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Glimmers of Hope in a Sea of Hate – Antisemitism and Our Response

“Do not hate your brother in your heart.” Everything we know about fighting hate flows from the very source of our tradition. This quote from Leviticus 19:17 could stand alone as a means of stemming the tidal wave of antisemitism currently rushing toward tsunami proportions in this country and around the world. If only it were that simple.

I grew up in Annandale, VA, one of only a few Jews in my school and in my neighborhood. I remember sitting on the edge of my seat in Hebrew School listening to one of our congregants, Ari Torner, tell of his time in Auschwitz – of the terrors he endured and the lasting effects he still carried in his body from the medical experiments he suffered. I remember craning my neck, frightened to get a glimpse of the number on his arm, yet too mesmerized to look away. I can still feel the deep sense of relief I experienced in my certainty that such hatred was a thing of the past. I couldn't fathom anyone I knew, anyone from the world that was 'today' back then believing or espousing such antisemitic vitriol. The shattering of my naiveté came in words of hate shouted at me not by a stranger, but by an angry friend in my own home after a disagreement. I don't even remember what started the argument. And I didn't know what the word “kike” even meant; I just knew that it was a nasty, hateful term meant to hurt me because I was Jewish, and he wasn't.

That was at least 40 years ago. To hear a parent in my office just a few months ago, close to tears, describe a similar incident that her child experienced on the school bus gave me cause to revisit this and similar unwelcome memories. The difference today isn't the hate, it's the normalization of it and thanks to social media, the ease with which it is spread – its reach and the effects of that are astounding. According to the Anti-Defamation League, the world's premier organization fighting antisemitism and hate in all its forms, there were 3,697 antisemitic incidents in 2022 in this country alone – a 36% increase over 2021.¹

¹ <https://www.adl.org/resources/report/audit-antisemitic-incidents-2022>

This represents dramatic rises in every category: harassment up 29%, vandalism 51% increase, assault up 26%. In 2022, there were 589 incidents logged at Jewish institutions – synagogues, Jewish community centers and Jewish schools, an increase of 12% from 2021. And most disturbingly, on our college campuses, antisemitic activity increased by 41%, with 219 incidents. In 2022 on average, 10 antisemitic incidents per day were reported – the highest level of antisemitic activity since ADL started keeping records in 1979 – following an upward trendline of hate and vitriol directed against the American Jewish community over the last five years. This is the third time in the past five years that the year-end total has been the highest number ever recorded.² In Connecticut alone, there were 68 antisemitic incidents tracked by the ADL in 2022, double 2021's number, including 55 incidents of harassment and 13 of vandalism. That puts Connecticut at number 11 nationwide for antisemitic activity which was seen in 34 communities, one out of every five Connecticut towns.³

Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch teaches, "If there is one lesson to absorb from the Holocaust, it is that when someone proclaims an intention to exterminate the Jews, believe them."⁴ The barbarianism is incomprehensible. What could cause such unthinkable violence and atrocity? And yet, we hear the echoes even now... "Jews will not replace us" – shouted on the streets of Charlottesville, VA only a few years ago by a marching mob of white nationalist Nazis. That's what they called themselves – Nazis, marching on the streets spewing antisemitic tropes that should have died 80 years ago! Of all the savageries in the sordid history of human affairs – what explains the singling out of the Jews? Why "Jews will not replace us?" Why not Scandinavians will not replace us or Unitarians will not replace us? Why not Hindus will not replace us? There are a billion Hindus in the world. Why not Buddhists will not replace us. There are 500 million Buddhists in the world. Why Jews? There are only 14 million of us. We are less than 2% of the American population but were the target of 58% of all religiously motivated hate crimes in 2020.

Antisemitism of course falls on the spectrum of all expressions of hate, intolerance, xenophobia and racism, yet it somehow lands differently. Why? Because of the ideology that fuels it. No other supremacist ideology is as singularly fixated on an entire people. It is not about the hatred of a single Jew. Many antisemites have never met a Jew. The ideology of antisemitism is so dangerous because it focuses on the entirety of the Jewish people regardless of observance,

² <https://www.adl.org/resources/press-release/us-antisemitic-incidents-hit-highest-level-ever-recorded-adl-audit-finds>

³ <https://www.ctinsider.com/connecticut/article/adl-antisemitic-incidents-ct-2022-17854157.php>

⁴ <https://swfs.org/sermons/reflections-on-antisemitism>

belief, place of residence. How preposterous that the eradication of an entire people – the Jewish People – was the antisemitic foundation of Hitler’s insanity. And while for most the overall goal may no longer be extermination (please God), we still must listen. Iran and Hezbollah threaten Jewish extermination all the time. Palestinian Hamas and Islamic Jihad threaten Jewish extermination. Make no mistake, antisemites are obsessed with what they term the “worldwide Jewish conspiracy,” and no single Jew is going to change their minds. Their antisemitism is not about you as an individual. It is about them. It is a window into their own fears, suspicions, insecurities and hatred.

