

Tonight marks my thirty-first High Holidays at Temple Emanu-El, a huge blessing in my life. In thirty-one years of high holiday sermons, you have been very forgiving, and I have addressed a diverse array of topics: from our internal spiritual journeys to Judaism's call for justice in the world; relationship and forgiveness, immigration and race, prayer and faith, loving Israel and loving our neighbors; birth and death and just about everything in between in this messy, frustrating, promising, profound, sacred realm we call life.

Except -- in thirty-one years as a Jewish leader, I have not given a single High Holiday sermon about antisemitism.¹ References, allusions, a pointed paragraph here and there, yes. But in three decades of High Holiday sermons spanning the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries, not a single one about antisemitism. I'm hoping that doesn't constitute professional malpractice, but it is strange. So I've asked myself why.

Reason #1: I had almost no experience of antisemitism growing up. With one limited exception, I never even experienced name-calling, let alone any physical incident. All four of my grandparents were born in America, and our story was the classic trajectory of American Jewish integration and success.

¹ Professor Deborah E. Lipstadt makes a compelling argument for this spelling. Lipstadt rejects the hyphen in the more conventional "Anti-Semitism" because it implies that whatever lies to the right of the hyphen exists as an independent entity. Yet she argues that neither "Semitism" nor a "Semitic people" exists, and that the conventional spelling obscures the fact that antisemitism refers to Jew hatred, plain and simple. As for lower case, she writes that Jew hatred "doesn't deserve the dignity of capitalization." Deborah E. Lipstadt, *Antisemitism: Here and Now* (New York: Schocken Books, 2019), pp. 22-26.

Antisemitism happened, but it happened somewhere else to someone else. Throughout my childhood and almost all of my adult life, I never felt vulnerable as a Jew.

Reason #2: The corollary of that sense of security was a universalist sense of obligation to others. Growing up in a 1970's New York suburb where Jews seemed to have made it, the social justice message of Isaiah and Amos proclaimed in my home congregation was clear – we have an obligation to use our privilege to help people who are persecuted. Other people's problems were worse – American citizens facing racism and poverty; citizens of the world facing hunger and oppression; Russian refuseniks or Ethiopian Jews seeking to immigrate to Israel. They were the suffering. We were the saviors.

I also think this sermonic gap stems from my conviction that a good sermon should give people something to do. In contrast, and too simplistically, I have tended to view the standard antisemitism sermon as being about all the terrible things that somebody *else* is doing to *us* – casting us as passive objects, not as active subjects – and so it has never quite made it to the top of the list.

Until now.

Because on October 27, 2018, Pittsburgh happened: the murder of eleven Jews at Tree of Life Synagogue on a Shabbat morning in Squirrel Hill as the killer shouted, “All Jews must die.” And then six months later to the day – Shabbat morning April 27, the last day of Pesach, Poway happened: another shooter, another murder, another synagogue, another anti-Semitic rant, this time in an open letter the murderer posted online, blaming Jews for the “meticulously planned genocide of the European race.”²

² <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2019/04/28/shooting-poway-synagogue-underscores-link-between-internet-radicalization-and-violence>

We know it's happened in churches and mosques, to our brothers and sisters in places like Charleston, South Carolina and Christchurch, New Zealand; that our dead now join a too-long list of people of faith lost to murderous shooting sprees. But this time, the nightmare is ours, the grief is ours, this feeling of vulnerability is ours. Antisemitism may be called the oldest hatred, but as we come up on the yahrtzeit of the Squirrel Hill victims, it is a current event.

According to the Anti-Defamation League³, there were 1,879 antisemitic incidents in America in 2018, the third highest count since ADL started keeping these statistics in the 1970's. Dividing incidents into categories of assault, harassment and vandalism, the study includes everything from anti-Semitic fliers on college campuses and anti-Semitic robocalls during political campaigns to direct physical intimidation: the recent and frightening phenomenon of violent assaults on Chasidic Jews in Brooklyn, or horrific acts of murder like Squirrel Hill. While the vandalism numbers were actually down from 2017, the number of assaults against Jews more than doubled, from 19 to 39, and the number of victims almost tripled, from 21 to 59.

