

FIGHTING ANTI-SEMITISM

Shanah Tovah! The story is told of a little Jewish man in the Old Country who, during his train ride to work each morning read the local anti-Semitic newspaper. A fellow Jew finally asked him, “Why do you read that anti-Semitic rag? Why don’t you read the Yiddish paper?” The man replied, “Listen, when I read the Yiddish paper I learn how Jews are suffering - a riot here, a pogrom there. When I read this paper I learn how Jews own all the banks, all the railroads, have all the money. Which do you think I want to read?”

We Jews have developed dark humor into an art form. We even told jokes in the ghettos and concentration camps. Psychologists say that humor helps those who are powerless cope emotionally with their situation. A coping mechanism for those who are powerless. Those who have no other avenue of response. That certainly applied to us through much of our history. But the Jews of America are not powerless and today we are facing a surge of anti-Semitism, and it is no laughing matter.

Those of you who have been listening to my sermons for more than a quarter-century know, I hope, that I am not an alarmist. I firmly believe that America has provided the best opportunity for a Jewish diaspora community ever in the history of our people, and I fully expect that this will continue. I believe that it would be incredibly difficult for any of the horrors that our people have experienced elsewhere to occur here in the United States. Difficult however, even incredibly difficult is not impossible, and as Thomas Jefferson has been quoted as saying, “Eternal vigilance is the price of freedom.” We cannot assume that the 80% rise in anti-Semitic acts over the past few years is simply an aberration. It may very well be an aberration, but we are not free to assume that, nor make jokes about.

This is a sermon that I never expected to give because my lifetime, indeed the lifetime of any American Jew born after World War II has been a period without precedent in Jewish history. From the Roman diaspora of the first century forward, wherever our people have gone, there have been good times and bad times, but never a time of near complete acceptance. In the much touted Golden Age of Spain, where Jewish culture flourished, and where Muslims, Jews and Christians lived largely at peace, we were still second-class citizens, with many fewer rights and privileges than the ruling Muslims. Even there, in what had been the most successful diaspora Jewish community in history, even there the Jewish position remained tenuous. Similarly, the Jews of late 19th-century Western Europe, of France and Germany, the most comfortable, most assimilated, and most outwardly successful of any Jewish community up to that point in history, faced ongoing social and political exclusion. In Germany, well before Hitler, the Volk movement

imagined a Teutonic folk history that excluded outsiders, so even as German Jews were trying to assimilate, they had to create their own sports clubs and youth groups. In France, we have only to think of the Dreyfus affair, the ease with which an innocent Jewish army captain was convicted of treason, and the explosion of anti-Jewish sentiment that resulted.

But the United States after WW II really has been different. In 1945, with Americans still aghast at the horrors they had witnessed, anti-Semitism, which only 15 years earlier had been widely and publicly proclaimed here, was no longer socially acceptable. Those who held anti-Semitic beliefs kept them largely to themselves. There was still discrimination, but for the first time - truly the first time since the diaspora began - Jews were by and large not physically afraid. Here is how Bari Weiss, author of the new book, How to Fight Anti-Semitism, describes it. She says of herself:

“I have always considered myself among the luckiest Jews in all of history. This would be true simply if I had been born in America after the mid-century. These were the years of plenty for Jewish Americans. Hospitals and law firms Jews had built because they been shut out of the others were now the ones everyone was clamoring to join. The consummate outsiders had, in mere decades, become the insiders, capable of advocating not just for themselves but also for those others still facing systemic discrimination - and all without having to give up smoked fish or Yom Kippur. That I have lived in the United States at this time is a matter of incredible luck or blessing.”

This has been the reality of my life as well, the reality of all the Jewish baby-boomers. It is a matter of incredible luck or blessing to have been born when and where we were. The stories of the 1930s may be known to us, but they feel distant, like waking up from a nightmare. And for those born after us, the Gen Xers and those who have followed, the 1930s are ancient history, stories written in books they have not read nor perhaps even heard about.

