

Antisemitism: Our Response And Our Responsibility

My father lives in La Jolla, California. It's a beautiful neighborhood. It's right by the beach. And surprisingly, it happens to be very Jewish.

I say surprisingly because when my parents first moved to San Diego in the 60's, Jews did not live in La Jolla. My dad used to repeatedly explain to me that when he was looking for places to set up his medical practice, he would not set up shop in La Jolla because there were signs that said "No Dogs or Jews allowed."

Today, whenever I go home to visit, I always find that story somewhat ironic because there are two Synagogues, one Orthodox and one Conservative, within walking distance from my dad's house. It's no "Deal, NJ," but there are many Orthodox Jews in the neighborhood and the local supermarket has a huge selection of kosher meats and specialty foods.

What led to this change? According to my father, when the Salk Institute opened in the early sixties, and the University of California in San Diego began growing and expanding, the Jewish population increased and La Jolla became more "welcoming" to Jews.

Thinking about this story, I imagine that it is not all that surprising to most of us in this room. Everyone here knows that Antisemitism has sadly been a “fact of life” throughout the Jewish experience, even to a time fifty or sixty years ago in a place as progressive as California. It is something that has been present in our Jewish story since the days of Pharaoh. It is something that most of us understand has simply been a part of life.

That said, while we all know that antisemitism has been a part of the American Jewish story, you, like me, probably felt that this was a fading part of our experience. Until recently I never would have imagined that I would be giving a sermon like *this* on Rosh Hashanah.

After all, Jews have arguably had more success in America than we have had in any other society in our five thousand year history. We are not denied entrance into universities or cities any longer. We have had Jews past and present run for the office of Vice President and President. There are no leadership positions that are denied to us because we are Jewish. With hard work, material blessings, and a bit of good luck, most Jews growing up in America can rise to be and do anything.

So in light of all of this, many of us in this room might have thought we were past all of this. And yet, as we have all seen in recent years, anti-Semitism

has not really gone anywhere. As American Jews we thought we were special. We thought we were different. Different from the Jews living in the times of the Greeks, the Romans, the Babylonians; different from the Jews living during the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, the Dreyfus affair, Germany, or Eastern Europe during the Second World War.

I know that's what *I* thought. When I was younger I had what I would call a Holocaust-centered Jewish education. I internalized the message that I was to be Jewish, in large part, *as a response* to the Holocaust. I read books on the Holocaust, saw movies about the Holocaust, and sang songs about the Holocaust in my elementary day school.

As I grew older I understood intellectually what my teachers, camp counselors, and USY staff members were trying to convey. I understood the importance of memory. I also had a vague understanding of my family's personal connection to the Holocaust, including some family members who perished, some who made it out just in time, and others who survived and escaped Europe after the war to restart their lives in America. But again, I thought that was all in the past. *I* myself had never personally experienced any anti-Semitism. And why should I be Jewish just because of the Holocaust? Wasn't there a more significant reason to be Jewish than simply as a response to evil and hatred?

The answer to that question was, and remains- **yes, but....**

Yes there is much more to being Jewish than identifying who we are in response to those who have an irrational hatred for all things Jewish. Yes, we should understand who we are, what we stand for, and work to bring Jewish values and practices into our lives each and every day because Judaism stands on its own and has for thousands of years thanks to the incredible depth, wisdom, and beauty of living a life of Torah.

But....

But, the moment we forget that anti-Semitism is real, the moment we neglect our entire history and the responsibility that comes along with it, is the moment that we doom history to repeating itself.

In his book "Witness," Rabbi Ariel Burger explores the life lessons that he learned from his teacher and mentor, the famous Holocaust survivor, writer, and teacher Elie Wiesel. Burger writes:

Professor Wiesel often quoted a Hasidic saying: 'Forgetfulness leads to exile, memory to redemption.' Time and again, he reminded his classes that memory is our only protection. 'My goal is always the same: to invoke the past as a shield for the future.' He often referenced the great Jewish historian Shimon Dubnov, who, when facing imminent death in the Riga ghetto, called out to his people: "Jews, write everything down!"