If you're like me, there is a part of you that is surprised, and another part of you that is surprised that you're surprised. A part of me that asks incredulously, "Even here in America?", and then a part of me that responds wearily, "Yes, here in America."

American democracy and religious freedom have been an inestimable boon to the Jewish people, allowing us to thrive here as we have nowhere else in our history of Diaspora. And yet we know a more troubling legacy. Here in America: where Father Charles Coughlin spewed Jew hatred on his 1930's radio show with statements like, "When we get through with the Jews in

³ <https://www.adl.org/news/press-releases/anti-semitic-incidents-remained-at-near-historic-levels-in-2018-assaults>

America, they'll think the treatment they received in Germany was nothing."⁴ Coughlin's broadcasts reached thirty million Americans a week.

Here in America, where aviation hero Charles Lindbergh spoke at a rally of the isolationist America First Committee in 1941. He nodded at Jewish suffering in Germany, and then added his take on us American Jews: "Their greatest danger to this country lies in their large ownership and influence in our motion pictures, our press, our radio and our government."⁵

And let's not forget Henry Ford, whose newspaper, the *The Dearborn Independent*, was a regular and popular platform for antisemitic conspiracy theories, including the notorious *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. In 1938, Adolf Hitler awarded Ford the Grand Cross of the Supreme Order of the German Eagle, the highest honor the Nazis bestowed on any foreigner.⁶

"But wait," the first part of me says, "just because there is Jew-hatred in our past doesn't mean it's in our societal DNA. That was then, this is now." And then that other part of me, wearier still, says one word, "Charlottesville": white supremacists, the Klan in khakis, chants of "Jews will not replace us," armed extremists gathered outside the Reform synagogue while the Jews prayed inside. In 2017, here in America.

Racism and antisemitism marched in lock step in Charlottesville, and reminded us of the truth we learn and forget, and now in 2019 learn again: Antisemitism flourishes in any hothouse of intolerance, and grows robustly alongside other hatreds, whether those hatreds seem directed towards us as Jews or not. Racism, nativism, homophobia, Islamophobia – all should ring a shofar blast of alarm not only for the decency of American society, but for the safety and well-being of the Jewish community. This past year has taught us yet again: it is both morally

⁴ Jon Meacham, "American Hate, A History," *Time*, August 28, 2017, p. 40.

⁵ Meacham, p. 40.

⁶ Bari Weiss, *How to Fight Anti-Semitism* (New York: Crown, 2019), p. 9.

repugnant and practically misguided to hunker down while others are targeted, let alone to support those who do the targeting.

If one minority group is threatened, we are all threatened. Robert Bowers, the Squirrel Hill murderer, posted this before he went and committed the most deadly anti-Semitic act in American history: “Open you Eyes! It’s the filthy EVIL jews Bringing the Filthy EVIL Muslims into the Country!!”⁷ If one group who diverges from the self-proclaimed ethnic or religious norms of the majority is cast out or othered, we can expect that the cries of “All Jews must die” will not be far behind. We should not be so short-sighted as to think that hatred prefers surgical strikes. We might be weary and we should be wary, but surprise is no longer an option.

But what exactly is this phenomenon we call antisemitism? The term itself was popularized by a Jew-hater named Wilhelm Marr in 19th century Germany who sought to racialize the hatred of Jews beyond its religious roots. Sociologist Helen Fein defined it as a “persisting latent structure of hostile beliefs towards *Jews as a collectivity*.”⁸

We use the word to refer to Jew-hatred in all its forms – from a swastika defacing a cemetery to an internet screed about Jews controlling the global economy; from the religiously motivated anti-Judaism of the ancient and medieval church, which saw Jews as the source of ultimate evil for their rejection of Christianity; to the 19th century racial theories which saw Jews as corrupting the purity of the white race and eventually gave rise to Nazism; to the political uses of antisemitism today by left and right alike.

In important and recent books, Professor Deborah Lipstadt of Emory University (who will speak here at Temple in February) and New York Times columnist Bari Weiss each emphasize that antisemitism, for all its diverse expressions, always asserts a core conviction of

⁷ Weiss, p. 5.

