

Small Steps Against Antisemitism

When I was in the 4th grade, my mother received a phone call from one of the leaders of my Girl Scout Troop. That afternoon, at our troop meeting, we had been making up a skit and I had made up our pretend names. I had given the troop-leader's daughter the last name "Goy" and the mom was pretty upset. It turns out, that fourth-grade-me had no idea that "goy" was a derogatory term and I had just used whatever name came to mind. So, my mother explained to me how "goy" was sometimes used in a negative way to describe non-Jewish people. I apologized, and have never forgotten the lesson.

My memory of this day, however, is now tinged with a little bit of irony. This non-Jewish mom did not want her daughter to feel like an outsider in our largely Jewish Girl Scout troop. Please understand me, it was totally appropriate for her to make the phone call and totally appropriate for my mom to pass on the lesson. I guess I just wish the scenario played out so smoothly every time a Jewish child is made to feel like an outsider; every time any person is made to feel like an outsider because of their most basic and core identity.

Ten days ago, on Rosh Hashanah, we celebrated the Creation of the World. The Torah tells us that God took the earth from being *tohu vavohu*, unformed and void, chaotic and desolate, to being beautiful, ordered, and full of life. Unfortunately, the world does not feel beautiful and ordered. Hateful rhetoric is directed toward people of different races, religions, ethnicities, genders, sexualities, political orientations, and on and on... this rhetoric has brought chaos and bleakness back into the world.

But we do not have to stay stuck in this void and darkness as it was at the beginning of the story of Creation. We can find inspiration near the end of the story when, on the sixth day, God created Adam in God's own image. We can find inspiration by asking why: Why did God create the first person alone? Why didn't God create a whole mess of people all at once, a beautifully diverse humanity from the very beginning?

According to the rabbis of the Talmud¹, it was for the sake of peace. God created Adam alone so that in the future, one person could not say to another: "My ancestor is greater than yours." Do not think for a moment, though, that these ancient rabbis were so naïve as to think that there were no quarrels in the world. They follow up their suggestion with the comment that given that "Adam was created alone" and still "each family claims superiority," imagine what the world would be like if two people had been created initially.

The world that the rabbis imagine is a world where people relate to one another with this knowledge that each one of us was created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God, and descended from Adam, and therefore each person is "deserving of all the dignity and value inherent in every human being."² Anti-Semitism, racism, homophobia, any kind of prejudice against a group of people because of their identity, violates this sacred principle.

In the same Talmudic passage where the rabbis celebrate our united ancestry through Adam, they also celebrate our diversity: When a human king stamps coins with his image, each

¹ Sanhedrin 38a

² URJ Congregational Discussion Guide on Racism

one comes out looking the same. But when God, the “King of Kings,” stamps God’s own image on human beings, not one resembles another.³ The hate speech heard in our country maligns rather than celebrates our differences. Those who speak it see diversity as threatening and justification for ranking one group above another.

Antisemitism is often called the oldest form of hate, going back thousands of years. It is notoriously adaptable, used by different groups across time and geography, drawing on longstanding lies and stereotypes to blame the Jewish people for every variety of hardship and tragedy. Antisemitism, scholars point out, is unique among the types of hate because Jews are simultaneously cast as both strong and weak. According to the Anti-Defamation League, “It does so through contradictory logic that envisions Jews as both excessively powerful and as weak or even subhuman.”⁴

Furthermore, antisemitism does not exist in isolation: it is interwoven with other forms of prejudice; it is “an animating force of modern white supremacist movements.”⁵ We cannot ignore it. It will not go away and its presence threatens not only our own community, but other minority communities and the very foundation of our democracy.

Sadly, reaction to the coronavirus pandemic has followed the pattern of so many calamities before it. Some conspiracy theorists have blamed a Jewish cabal for causing the pandemic in order to gain control of the world, while others have simultaneously blamed Jews for creating vaccines in order to make money off the suffering of others.

These past several years have seen a sharp rise in antisemitism across the United States. In 2021, the ADL tabulated 2,717 antisemitic incidents in the United States – the highest number on record since the ADL began its tracking in 1979.⁶ The American Jewish Committee’s extensive survey of American Jews in 2021 found that 4 in 10 American Jews had changed their behavior out of fear of antisemitism⁷ – they stopped wearing a Jewish necklace or chose not to post something online that identified them as Jews. Antisemitic incidents reported to our own Jewish Federation of Greater Charlotte tripled in 2021.⁸ These numbers have led our Federation to launch Outshine Hate, a new initiative designed to combat antisemitism through education and community building right here in Charlotte. An initiative we should all participate in.

The statistics I have cited capture the enormity of the problem, but they can also leave us frozen. They can leave us wondering how we as individuals can possibly push back against the world’s oldest hatred. How we can disrupt a pattern of prejudice that has repeated itself over and over again.

But we would not be here tonight, engaging in this period of spiritual introspection, if we did not believe that change within ourselves is possible, and that by changing ourselves, we can positively influence the world around us. We will, of course, continue to stand together as a community in the face of public, violent or large-scale acts of antisemitism. But at the same time, we can commit as individuals to pushing back against more subtle expressions of antisemitism.