Many Jews no longer know that in the decade before WW II, active, virulent, even violent anti-Semitism was a plague not just in Europe, but also in America. Charles Lindbergh, America's hero, was a rabid antisemite, and a public admirer of Adolph Hitler. Father Charles Coughlin was a priest and radio personality who publicly defended the German burning of synagogues on Kristallnacht, and said of the Jews: “We have lived to see the day that modern Shylocks have grown fat and wealthy, praised and deified, because they have perpetuated the ancient crime of usury under the modern racket of statesmanship.” 30 million people – 25% of the American population at the time! - tuned in every week to hear him. That number today would be 80 million, just 10% less than the number of Americans who watched the Superbowl last year. Every week.

Henry Ford published his newspaper, the Dearborn Independent, specifically to disseminate anti-Semitism. He also printed and distributed thousands of copies of the anti-Semitic forgery, The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, and in 1938 Hitler awarded him the Grand Cross of the Supreme Order of the German Eagle.

And in 1939, six months before the Germans invaded Poland, a rally for the Nazi cause, complete with huge Nazi flags emblazoned with swastikas and ushers dressed as storm troopers was held not in Berlin, but in New York, in Madison Square Garden. 20,000 Americans showed up, carrying banners declaring, “Wake up America. Smash Jewish Communism” and “Stop Jewish Domination of Christian Americans.”

Most Jews born after 1945 barely know this history. Even when we do, for those of us who live in Westchester or other places with substantial Jewish populations, it can be difficult to relate personally to the stories, to think of them as more than just another difficult Jewish historical moment along with the Crusades or the expulsion from Spain.

On the one hand, thank God for that! Thank God that we feel safe enough here that we have not sensed any urgency to dwell on the history of American anti-Semitism or to warn our kids about its possible reemergence. Thank God! It is as though we have been on a vacation from Jewish history.

On the other hand, how foolish we may have been. The vacation felt as though it ended with the shootings at synagogues in Pittsburgh and Poway. Over the years we have diligently taught about the Holocaust and its horrors, and declared “Never Again!” Necessary, important, vital lessons. In the process, we may have neglected to remember that periodically there are other manifestations of anti-Semitism to be concerned about, less cataclysmic to be sure, but still dangerous.

White supremacists march and declare “Jews will not replace us.” Politicians make anti-Semitic remarks and there are no consequences. Jews in Brooklyn are being regularly beaten up on the streets. Universities allow professors to demonize Israel and too many campuses have begun to feel inhospitable or even unsafe for Jewish students.

This is not a time to panic, but neither is it a time to ignore what is happening and hope that it will just go away. On Rosh Hashanah we sound the shofar to awaken us to what we have done wrong in the past year, but also to awaken us to what is happening around us. The shofar is a call to pay attention. We must not minimize what is happening in our country, even as we remind ourselves that America really is different.

The American Jewish experience remains different for many reasons. One is the response of our neighbors to what is going on. In Germany during Kristallnacht, German citizens stood and watched as synagogues burned, or actively helped smash the windows of Jewish owned businesses. In Pittsburgh,

when Tree of Life synagogue was attacked, the neighbors ran to help, to support the Jewish community. “Pittsburgh strong” became a rallying cry; the professional hockey and football teams, the Penguins and the Steelers sported quickly redesigned logos that included a Jewish star. There is an uptick of acts of anti-Semitism in America, but the vast majority of Americans are not anti-Semitic.

Of the many reasons that the Jewish experience in America is different, perhaps none is more important than this: unlike 1930’s Germany, unlike almost anywhere Jews have lived, here in America the government is not complicit. On the contrary. There are individual politicians who are problematic. But the government as a whole is on our side. When bad things happen to Jews in the United States, the police run toward us to help. The Tarrytown police are caring, concerned and attentive. I hope that on the way out you will thank them for being here each year. The American government is protective. Recently, TBA received \$150,000 in government grants from New York State and from Homeland Security, to “harden” the synagogue against attack. That is remarkable. I am grateful for our government’s support. And I am horrified that these steps are necessary.

