitism, in our schools, our universities, our places of employment. We worry about our city, our own temple and our safety.

We did not see this hate revival coming. Who could imagine that extremists with the darkest conspiracy-driven impulses would feel emboldened to openly profess their pathological hatred, and then act on it? Who was prepared to watch our country sliding into this kind of rhetoric? The current political scene has reinforced an ancient hatred.

How do we respond to this reemergence of antisemitism? What lessons of survival have we learned over 2000 years of minority status in the Diaspora? How do we strengthen our resolve? What do we tell our kids? What do we tell ourselves?

Silence is not an option. Waiting quietly is not an option. Going along to get along is a formula for failure. We've learned a lot about Jewish resistance since 1933. We've come to see the price of acquiescence. Our children and grandchildren must learn about power and action in the face of threats to our safety as a Jewish community.

- 1) We must keep our antennae up. We must pay close attention to what our kids are saying about their experiences in school, at summer camp, etc. I realize that the Newton, Needham, Brookline area has a significant Jewish population. We do live in a particularly insulated cocoon. Sadly, that doesn't mean we're invulnerable. Most of the time, everything is fine. But sometimes it's not, and we have to firmly, gently get more information.

And for adults in your workplace. You may hear certain comments that might be an invitation to others to indulge in antisemitism-lite. Sometimes it's couched in stupid, insulting jokes. Then there are the stereotypes, phrases like, "The Jews are rich", or "Jews are so smart", that then degenerate into antisemitic slurs like "Jews are so cheap", or "Jews control all the banks", or someone might say, "Yeah, some guy Jewed me down the other day".

If you are a witness to such talk, it's necessary to speak up – gently – but assertively. A comment like, "You know, that stuff is really not true, and it hurts my feelings," is enough to send a message. When someone uses the phrase "somebody Jewed me down", they may not even get how offensive it is. Speak up. It's scary sometimes. But not to comment is to give it a pass.

And by the way, don't give fellow Jews a pass. Sometimes Jews will use antisemitic slurs about other Jews. Maybe it's to impress people with their own alienation. Maybe they're hoping to show how cool they are, that they're not like "those people." Only It's not funny or clever. It's wrong. And they need to understand that it doesn't make them more popular amongst people who aren't Jewish. It makes them look foolish. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks once

said, “Non-Jews respect Jews who respect Judaism, and they are embarrassed by Jews who are embarrassed by Judaism.”

- 2) Demand more accountability. When an antisemitic incident occurs at a public school, we need information about what happened and what will be done. Are the police involved? Is there an active investigation? How are the students being informed? How is their anxiety and fear being handled? If a minor is involved, I understand that no names will be divulged. And that’s as it should be.
But what is the school system doing with this perpetrator? What kind of safety mechanisms are in place to assure the school administration that a child can’t get away with this sort of vandalism in a public school during school hours?
The school system and City Hall must understand that an act of antisemitic vandalism sends shockwaves through the entire Jewish community. It’s not that we don’t trust the political system in our various communities. We need answers. We need to be reassured.
- 3) We must learn more about the current trends in antisemitism. Who are the current white supremacists? What ideology are they preaching? What kind of conspiracy theories are they spreading on the Internet? Who’s listening to them? How do antisemites spread their malignancy while appearing acceptable? Listen to their language. “A certain liberal elite.” “Those people.” “George Soros is behind every conspiracy theory plotting the downfall of white Christian America.” “It’s all about the Benjamins, baby.” This is code. Pay attention to who is using it.
- 4) We must prepare our kids as they go to college campuses across the nation to face a certain kind of sustained critique about who they are and what they believe as Jews. I am in no way suggesting any sort of indoctrination or party line. But I do believe they must have a real baseline of knowledge about Israel and about the Reform movement’s commitment to social change. Perhaps a pre-college seminar for high school juniors and seniors? Would they come? Do they think it’s necessary?

5) There are Jews who are reluctant to acknowledge the harm of American antisemitism in the 21st century. We have it so good; we shouldn't make a big deal of it. After all, others have it worse off than we do.

Yes, we do have it good. In the annals of Jewish history, no Jewish community has done as well as we have. We are a presence in industry, education, entertainment, and philanthropy. We are involved in every level of local, state, and federal political leadership. And yes, others have it worse off than we do. But: to ignore antisemitism, to turn a deaf ear to the dog whistles of antisemitic trope is to be an accomplice to hate. The extent to which others suffer is irrelevant to our own unique historical experience and our well-grounded fear. Each and every one of us must be a fighter against antisemitism.