⁸ Quoted in Lipstadt, p. 15. Italics in original.

conspiracy: of Jews as a maliciously intelligent force, small in number, cosmopolitan in alliance, with the ability to compel the will of the powerful and wreak havoc around the world.⁹

Antisemitism is deviously flexible in its form. Weiss calls it “an ever-morphing conspiracy theory in which Jews play the starring role in spreading evil in the world.” “In the eyes of the anti-Semite,” she writes, “the Jew is ... whatever the anti-Semite needs him to be ... the symbol of whatever a given civilization defines as its most sinister and threatening qualities.”¹⁰

Think about it – to the anti-Semitic country club capitalist, Jews are a bunch of Commies inciting the rabble; but to the anti-Semitic leftist, Jews oppress the common man by controlling all the capital. To today’s white supremacists, Jews are traitors to the white race, and our international scheming and perverse sympathies are the only explanation for the ascent of all those innately inferior people of color in America.¹¹ Yet to anti-Semites who claim that Israel has no right to exist, we are the epitome of the oppressive white colonizer. Only the phenomenon of anti-Semitism could produce images of the Jew that are diametrically opposed, but have in common a core notion of Jewish villainy. That’s why Weiss argues that anti-Semitism is “not a solid idea or a singular theory,” but “a shape-shifting world view that slithers away just as you think you have it pinned down.”¹²

That said, some of antisemitism’s shapes have become familiar to us. We perhaps know it best in its right-wing extremist forms: Charlottesville and its tiki torches, internet harassment

⁹ Lipstadt, pp. 16-17.

¹⁰ Weiss, p. 31.

¹¹ Eric K. Ward, “Skin in the Game: How Antisemitism Animates White Nationalism.” In this seminal essay, Ward, an African American community organizer and activist, argues a) that antisemitism is the engine of the white nationalist movement, and therefore that b) when Jews fight antisemitism, they engage directly in the broader fight against white nationalism and racism. <https://www.politicalresearch.org/2017/06/29/skin-in-the-game-how-antisemitism-animates-white-nationalism>

¹² Weiss, p. 27.

and death threats to Jewish journalists, the domestic terrorism of neo-Nazis and the white supremacist movement. While much of the alarming rate of violence against Jews in Europe is perpetrated by Islamist extremists, when it comes to anti-Semitic violence in this country, it comes almost exclusively from the white racist right.

But antisemitism has found a home on the left as well. Weiss finds deep roots for leftist antisemitism in the legacy of Stalin and the Cold War; we see much of its current manifestations on campus, where Jewish students who express support for Israel can encounter harassment or exclusion from progressive spaces and movements. As my friend and colleague Rabbi Angela Buchdahl observes, on campuses and beyond them, “Opposition to Israel has increasingly become a necessary precondition for all other progressive commitments. Some groups will only allow Jewish students 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.”¹³

This does not mean that all criticism of Israel is antisemitism. To the contrary, I believe we have an obligation to raise the voice of Jewish conscience when we disagree with certain policies or practices of the Israeli government. We shouldn’t pretend these issues are easy: the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is fraught and complex, Palestinian suffering is real, Palestinian self-determination will be a necessary component on the path to peace, and we should be careful not to shout “antisemitism” any time someone offers a criticism of Israel that makes us uncomfortable.

¹³ 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>

But when criticism of Israel becomes delegitimization or demonization; when it starts to employ classic anti-Semitic tropes about global power and control; when only Israel's right to self-determination is challenged; when critics engage in what Lipstadt calls "Holocaust inversion,"¹⁴ using the language of the Holocaust to describe Israelis as Nazis, then the oldest hatred has shape-shifted again, now cloaked in the guise of legitimate political discourse.

We see another form of delegitimization in social justice alliances when Jewish claims of antisemitism are diminished or dismissed because of Jews' relative success in America. Lipstadt sums up that perspective this way: "Jews aren't suffering. They have good jobs, get into good schools, and have no problem succeeding in life. Antisemitism is not in the same category of racism [Jews] are white and they are privileged."¹⁵

Gathering in this sanctuary, we should not underestimate the power, privilege and potential we hold. But we should remember first of all that we're not all white – demographers estimate that approximately 15% of the American Jewish community consists of Jews of color – a growing and rich facet of our communal and congregational identity who are no strangers to the effects of American racism, both within the walls of Temple and beyond them.