Even more, I am horrified at how quickly we have all become used to our own security measures. We accept as natural that the synagogue doors are locked at all times, forgetting that not long ago they were always open during the day, welcoming anyone. Since Pittsburgh we accept as a necessity having armed off-duty police officers in the building whenever we hold services or Religious School, and no one blinked when, like other synagogues, we charged an extra fee to pay for that security. I am beyond excited about our soon-to-be built new entrance. And I am upset that a space which was conceived primarily as a way of improving accessibility and being more welcoming has also had to be designed with an extra-large entryway known in the security business as a “person trap,” and that the plans call for bullet-resistant glass. I am glad we are able to do all of this, and I am saddened that it is necessary. Most of all, however, I am angry.

I am angry that I felt that I had no choice but to offer this sermon today. I am angry that on this Rosh Hashanah the *shofar* is not only a call to repentance but also an alarm awakening us to what is going on in our country, and as in days of old is a clarion call to do battle in our own defense. I am angry about it, and you should be too.

You should be angry because while there have always been Americans who harbor anti-Semitic ideas it is only very recently, after more than a half-century of improvement, that these people believe it is once again socially acceptable to express those ideas and to act on them. They believe this in part because politicians on both the Right and the Left are willing to use anti-Jewish stereotypes loudly and unabashedly. Republicans and Democrats hide behind the ideas of free speech or academic freedom as justification for allowing the spewing of hatred. Our

representatives point fingers at one another, calling out examples of how the other side is anti-Semitic while ignoring the clearly expressed hate within their own parties.

On the Right, among other examples, we have a president who finds it expedient to make excuses for or look the other way when some who support him terrorize a Charlottesville synagogue and murder a protester: "I'm sure there are good people on both sides," is a comment which the alt-right has called the high water mark for American White Nationalism. And the Republican Party establishment supports him anyway, either because presidential equivocation on the presence of jackbooted thugs on American streets is acceptable to them, or they are simply afraid that saying anything would cost them too many votes.

On the Left, among other examples, we have a congresswoman recycling classic anti-Semitic stereotypes about Jews and power and money and dual-loyalty: "It's all about the Benjamins baby," is a comment which was echoed and applauded in so-called Progressive areas of the Twitterverse. And the Democratic Party establishment could not bring itself to censure her with more than a tepid statement about general prejudice, either because they knew that too strong a condemnation of a female minority Congressperson for anti-Semitism would not have passed the Democratically controlled House of Representatives, or they were simply afraid it would cost them too many votes.

Let's be clear: Words matter. If hate speech is not challenged, it leads to tragedy. The mainstream of the Republican party needs to loudly and unequivocally repudiate the white nationalist elements in their ranks that demonize Jews as the cause of all evil in the United States, demonization which incites armed terrorists to attack synagogues. And it needs to stop claiming that the words which inspire these attacks fall under the umbrella of free speech.

The mainstream of the Democratic party needs to loudly and unequivocally repudiate their own members who demonize Israel as the cause of all evil in the Middle East, which leads intellectual terrorists to attack students on college campuses on the presumption that if they are Jews they are automatically racists. And it needs to stop pretending that the words which lead to these attacks are protected under the umbrella of academic freedom.

Anti-Semitism on the Left and the Right - There is enough blame to go around. If you want to know the first thing you can do to fight back, it is this: Be willing to call out anti-Semitism on your side of the aisle. If your own party will not clearly distance itself from the anti-Semitism within its ranks, you should call them out on it, loudly and repeatedly. That would be more effective than your pointing out what the other side is doing wrong, or trying to defend actions by your own party that are simply indefensible. This is the first thing we must do to combat the new

American anti-Semitism: as Jews, we have to put our people and our values ahead of political parties.