6) But -- "You cannot be a fighter against antisemitism but be blind to racism, or even worse, engage in it yourself. And you cannot fight racism but be blind to antisemitism, or even engage in it yourself.

The Jew in the kippah, the Muslim woman in the hijab, the African American student walking across campus, the Latino kids gathered celebrating, or just enjoying themselves in a park, must feel as safe as anyone else. And if you see them harassed or mistreated, you must feel outrage, even if it is not a member of your own group suffering the insults. In the fight against evil, there are no bystanders. Onlookers are not neutral, they are complicit.¹

Or, as Martin Luther King put it so well,: Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.

¹ <https://www.brandeis.edu/now/2019/may/lipstadt-speech.html>

7) After the slaughter last year at Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, we all experienced deep anguish. It was a dark time. And in our grief, people reached out. I received letters and email from people who are not Jewish, people who wanted to share their outrage and sadness.

Wasi Mohamed, executive director of the Islamic Center of Pittsburgh, gave a speech following the mass shooting, announcing that Pittsburgh's Muslim community had raised \$70,000 in just two days for Tree of Life victims. The story was picked up by national news. A tweet of that speech was shared more than 60,000 times on Twitter. Eventually, Pittsburgh's Muslim community was joined by other Muslim groups and more than \$238,000 was raised.

Mohamed said his community was inspired to help by lessons found in the Koran.

"It is because of these prophetic traditions that we decided to do something for our Jewish brothers and sisters," said Mohamed in his speech. "This is sincere, we are not going to stop. We don't think our work is finished. We just want to know what you need. If it is more money, just let us know. If it's people outside your next service, protecting you, let us know [and] we will be there."²

The Jewish community — 2 percent of America's population — cannot go at this problem alone. We have to insist that the societies of which we are a part take a stand against antisemitism because any society in which it flourishes is one that is dead or dying.³ We must think and act strategically.

We need to build partnerships with people like Wasi Mohamed. We need to think of ourselves as a part of a mosaic of cultures and colors. Alliances that ask you to disavow or distort a fundamental part of yourself are not okay. But alliances that allow you to come as your full self to work for the common good? These ... reflect the heart of being Jewish --- and should – must be sought out.

² <https://www.pghcitypaper.com/pittsburgh/pittsburghers-of-year-the-islamic-center-of-pittsburgh/Content?oid=12781527>

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/06/opinion/sunday/anti-semitism.html>

- 8) I had a great conversation with my mentor and friend, Rabbi David Ellenson, former president of Hebrew Union College. He told me that he'd been invited to write an essay on what Israel will look like 20 years from now. I said incredulously, "Twenty years? What about 6 months from now?"

Who knows what the future holds. We are not prophets. No one has the power to see into the future. But we do have the collective conscience and values and history of the Jewish people. And our conscience, our values, our history insist that we stand proudly as Jewish Americans. We uphold the best ethical standards of the Jewish tradition by seeking justice for our fellow citizens and for our own community.

The fight against antisemitism is waged on many fronts. I come back again and again to Hillel's wisest statement: If I am not for myself, then who will be for me? If we do not uphold the core of who and what we are as a community with a shared past and a glorious destiny, who will do it? If we do not double down on Jewish learning and Jewish experience for our children and our children's children, who will do that for us? If we, as adults, do not engage with our Judaism, if it becomes a tangential and insignificant aspect of our lives, then why should we work so hard? If we don't have a sense of personal outrage in our hearts when a swastika is scrawled on the wall of a local school, then what are we doing here, anyway?

But if I'm only for myself, continues Hillel, what am I? Jews know that something that starts with the Jews never ends there. And today, those who hate people of color or people of the Muslim faith will, there is no doubt, eventually turn their ire, if they have not already done so, on Jews. We must be in this together, relentlessly, with all our soul and with all our might."⁴

In this perilous world filled with fear and anger and hopelessness, we must lean into our Judaism. We must express

⁴ <https://www.brandeis.edu/now/2019/may/lipstadt-speech.html>

our love for our people and our tradition. We must proclaim that this big Jewish tent is open and worth entering. American Jews will not relinquish our freedom to express our unique vision of the world.

We must continue to fight antisemitism from the micro to the macro. We must continue to affirm our heritage as Jews and as Americans. We must never allow any aspect of antisemitism, from a swastika on a wall to the conspiracy crazed utterances of fascists and neo-Nazis to go unanswered. And we must double down on our fight against racism in all its forms. It's two sides of the same coin of evil.

In this turbulent time at the beginning of 5780, let us all recommit our love for Judaism and our love for justice. This is how we will fight antisemitism. If not now, when?