

Antisemitism: Defining the Roots

Definitions:

A Jewish optimist: someone who thinks things can't get any worse

A Jewish pessimist: someone who thinks they can

A Jewish realist: someone who knows they already are¹

Last year, someone smeared a swastika on a wall at Oak Hill, one of our local middle schools. It wasn't the first time at Oak Hill, and it wasn't the first time in Newton that some twisted kid defaced public property with the most offensive symbol in the Jewish catalog of defamation.

It is an increasingly common phenomenon in the United States to hear stories of swastika graffiti, defiled cemeteries, fraternity Hitler parties, various hate crimes, and, worst of all, homicidal attacks on Jews at prayer in our synagogues. The new normal in America is antisemitism. It is a frightening time we live in, and to pretend everything is fine is to willfully bury our heads in the sand.

I didn't want to talk about antisemitism today. I hate focusing on something so dark and disturbing. And I don't want to enter into a political minefield. But I also believe with all of my heart that not to engage in this subject would be a dereliction of my duty as your rabbi.

¹ Attributed to Deborah Lipstadt

This is not about politics or what side are you on. The subject of antisemitism is about us.

I felt sick and disappointed when I got word of the incident. Sick because as a Jew and as the son of a Holocaust survivor, the very mention of words like 'Nazi' or 'swastika' triggers deep and painful memories of my family and the Holocaust. The war against the Jews remains for me and those with direct connections to that catastrophe a primary disturbance in the field, a dark source of sadness and loss. Every antisemitic hate crime reconnects us to past trauma. We feel alone and vulnerable, set up, once again, to experience an unbridled dose of hate from people who see us through a twisted, distorted lens of white supremacy. That it happened so close to home was particularly distressing.

I was disappointed, because we imagined not that long ago, that antisemitism, for all practical purposes, was eliminated. But no. From the right and from the left, people are loudly humming the old familiar melodies of Jew-hatred, and making up some new and confusing lyrics, too.

That afternoon, we gathered our Hebrew School kids here in the sanctuary. Most of them already knew. But not all. Some of our kids didn't even know what a 'swastika' was – they'd never heard the word before. I told them all about the origins of the swastika.

I explained why it was so deeply offensive to the Jewish people. This particular symbol, I told them, for Jews and for others who suffered at the hands of Hitler, is provocative and unbearably cruel. And even if the perpetrators were not aware of the swastika's origins, they surely knew that vandalizing the school with that particular symbol, was a way of communicating contempt.

I felt so sad about having to explain this horrible act to our kids. I would have preferred a conversation about anything else. But this is the epicenter of our Jewish lives. They needed to know what it meant and why it was so upsetting.

One of our students, the always-loquacious Max Worman, raised his hand. In a voice tinged with sadness and frustration, he asked, "Why do people hate the Jews?" What a question: just 6 words. And the answer? Two thousand years long.

Antisemitism, or Jew-hatred, or anti-Judaism; whatever you call this scourge, is an ever-present part of Western civilization. It is like a creeping mold that spreads insidiously and, at times, toxically, with profoundly and deeply damaging consequences. The millions of broken lives, the destruction, and death that follow in the wake of antisemitism is one of the horrors of humanity.

The history of antisemitism is an ancient, long-running tragedy. It is profoundly complex and has a thousand moving parts. There are

particularly well-documented studies of antisemitism, and I will provide a bibliography at our temple website over the next few weeks. I am also eager to join anyone here today who would like to spend some time learning more about this terrible phenomenon. Please email me your interest, and I'll take care of the rest.

Professor Ken Stern, director of the Bard Center for the Study of Hate, defines this subject: "Antisemitism is hatred toward Jews and is directed toward the Jewish religion, Jews as a people, or, more recently, the Jewish state. Antisemitism frequently charges Jews with conspiring to harm non-Jews and is often used to give an explanation for why things go wrong. It is expressed in speech, writing, visual forms, and action, and regularly employs stereotypes."²

If you ask virtually anyone in the sanctuary today who is over the age of 75, they can tell you stories about their encounters with antisemitism; and I mean encounters, the plural form. Some may remember slurs while serving in the military, being beaten up at school, not receiving a job offer or not getting accepted to a particular school, being ostracized at work, and so many more examples, all because they were Jewish.