*Wiesel frequently pointed to the Jewish victims of the Holocaust who, hiding in bunkers from the Nazis, scratched their names into the walls and wrote invisible messages in urine, who buried manuscripts in tin cans under ghetto streets so that one day their names, their words, their lives, might be remembered. He believed that those who lived before us call to us to remember them and that by examining the past, we can create a new future. As Wiesel stated in his Nobel acceptance speech "If anything can, it is memory that will save humanity."*¹

Today is Rosh Hashanah, a holiday also called *Yom HaZikaron*, the day of memory. It is a day when we ask God to remember us and inscribe us for a good year, but it is also a day when I want us to consider what it means to really remember, what it means to live a life governed by the responsibilities that come along with memory.

It has been an incredibly difficult few years for the American Jewish community when it comes to the issue of Antisemitism. It seems that not a week that goes by when we don't read about some type of antisemitic incident somewhere. Graffiti painted on synagogues, hateful speech and gatherings, and of course, the nightmare of the shootings in synagogues in Pittsburgh and Poway that shocked all American Jews and changed the culture and feel of American synagogues across the country. *And here, I want to pause to take a moment to thank our leadership team of our board and office staff, all of you, and the officers who are here with us each Shabbat and every holiday for their support during these challenging times.*

¹ 21-22

Synagogue vandalism, marches of White Supremacists, and virulent anti-Israel sentiment, are but a few things that have awoken us to reconsider the notion that we are “the exception” to the arc of Jewish history.

It turns out, that we are not.

Equally troubling, is that coupled with an increase in Antisemitism in recent years is the fading of the collective memory cast by the shadow of the Shoah, the Holocaust. The facts, so well documented by the perpetrators, are being forgotten, misremembered, manipulated or outright denied. In February 2018, The Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany published a study of more than 1300 American adults ages 18 and over, They found:

- 11% of US adults and over one-fifth of Millennials (22%) haven’t heard or are not sure if they have heard of the Holocaust.
- One-third of all Americans (31%) and over four-in-ten Millennials (41%) believe that two million Jews or less were killed during the Holocaust.
- Most Americans (80%) have not visited a Holocaust museum and two-thirds (66%) do not know or know of a Holocaust survivor.

How are we to respond to all of this? While many of us feel the memories of the Holocaust with us on a regular basis, it is clear that the majority of Americans, especially the younger generations, do not live with these same

memories, are not haunted by the genocide that happened just a generation ago, and may not be attuned to the risk of this history repeating itself.

What are we, as Jews, as descendants of survivors, pogroms, people who were denied entry and access to various clubs, universities, cities, etc. because they were "Jewish" to do about all of this? How are we, as Americans, to respond to the plague that seemed to lay dormant, that we thought was in "remission" in our society, but has re-emerged and is today, in 2019, threatening to ravage the very fabric of our society?

First, it is important that we take a moment to understand just what it is that we are talking about here, just what it is that constitutes Antisemitism. Over the summer I read a very useful book by Professor Deborah Lipstadt, entitled: Antisemitism Here and Now, in which she discusses all forms of antisemitism, and antisemitic behavior. In her introduction she writes that antisemitism is not the hatred of people who happen to be Jews. It is hatred of them *because* they are Jews (19). Neither is it something that is entirely explainable because it is essentially "irrational delusional and absurd" like many conspiracy theories (7). To a certain degree she explains, echoing a famous Supreme Court decision, while Antisemitism comes in many forms ranging from ignorance to purposeful hatred- "we know it when we see it (13)."

And so one of the first things that we must do as a response to the increase in public displays of Antisemitism in America and around the world is simply to name it. The challenge today is that sometimes, the political atmosphere of the past decade has blinded us to naming, and calling out Antisemitism *wherever and whenever we see it- full stop.*

Let us begin by taking a deep breath and remembering that there is plenty of Antisemitic behavior to point out- left, right and center politically. Antisemitic comments or behavior, ranging from “innocent and unintentional” to “egregious and offered with malice” can be found all around. As Jews we have a responsibility to call out this behavior wherever and whenever we see it- personally, professionally, and yes, politically. This might make us uncomfortable, but we have to remember that calling out Antisemitism in the political arena has nothing to do with “which team” we support. We have an obligation to call out this most ancient type of hatred because we are a people who made a promise. We are a people who told those survivors in our families that we would never forget. We are a people who know the dangers of what happens when memory is neglected. We have an obligation that we ought to take seriously, consider carefully, and place above politics and rhetoric.

