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Temple Beth El
Rosh HaShanah Morning Sermon – 5782/2021

Facing Danger With Jewish Pride¹

After learning to bake sourdough and dabbling in a few more COVID trends, my family and I followed yet one more in December. We added a pet to our home. Our Chanukah was brightened by Glacier, our extremely large puppy. I'd like to say that I take Glacier on walks every day. But the truth is, she walks me. One morning this summer, a few days after the conflict in Gaza we were out for our morning walk when I saw a swastika spray-painted on a sign in my neighbor's yard. Eight houses down from ours. A swastika. I wish that this was a unique experience in Charlotte or in North Carolina or the world. But it's not.

I grew up in Denver, Colorado. I'm a fourth generation American. Yes, my family's history includes stories of antisemitism.² My grandfather went to medical school in Texas because the schools in the Northeast had reached their quotas on Jewish students. He also founded a Jewish hospital, so Jewish doctors would have a place to practice. And we were members of the Jewish country club because Jews weren't allowed in the other ones.

But, when I was a kid, I was taught that the world was changing, that the greatest generation's hard work had made antisemitism a thing of the past. And I believed that. Perhaps blindly or naively, I did not think that the kind of antisemitism my grandparents experienced would ever return in America.

But things have changed. In the past few years, we've heard people in Charlottesville chant "Jew will not replace us." And Jewish children called antisemitic names at school. We've seen attacks on Jewish people and institutions across the country.

I remember the morning of October 27th, 2018. In the middle of the B'nei Mitzvah of two awesome and thoughtful teens, Andrew and Nathan, a staff member quietly approached me and told me about the shooting at Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh. And my first thought, after I confirmed our building was safe, was that I wasn't surprised at all. It had felt like it was only a matter of time before something terrible happened- and it did: in Pittsburgh and then in San Diego and now, across the country.

¹ Thank you to my editors, Michele Lowe, Julia Bonnheim, Rabbi Ana Bonnheim and my writing partner and friend, Rabbi Dara Frimmer.

² The spelling of antisemitism, without the hyphen, has become the academic standard. See: <https://www.adl.org/spelling> or

The historian Dr. Deborah Lipstadt often compares antisemitism to a herpes virus.³ Why? Because, once someone contracts herpes they can never be free of it. And under certain pressures, at difficult times for instance, they could have an outbreak. But I have stopped using this metaphor.

Why? Because I don't believe that antisemitism is natural or inevitable. Antisemitism is part of the machinery people use to build political power or to generate fear and keep minority groups divided. Yes, antisemitism shares many of the characteristics of racism, homophobia, and xenophobia. But to dismantle and shut-down it down, we also have to understand its uniqueness.

At its core, antisemitism is a conspiracy theory that invokes Jews as puppet masters who control society and manipulate world governments for some ulterior motive. I spoke with several experts after the January 6 Capitol riot and none of them were surprised to see some of the insurrectionists wearing shirts emblazoned with the message 6MWE – 6 million weren't enough. The ADL is now reporting well over a thousand antisemitic incidents a year, along with an uptick in assaults, vandalism, and hate speech. And none of the experts were surprised that following the recent events in Gaza, Jews were targeted, harassed, and physically attacked by people who want to delegitimize Israel or who blame Jews for what is happening in Israel and Palestine.

Where Israel is concerned, every week we remind ourselves in the Aleinu prayer that Israel should be a "beacon of Justice for all." I firmly believe one can disagree with the Israeli government's policies and decisions or feel disappointed when Israel's government doesn't live up to your expectations. The same way we become frustrated with or disappointed by our own country's government at times. We need to be careful to not indiscriminately cry "antisemitism!" in response to people who are frustrated with the government of Israel.

But we are also witnessing the blurring of lines between criticism of Israel's government and outright antisemitism. My friend and colleague Rabbi Angela Buchdahl wrote, "Opposition to Israel has increasingly become a necessary precondition for all other progressive commitments.

³ Dr. Deborah Lipstadt is a phenomenal scholar and speaker. Her book, *Antisemitism: Here and Now* is a must read (New York: Schocken Books, 2019). I only disagree with this particular metaphor, because I do not believe that antisemitism is a natural phenomenon. Similar metaphors include "rising tide."
<https://www.jpost.com/diaspora/deborah-lipstadt-antisemitism-is-like-herpes-it-never-goes-away-593160>

Some groups will only allow Jews...to participate if they take a ‘disloyalty oath,’” decrying Israel as racist or fascist. To make condemnation of Israel “the litmus test for Jewish involvement in any social justice cause is antisemitism, plain and simple.”⁴

We also desperately need to drop the idea that antisemitism is only being peddled by people in the extremes of the “far left” or the “far right.”