If you were to ask the children and children of those elders about their experiences with antisemitism, it is likely that their lives have been much different.

² <https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/working-definition-antisemitism>

But in the shadow of Charlottesville, the Tree of Life massacre in Pittsburgh and the Poway shooting shocked us. We are shaken to the core. How could this happen? Who are the haters? What is their motivation? And what are we supposed to do about it? Should we be worried?

Whenever a nation experiences prolonged divisive political conflict, often accompanied by economic anxieties, and regularly witnesses explosive ideological confrontations, people come to see the future as a stark, existential choice between the good guys and the bad guys. If you don't see it my way, then there can be no conversation, no rational analysis. We can't agree to disagree. There can be no common ground. Lines are drawn. And whenever lines are drawn, antisemitism grows. In fact, antisemitism plays best in a binary world.

From the far-right come endless conspiracy theories that you can find all over the Internet. Their playbook is centuries old, drawing on the mythic Aryan past, promising to create a new America for the white race. And who is in their way? Who is the archenemy of the far right? Who owns everything? Who are the puppet masters? The Jews.

The hateful antisemitic screed spewed by white supremacists is based on the notion that they are the only true saviors of this nation, and ultimately, the world. They consider their struggle to be a holy war against non-Christians, and "that people of color pose a mortal danger to the survival of whites, and that Jews are behind this nefarious plot to

destroy whites by promoting affirmative action, equal rights, and immigration, among other initiatives.”³

So many mass shootings in America are perpetrated by obsessive haters whose souls have been twisted almost beyond recognition by far-right hatred. Everywhere they look, they see the dreaded other. They take this far-right ideology to its logical conclusion: they seek out the enemy and then, with their multiple weapons of war, hunt them down.

These haters have been around for centuries. They’ve been known by many labels and have spoken various languages, but they are, in the end, the spawn of thuggish antisemitism that always portrays us as the other. The antisemitism espoused by the far-right is vile and pernicious. After the Holocaust, such haters living in America tended to crawl under their respective rocks. We’d hear about the Klan or Lincoln Rockwell and the American Nazi Party. The John Birch Society would distribute pamphlets, and so forth. It was such foolishness. We’d shake our heads and look at these fools and their paranoid conspiracy ranting.

In recent years, these folks have emerged from their caves and into the sunlight. Their leaders have learned how to dress up and sound respectable. They tend not to behave like the Brownshirts of the 1930s. Their “we’re just white men pointing out that we are not be treated with respect” speeches are a cover for their deep-seated racism and antisemitism. They live and breathe the replacement conspiracy that

³ <http://kennethsstern.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/ANTISEMITISMTODAY.pdf>

their white Christian lives are being ruined by people of color – and it’s all engineered by Jews. Remember the chant in Charlottesville? “Jews will not replace us”? That’s where the chant comes from.

We saw them in Charlottesville. We saw them in Pittsburgh. We saw them in Poway. We saw them in Brooklyn. I fear we will see them again.

American antisemitism of the far left is a different beast. While the antisemitism of the far-right is about hating us through violent speech and violent action, the antisemitism of the far-left is all about hating us through isolation and exclusion and putting us in our place. “People who come for the Jews unfortunately tend to come from all directions, and while the variant that comes from one direction may be deadlier than the variant from another, they ultimately converge at the same point.”⁴

The perspective from far-left antisemitism hinges on two issues: race and Israel. Regarding race, it’s ironic that the antisemites on the far-right claim we are not white, and those on the far left claim that we are too white. Jewish women who were involved in the politics of the Women's March will tell you candidly that their Jewishness was seen as a liability, that their white privilege overshadowed their historical experience as Jewish women. “The message was that Jews are members of the elite and therefore cannot be fair-minded or the victims of

⁴ <https://israelpolicyforum.org/2019/08/01/trump-may-not-be-coming-for-the-jews-but-someone-is/>

discrimination. In doublespeak worthy of George Orwell... keeping Jews out serves the goal of inclusion.”⁵

Jews are not a race. Of course Ashkenazi Jews, like me, are indeed white. But Mizrachi Jews are certainly people of color. There are Jews from Ethiopia. From India. From China. Not to mention hundreds of thousands of Jews by Choice, who come from families of every ethnic and racial group.