And here I will be specific about at least two Antisemitic tropes being played out on both the political left and the right today. BDS on the “left” and recent comments about “loyalty” on the right. Please listen carefully without political boxing gloves on.

We will start with BDS, the anti- Israel Boycott Divestment and Sanctions movement. On the surface, one might innocently think this tactic is about a boycott to promote a peaceful two state solution with Israelis and Palestinians living side by side. But on closer examination, there are at least two things that make BDS Antisemitic. First, the BDS movement seeks a complete right of return for all Palestinians throughout the world- effectively creating an Israel that would have a minority of Jews and no longer be a “Jewish state.” That is simply untenable. Second, one of the founders of BDS, Omar Barghouti, has explicitly stated: *“We definitely oppose a Jewish state in any part of Palestine”* and, *“I am completely and categorically against bi-nationalism because it assumes that there are two nations with equal moral claims to the land.”*² In other words, one of the founders of BDS does not believe that the Jewish people has ever had any historical or ideological claim to the land of Israel. That is both inaccurate and Antisemitic, and must be called out as such.

² Lipstadt, 171-172

So too with the comment made this past summer about Democrats showing no "loyalty" to Israel. The trope of "loyalty" has a long, sordid, Antisemitic history. Intentionally or not, the use of such a term, by anyone, has Antisemitic undertones because it assumes that "Jews" are somehow only loyal to "their own." It infers that Jews cannot be trusted, that we only have allegiance to our own people, our own religion. The antisemitic trope of "loyalty" was used in the Middle Ages against the Jews to describe us as a threat to the church. It was used by Napoleon who emancipated the Jews on the condition that Jews would not consider themselves "a nation within a nation." It was used during the Dreyfus affair to falsely convict Alfred Dreyfus of passing military secrets to the Germans because he was not loyal to France. And it was used by Hitler and the Germans during World War II to accuse Jews of not being "loyal Germans"- to name but a few incidents.³

Left, Right, Center, American politics, or politics anywhere else in the world- we must be knowledgeable and honest enough with ourselves to see when something is Antisemitism and then be willing to call it out as such- even, or perhaps especially, when that makes us uncomfortable.

³ *Davis, The Toxic Back Story to the Charge That Jews Have A Dual Loyalty, NY Times*

But naming Antisemitism is only the first step. We must also remember that while Antisemitism is about Jews, it cannot, and must not become divorced from hatred of any kind. I attended a program over the summer at Camp Ramah where I was privileged to hear from Ariel Burger, the author who I mentioned earlier that wrote the book about Elie Wiesel's teachings. He said that while Wiesel insisted on focusing on the particularism of the Holocaust, it led him to a universal commitment. For Professor Wiesel, the more committed we become to our particular cause of Antisemitism, the more universal our outlook should become. Here is Wiesel in his own words:

To be human is to share a common origin. And if we share a common origin, our destinies are entwined. What happens to me will eventually happen to you; what happened to my people is a foreshadowing of what will threaten the world. Auschwitz led to Hiroshima and who knows what else? Therefore the most important biblical command is *Lo taamod al dam reakha*, 'Thou shall not stand idly by the shedding of the blood of thy fellow human being.' The word *reakha*, 'fellow human being'-it is universal. *Anyone* who is suffering *anyone*, who is threatened becomes your responsibility. If you can feel this and act with even a little more humanity, a little more sensitivity, as a result, that is the beginning. It is not the end- I do not know how to end hatred, I truly wish I did- but recognizing our shared humanity is a good beginning." (Burger, 147-148)

Similarly, in her book on Antisemitism, Professor Lipstadt expanded upon this idea:

It is axiomatic that if Jews are being targeted with hateful rhetoric and prejudice, other minorities should not feel immune; this is not likely to end with Jews. And, conversely, if other minority groups are being targeted with hatred and prejudice, Jews should not feel immune; this is not likely to end with these groups either. Antisemitism flourishes in

a society that is intolerant of others, be they immigrants or racial and religious minorities. When the expressions of contempt for one group becomes normative, it is virtually inevitable that similar hatred will be directed at other groups. Like a fire set by an arsonist, passionate hatred and conspiratorial worldviews reach well beyond their intended target ... the existence of Jew-hatred within a society is an indication that something about the entire society is amiss. No healthy society harbors extensive antisemitism- or any other form of hatred. (Lipstadt, xi)

Just like the message of the well-known poem by 20th century Lutheran pastor, Martin Neimoller, "First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak up because I was not a socialist..." both Wiesel and Lipstadt are reminding us that part of the way that we are to combat Antisemitism lies in speaking out against hatred of any kind, against any group. The particular and personal connections that we feel specifically about antisemitism must not preclude us from our sacred responsibility to all of God's creatures. That is what it means to honor the history of those who have lost their lives to the evils of Antisemitism. That is what it means "*to invoke the past (our past) as a shield for the future.*"

Two additional final thoughts:

First, we must combat Antisemitism by not allowing ourselves to be divided as Jews. It is a classic tactic of the antisemite to turn Jews against one another. For the Seleucid Greeks in the story of Hanukkah it was an attempt to force us to be "Jews" or to become "Hellenized Greeks." For the Romans it was the choice to serve the Roman Empire, or to remain as Jews. Both the

historian Josephus, and the Talmud point to the idea the destruction of the second Temple was a direct result of Jewish infighting. The Nazis tried to pit Jews against one another when they forced Jews to “guard” other Jews in the camps. We must not allow this ancient tactic to take root within our local, national, or international Jewish community. Internal division leads to destruction. We can handle debate; we have been doing that for thousands of years. But as our rabbis teach we must always ensure that that debate is “for the sake of heaven,” for the greater good, and not done from a place of ego and selfishness (Avot 5:17).

Lastly, I will conclude with perhaps the most important point. One of the best ways to respond to Antisemitism is to understand who we are as a people. It is to live, to learn, and to continually discover the power that lies within the ancient well of our tradition. It is to understand that Israel is not just about having a “safe place for Jews,” but is equally about our national identity, history, and spiritual well-being as a people.

One last story about Elie Wiesel. His students once asked him:

“Professor, what kept you going after the Holocaust? How did you not give up?” Professor Wiesel [answered]: ‘Learning. Before the war, I was studying a page of Talmud, and my studies were interrupted. After the war, when I arrived at the orphanage in France, my first request was for that same volume so that I could continue my studies from the same page, the same line, the same spot where I had left off. Learning saved me (Burger, 4).

Can you imagine? The first request was to continue his learning? It is an incredibly powerful anecdote because it reminds us that to be a Jew, to respond to Antisemitism as a Jew is to learn just exactly who we are, what we value, and what we stand for. The question of the morning is not just do we know what we stand against, **but do we know what we stand for?** What does it mean to be a Jew in the first place? What guiding values, principles, beliefs, practices, and traditions are found at the center of our Judaism. And what are we doing to learn, to study, and to apply our learning so that we can get the most out of the wonderful meaning and joy that is living a fully engaged Jewish life? That is the most important response to all of this.

Returning to my younger self, it turns out that I was right and I was wrong. I was wrong to discount Antisemitism as a “thing of the past,” but I was right in my insistence that being Jewish is empty, and shallow, if it is merely a response to senseless, irrational, hatred. It must be more than that. It is more than that. For Judaism to mean anything to us, it must be accessed through living, and learning.

My friends, these are trying times. They are frightening times. They are anxious times. But we must not despair. As Moses said to Joshua, we must be “strong and of good courage,” as we re-orient ourselves to the familiar

Jewish position of combatting the evils of Antisemitism in our midst. We have been here before, and we will likely be here again. Today, on Yom Hazikaron, the Jewish day of remembering and memory, let us take time to remember and respond, by standing up against this most ancient hatred and indeed against hatred of any kind. Let us recommit ourselves to Jewish living and learning. And let us give thanks, and never forget that thousands of years and thousands of enemies later-*am yisrael chai*- we are still here. We are not going anywhere. The people of Israel lives.