³ Sanhedrin 38a

⁴ <https://antisemitism.adl.org/>

⁵ <https://www.projectshema.org/core-principles>

⁶ <https://www.adl.org/audit2021>

⁷ <https://www.ajc.org/news/top-4-takeaways-from-ajcs-antisemitism-in-america-report>

⁸ <https://www.jewishcharlotte.org/what-we-do/outshine-hate>

Many of us in this room have heard people in our everyday circles make casual comments about Jews – comments that draw on stereotypes of Jews as greedy, comments that place blame on Jews today for the killing of Jesus almost 2000 years ago, comments that exaggerate the actions of one Jewish person to be representative of an entire people. And many of these comments were made by people we consider friends and colleagues and were made without malicious intent. And so, we tend to shrug them off: they didn't know what they said was offensive; she's my friend, and didn't mean it like it sounded; he's smart – I'm sure he doesn't actually believe what he's saying. If all of these explanations we tell ourselves are really true, then we do not have to respond with anger or condemnation. If no harm was intended, we should be able to approach the people who said these words with the goal of sharing our experience and promoting understanding.

But even with this framework, calling out a friend or colleague for making an antisemitic remark is still hard – really hard. It can immediately change the mood of a room from casual to serious, it brings our Judaism out front and center, it provokes defensiveness... But it is important work for us to do. The perpetuation of these types of comments allows more dangerous expressions of hate to take hold, and grow. The ADL challenges us, "We must never normalize even seemingly harmless forms of hate-based prejudice... Silence and complacency in the face of biased remarks or actions permit others to internalize harmful messages, making such messages commonplace."⁹ Saying something helps to invalidate stereotypes and encourages people to view others as individuals rather than as a monolithic group. It demonstrates that prejudices and intolerances of any kind are not acceptable. Advocating for ourselves promotes an environment where others are able to proudly be themselves as well.

There is one additional explanation that people give for comments that rely on antisemitic tropes: it's okay, because I'm Jewish. I'm making fun of myself. We think, "What's the harm of Jews making Jewish jokes?" Potentially, I believe the harm could be quite severe. The Jewish legal concept that can best explain my fears about the casual way we use Jewish stereotypes and slurs within our own community is called *marit ayin*, literally the "appearance to the eye." *Marit ayin* states that actions which might appear to surrounding people to be in violation of a Jewish law, when in reality they are not, are still not allowed so as to prevent people from making a false conclusion.

Let me explain: A classic Talmudic example of *marit ayin* is what to do if you fall into a stream on a Jewish holy day and your clothes get wet. The rabbis prohibit you from laying your clothes out to dry in public. Letting your clothes dry does not, by itself, break any commandments, so why do the rabbis care? They care, because someone who sees the wet clothes might assume that you were doing the laundry on a day when work is forbidden. The rabbis' concern is not that a witness might mistakenly attribute the sin of doing laundry to their neighbor. Their concern is that the witness may conclude that doing the laundry is in fact permissible and go and commit the actual sin himself.

And now back to Jews making fun of ourselves. We justify our use of identity charged jokes and slurs by saying that we only use them when we are in an insular group, when we are with people who know that we are just joking. But how careful are we? Do we possess such self-control that we mentally go through every person in a room before sharing a joke when it

⁹ <https://antisemitism.adl.org/>

pops into our head? Do we know all of our friends well enough to decide on their behalf that our words will not offend them? Can we really trust that when our stories and stereotypes are shared they will be retold with the same nuances and sense of irony that made them acceptable when we said them?

The concept of *marit ayin* suggests that we need to seriously reexamine our use of language. It suggests that jokes, stereotypes and terms that we may be using in a safe space and in ways that we perceive to be harmless, may give someone else the impression that it is okay to go and use them in ways that are more blatantly antisemitic.

Marit ayin places a burden on us. It tells us that we are not only responsible for our own behavior, but for the behavior of others. We not only have to consider our own actions, but how our actions will be perceived and adopted by others. Essentially, *marit ayin* tries to remove the guesswork of what is right and wrong. We need to remove the ambiguity around harmful Jewish stereotypes and antisemitic rhetoric so that we can eliminate it. And while this might mean that we lose a few laughs poking fun at ourselves, maybe we permanently erase some of the lies used to harm our people.

Tonight I want to share one more dangerous outcome that I perceive from the ongoing use of Jewish stereotypes. When we reinforce, or even joke about, stereotypes that characterize what Jews are like, we divide our community. We suggest, however subconsciously it may be, that people who don't fit the stereotypes are not truly part of our community. If every Jew is white and has dark, curly hair, if every Jew is dripping in wealth, and if no Jew is handy or athletic, a lot of us would need to leave the room. Today's Jewish community, especially our Temple Beth El Jewish community, is amazingly diverse. The members of this community cover the full array of skin color, hair color, body type, height, wealth, occupation... The members of this community are multi-faceted, potentially identifying with multiple minority groups. We cannot fight against antisemitism labeling us as "other" if we are making people within our own community feel that they are "other." We cry out against antisemitism saying that Jews are diverse and not monolithic. Do we express that same value internally? We are diverse and we are not monolithic.

I want to be really clear – none of the steps that I have suggested tonight mean that we as Jews bring antisemitism on ourselves, or that we are solely responsible for ending antisemitism. But we do have agency to make change: to speak up for what is right, to educate others, and to be aware of the language we use. Tomorrow afternoon we will read from the Torah the commandments, "You are not to hate your fellow in your heart," and "Love your neighbor as yourself."¹⁰ In the coming year how can we personally live out these commandments? How can we help the world live with less hate and more love? By having the courage to speak up, the patience to choose our words carefully, and the openness to embrace all who find their home with us. Kein Yehi Ratzon, may this be God's will.

¹⁰ Leviticus 19:17