The bullying and dismissing of Jews by far-left antisemites is intricately connected to what many call anti-Zionism. Anti-Zionism may be characterized as a belief that Israel is not a legitimate entity. Instead, it is a colonialist usurper. Jews intrinsically have no unique claim to the land. Israel systematically oppresses people who are not Jewish.

The BDS movement, co-founded by In April 2004 by Omar Barghouti., of the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel, seeks to dismantle the Jewish State. In its place, BDS proposes replacing it with a secular government, because, according to Barghouti, Israel is an apartheid state legally and institutionally privileging the colonizers in historic Palestine, defying international law, ethical principles, and common sense.

“For young progressives on campuses across the country, allegiance to the BDS movement is just another item to check off as they make their

⁵ Antisemitism: Here and Now by Deborah Lipstadt

way down a list of current causes. Black Lives Matter, immigrants' rights, LGBT rights, gender sensitivities, opposition to all manner of cultural appropriation, and intersectionality.”⁶ To be clear, these are very serious and significant issues. The point is that BDS gets included in the same list, the same breath.

You can suggest that the current policies of the Jewish State betray Jewish values. You can claim that contemporary Zionism is not what our ancestors would have embraced. As Bari Weiss writes, “Any honest person has to admit that there were and are injustices perpetrated by Israel.”⁷ To see criticism of Israel as a sin is to do the ultimate harm to the Jewish State.

We believe in the Israeli Declaration of Independence which includes lofty principles and ideals. *The state of Israel will promote the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; will be based on precepts of liberty, justice and peace taught by the Hebrew prophets; will uphold the full social and political equality of all its citizens without distinction of race, creed or sex; will guarantee full freedom of conscience, worship, education and culture; will safeguard the sanctity and inviolability of shrines and holy places of all religions; and will dedicate itself to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.*

⁸When these principles are ignored or criticized as foolishness or worse,

⁶ (((Semitism))) : Being Jewish in America in the Age of Trump by Jonathan Weissman

⁷ How to Fight Anti-Semitism by Bari Weiss

⁸ <https://www.jta.org/1948/05/16/archive/full-text-of-israels-proclamation-of-independence-issued-in-tel-aviv>

then it is our duty to speak out, just as we must speak out when the USA, or any nation, fails to live up to its ideals.

“Criticism of Israel is not antisemitism when it is engaged in a similar manner as one would criticize any other country, focusing on a program, a policy, a political leader or party. But when the alleged problems in Israel are used to attack its basic legitimacy or to tarnish Jews collectively, that is antisemitism in effect, whether or not by design.”⁹

From the Right and from the Left, we are experiencing a resurgence of antisemitism. It is disconcerting and frightening. Some of us worry about the direction our country may be taking, how the landscape which once felt familiar and comfortable is now foreboding and increasingly, terra incognita. How do we uphold our Jewish values in the face of real and potential dangers? What are we supposed to do?

Here’s one thing I know. Our ancestors experienced excruciating hardship. When they arrived in America, they believed that they would be safe. In the late 19th century, they stood on the decks of ships watching for the first sight of the Statue of Liberty. My father, a 14-year-old orphan, escaping the Holocaust in 1941, remembered his first glimpse of Lady Liberty. He saw her and knew, after a harrowing, terror-filled lonely life, that he would never have to run away from anyone else again.

⁹ <http://kennethsstern.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/ANTISEMITISMTODAY.pdf>

We will not give up our freedom, our safety, our rights. Period. History does not repeat itself. History is a teacher of truth in the face of falsehoods. "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." Antisemitism is real. It is a genuine danger. But our determination to live out our lives in this nation transcends this terrible blight. We are Jews. We are not just survivors. We are free.