I want to be clear. Antisemitism bridges political and religious divides. There’s plenty of it to go around, not just on the far reaches of the right and left, but across all races and religions. Antisemitism is an equal opportunity kind of hate – a multi-dimensional problem. It is the oldest form of human hate, and we MUST call it out not only in those with whom we disagree, but even more so in those with whom we may more easily align ourselves politically. Skeptical? How many of you here this morning have children in college? American colleges and universities are havens of free speech and often liberal ideals. But what are your Jewish college students telling you about BDS, Jew hate and anti-Israel bias on campus? How many of them or their friends or professors have suffered harassment or been excluded from progressive spaces or organizations for expressing support for Israel? It’s not just the Marjorie Taylor Greene’s or Lauren Boebert’s in Congress espousing ridiculous, baseless antisemitic tropes. What about that seemingly like-minded colleague who suggests lunch and then rejects your restaurant choice telling you, “I don’t want to go to that place... it’s owned by Jews.” (True story!) Or those in Congress who lobby loudly for a “Free Palestine” without acknowledgement of the urgent need for a fair, equitable and peaceful settlement to the Israel-Palestinian dispute. Both peoples have indisputable claims to the land and to human dignity, yet too often pro-Palestinian activity is led by those who are seeking Israel’s annihilation rather than accommodation or co-existence with her.

To be clear, Israel is a political nation/state, member of the United Nations, and political actor on a world stage. It is normal and sometimes even required to criticize Israel’s actions, policies, and legacies, especially when her government acts in ways meant to weaken or dismantle the very democracy upon which it was built. It is the right of every citizen of the world to criticize Israel. Without question, we as Jews have a unique responsibility to protect this truth and even to hold Israel to a higher standard because Israel represents the Jewish people. The fundamental ideology however that the state of Israel should never have been

formed and must be eliminated – the belief that professes there can be no marriage of a “Jewish state” with a “democratic one” so therefore Israel shouldn’t exist at all? That antizionist viewpoint my friends is antisemitism full stop, and we must call it out, even in its most subtle forms. Zionism is not the last vestiges of western colonialism; it is Israel’s very existence as a self-determined haven for a minority persecuted around the world throughout history and today.

As we work together to push back against this rising tide of hatred, the Yamim Nora’im provide an opportunity to hold up a mirror and ask, “What have we – as individuals and as a community – done to create the society that we want to live in? How have we sought to increase understanding? How have we shown up to fight for the rights of others? How have we spoken out against bigotry and intolerance? In what ways have we lit a beacon of hope for a more loving, accepting and caring world?”

As one of hundreds of participating congregations in ADL’s National Kulanu: Synagogues in Action Against Antisemitism program, we here at TBC are helping to lead the charge against antisemitism and hate through collaborative efforts using a whole-of-society approach – building coalitions and bridges across faith traditions, age, gender, race and economic silos, providing education and training, and embracing partnerships that favor love and value the gifts that each individual brings to the table. And we need you to join us! The invitation is to get involved – to listen, to learn and to speak up!

We must call out antisemitism regardless of the source. If you find yourself rationalizing or minimizing the antisemitism of someone from your own political party, while railing against that of a different political party, then you are reducing antisemitism to a partisan political cudgel. Politics has nothing to do with it. Antisemitism isn’t ever acceptable, and we must learn to recognize it and speak up to stop it. One of the first and perhaps most challenging places we can do that, whether tweeted from the halls of Congress or dog-whistled from the White House, is among our own political allies. I encourage you to do so, and loudly!

Invite others to join you. Jews cannot stand alone in the fight against anti-Semitism. It is essential we see our fate as Jews as inextricably linked with the fate of others and help them see that ours is linked with theirs. We must show, not just tell our neighbors and non-Jewish friends, about the beauty of our traditions, share our sacred stories with them, and then listen, with strong backs and open hearts, as they share theirs with us. As individuals, we should invite them to

Seders, to services and to our Shabbat dinners, and we should accept their invites to Church celebrations and Iftar dinners.

As your spiritual leader, I am constantly working to deepen our interfaith relationships and bring us into sacred partnership and action with peoples of many different faiths and backgrounds. When we see other people as human beings and they see us, it is much harder for us to demonize one another.

And finally, I encourage all of us to lean into the beauty and blessing of Judaism. We must be motivated not by the “oy” of being Jewish, but by the great joy of Jewish life. As Dr. Deborah Lipstadt, the White House’s Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism reminds us, “even the alarming upsurge of antisemitism in Europe today does not come close to the antisemitism of pre-Holocaust Europe with its state-sponsored persecution, and is actually accompanied by encouraging signs of Jewish rebirth.”⁵ And in this country, after the shootings at Tree of Life, and in Poway, after Charlottesville, after Colleyville, TX, and after attacks in Los Angeles and New York, the outpouring of love, sympathy and solidarity for the Jewish community was profound, with very public support from the general population, from politicians across the spectrum, from religious leaders of every faith tradition, and from cultural figures of all kinds. We are not alone in our fight unless we choose to be.

My friends, the rising tide of antisemitism is painful and alarming. We must come together in solidarity and with great urgency to decry hate, denounce scapegoating, and ensure that rising extremism is not mainstreamed, normalized or amplified. Hate against any marginalized group only foments hate against all. Our challenge is to be vigilant, vocal and vibrant, but not fearful, because fear will distort who we are. The destiny of our people lies not in the hands of the antisemites – in some neo-Nazi rally, hate-filled pamphlet, vitriolic tweet or even in an act of terror. Rather the future of the Jewish people is right here – in this Ark, in this sacred community, in our hearts and in our hands. The hope for our triumph over antisemitism lies in our unabashed commitment to living proud, vibrant and joyful Jewish lives.

May this Rosh Hashanah serve as a reminder that we are all kin and together, we can change the tide. “Do not hate your neighbor in your heart.” Rather, open your arms and show them the way....

Kein y’hi ratzon – may it be God’s will.

⁵ Deborah E. Lipstadt, *Antisemitism: Here and Now* (New York: Schocken Books, 2019) p. 15. Italics in original. Pg. 108