As my mentor Rabbi David Stern says, “If you find yourself rationalizing or minimizing the antisemitism of someone from your political party, and railing against the antisemitism of the opposition, then you are reducing antisemitism to a partisan political cudgel and cannot claim to take it seriously.”⁵

If we blame the “other side” while ignoring the posts from our own feeds, we enable and embolden haters with whom we may agree with on other issues. We can and should speak out in the spheres in which we are most comfortable, most aligned, and have the greatest influence. Which is why Temple is supporting Federations’ upcoming programming and initiatives, including sessions in October and November about how progressives and conservatives can counter Antisemitism on the Left and the Right, featuring phenomenal speakers. Look for more from the Federation, soon.

In Pirke Avot, the Ethics of Our Ancestors, Rabbi Hillel wrote: *Im Ain Ani Li, Mi-li* – If I am not for myself, who will be for me?⁶

If I’m being honest, what worries me most is not what antisemites could do to us, physically. What I fear most is that Jews will choose to walk away from being Jewish or supporting Jewish institutions out of fear. We must counter that fear by living proudly as Jews and engaging proudly in the community as Jews.

Celebrate being Jew! Give each other a warm welcome when we gather here at Temple Greet each other with kindness, like family and the full recognition that Jews come in all shapes and skin colors and from all backgrounds. Remember that there are Jews who feel othered not only for being Jewish outside the Jewish community, but othered inside the Jewish community, too.

⁴ Rabbi Angela W. Buchdahl, “Yom Teruah: Sounding the Alarm for Anti-Semitism,” Rosh Hashanah 2018. <https://www.centralsynagogue.org/worship/sermons/detail/yom-teruah-sounding-the-alarm-for-anti-semitism-rosh-hashanah-5779-2018>

⁵ Rabbi David Stern, *Antisemitism*, Rosh Hashanah Sermon, 5780. https://www.tedallas.org/uploads/transcripts/RDS_Sermon_RH_2019_Antisemitism_Final.pdf

⁶ Pirke Avot 1:14

Attend a class here at temple or in the Jewish Community. Join a TriBE or connect with a cohort at Temple that speaks to you. Support the work of the Federation and the Levine Jewish Community Center and the Greenspon Center.

Sing the Sh'ma – before you go to sleep or in the morning. Anchor yourself in the practice of Judaism, with Jewish melodies, and prayers and ideas. Be proud about being Jewish. And don't be afraid to share your love of Judaism with others – especially other Jews and with non-Jews, too. In this very Christian town, be proud and excited about Judaism and share Judaism with others.

Hillel added: U'chshani L'Atzmi Mah Ani – If I am only for myself, what am I?

We also have to build bridges. Those who peddle in hate try to stoke fear that divides and consumes us. And if we in the Jewish community retreat into safe cocoons, afraid to engage with the non-Jewish world we will become more “otherized.”

It's why I have just joined the board of Mecklenburg Ministries, the Interfaith Council for the Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools and am working with a cohort of Muslim Imams and Evangelical pastors.

It's why we are committed to the work as a congregation and community, to build bridges of partnership and relationship and understanding. Because real partnerships mean showing up for others and having them show up for us. If we do not live up to the values and ethics of prophetic Judaism, the antisemites will have won with divisive tactics of hate.

The future of Judaism resides in us. We are the inheritors of an incredible wisdom tradition. We are Jews because we keep Torah central and we wrestle with God and spirituality. We are Jews because of our particular history and the songs that we sing, we are Jews because of bagels and challah, hummus and falafel and matzah ball soup.

We are Jews because of Shabbat, and we light the Chanukah candles each year, just like Jews did in the caves of Spain or in the barracks at Auschwitz. Even those with the most sinister of intents -- Pharoah, Torquemada, Hitler – none of them has ever been able to take that away from us.

Was I scared when I saw the swastika? Disappointed, yes. Scared? No!

Because I remembered being on the *bima* the morning the Tree of Life Shooting. Two young and proud Jews reading from the Torah for the first time! Connected to a phenomenal community, they are rooted in tradition and committed to innovation.

Yes, the dangers exist. No, they aren't as bad as previous eras of Jewish history. We can confront the dangers by being confident and living with purpose by realizing the best within ourselves, living as proud Jews, and committing to strengthening each other - and our whole Jewish community. We can have courage in this New Year to write the next chapters of Jewish history. As Hillel said, **V'eem loachshav, aymatai? If not now, when?**

Shanah Tovah.