The first thing we need to do is hold our own politicians accountable. The second thing we should do is join and financially support Jewish causes and organizations. You already affiliate with a synagogue. Did you know that only 30% of American Jews are synagogue affiliated? That number is even lower in Westchester. Your presence here today indicates that you are a minority within a minority. You are the ones who already understand that belonging is important. You understand that it is the synagogue that has kept the flame of Judaism burning all of these years. Ultimately, personal belief, as important as it is, is not enough. Belonging – to a people, to a community – is what gives us the knowledge, the pride, the support and yes, the clout that we need to push back against anti-Semitism. I am grateful to and I am proud of every one of you for doing all you can for TBA.

Rabbi Sam Silver wrote the following: “On the High Holidays we should ponder the question of whether the social justice the world needs, the combating of prejudice and hatred and terrorism can be accomplished without our vigorous support of the organizations which are committed to their realization.” In that light, I suggest that, in addition to the synagogue, we should all belong to B’nai Brith’s Anti-Defamation League, the ADL, and to the American Jewish Committee, the AJC. Both of these organizations lead the fight not only against anti-Semitism, but also against bias and discrimination aimed at other groups in America.

I am not suggesting that Jews abandon charities that are not specifically Jewish. We encourage our Religious School students to give the *tzedakah* they collect each year to both kinds of charities. But we insist that at least half of the money each year goes to a Jewish organization. Look at it this way. There are 329 million people in America. There are approximately 5 million Jews – less than 2% of the population. When the United Way holds a fund raiser, there are 329 million potential donors. When the United Jewish Appeal holds a fund raiser, its target population is 98% smaller – 5 million potential donors. The same is true of the American Red Cross and the Red Magen David. And it’s true on a different level for all charities, in the arts, education, wherever; Jews are simply beginning with a much smaller pool. Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, atheists, etc will all potentially give to non-denominational groups, both nationally and locally. A much smaller number of people will potentially give to Jewish charities. Put another way, if Jews don’t give to non-denominational charities, those organizations will have to look to others for funding. If Jews don’t give to Jewish charities, those organizations will go out of business. Don’t abandon the other organizations you believe in, but if you also believe in the mission of a Jewish cause, make sure to give generously there as well.

Hold your politicians accountable. Join and support Jewish causes. And finally, never forget that we are not in this fight alone. The real threat today is not just against Jews, it is against the fabric of American society. We may be among the most prominent of minority groups, but we are not the only ones under attack. Sikhs, blacks, gays, Muslims, Mexicans, immigrants of every color; they have all suffered increased verbal and physical attacks. From the beginning of this Republic there have been those who believe that only people of a certain color and religion qualify as “real Americans.” They have always been wrong. America was founded not on an ethnicity, but on an idea, and this ultimately is what makes this country different than any other in the history of the world. Anyone who accepts the covenant that is the Constitution is a “real American,” despite what the racists and bigots and antisemites believe.

If we are to prevail, we must call out not only anitsematism. We American Jews, who are in fact successful and powerful and influential, we must take the lead in calling out racism and bigotry and hatred of all stripes. We must stand with all groups which are under siege here because it is good for us and it is good for them, and we are in fact in a position to make a difference.

My friends we should be concerned about what is going on, in this country but we should not be frightened. We should be angry. We should be angry that we need to have these conversations with our kids. We should be angry that after more than a half century of the steady withering of bigotry and bias, we find them crawling out from under their rocks once again. If there was ever a moment in our lives to express righteous indignation, this is it, on behalf of the Jews yes, and also on behalf of our nation.

A New Year is always bright with the promise that the future can be better than the past. In this New Year, let us use the strength of our community to build that better future. Let us stand up for ourselves, as well as for others. Let us stand with Americans of good will against hatred coming from any point on the political spectrum, left, right or the center. And may 5780 be a year in which the call of the shofar heralds the victory of respect, good-will and peace.