But even more to the point – nobody wins in a game of competitive suffering. Antisemitism is not the same as racism – because most Jews do present as white, most of us do not have to worry about being followed in a department store, or having the talk with our kids about what to do when pulled over by a policeman.

¹⁴ Lipstadt, p. 146.

¹⁵ Lipstadt, p. 90.

But that does not mean antisemitism is some phantasm we've dreamed up. We Jews have lived a "dual history of trauma and privilege."¹⁶ Yes, we have achieved and experienced a notable measure of success and status in American society – but we know too well that such success is no guarantee of protection against - and sometimes invites - forces of scapegoating and hatred. We should use our power and privilege to pursue justice for all people. And we should never feel abashed about naming antisemitism when we see it.

So how are we to combat antisemitism in a new year?

First, we expand physical security. We, like thousands of Jewish organizations across the country, have enhanced our security measures significantly here at Temple. I wish that we didn't live in a world where a synagogue would need armed security guards, but we do. At the same time, we recognize that a synagogue that becomes a fortress is no longer a synagogue. We are grateful every day for the outstanding security professionals who protect us, and for the excellent team of lay people and professionals who help us strike the best possible balance between keeping people safe and helping people feel welcomed by this community of Jewish inspiration and purpose.

Second, we need to keep calling antisemitism out, whether it comes from the right or the left. 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 be taking it seriously. One of the first places we can call out antisemitism, whether tweeted from the halls of Congress or dog-whistled from the White House, is among our political allies.

¹⁶ Emma Goldberg, "White Jews have found privilege in America. Black communities haven't" <https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/after-farrakhan-mallory-confronting-america-s-black-jewish-divide-1.5958910/1.5958910>

Third, as real and stubborn as the existence of antisemitism is, we need to keep it in perspective. Lipstadt reminds us that 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 accompanied by encouraging signs of Jewish rebirth.¹⁷ Surveys show that while the number of antisemitic assaults has increased significantly in the United States, the overall proportion of the population that could be described as anti-Semitic remains essentially flat, and the vast majority of Americans do not possess negative impressions of Jews.¹⁸ After the shooting at Tree of Life, the outpouring of love and support from the general population for the Pittsburgh community was profound; we experienced the same sense of sympathy and solidarity from across lines of difference here in Dallas, and we heard similar reports from Jewish communities across the country.

The presence of antisemitism is painful and enduring. The challenge before us is to be vigilant, but not fearful, because fear will distort who we are. We can't let antisemitism drive us into tribal isolation, drawing the wagons into a circle, hopelessly distrustful of the world around us. If the targeting we experience as a minority leads us to fear and target other minorities, the anti-Semites have won. If the only message we give to our children is "Be Jewish, because your ancestors suffered and died for the privilege," the anti-Semites have won. If the only Jewish cause that excites us is fighting against our persecutors rather than fighting for our values, then the anti-Semites have won. If antisemitism breaks our hearts, but does not break them open to the suffering of others, then the anti-Semites have won.

¹⁷ Lipstadt, p. 108.

¹⁸ <https://www.adl.org/what-we-do/anti-semitism/anti-semitism-in-the-us>

A personal note: like most of you, I first heard about the Tree of Life shooting the morning it happened. But I first cried about it during the afternoon Bat Mitzvah service that same day here at Temple. I was holding the Torah scroll, preparing to pass it through the generations to a wonderful young woman named Isabella. And I thought – for all of the unanswerable questions of this terrible day, here is the beginning of an answer – in this one child. In this one child who accepts this Torah – who takes it into her arms, her heart, her life. Who stood tall in that line of generations, representing a hope as stubborn as the loss we all felt. She was aware of the news, knew what it meant to stand and sing amidst the darkness of that day. And stand and sing she did. And I wept and I thought – we’re already responding.

Because in the end, the destiny of the Jewish people does not reside in some neo-Nazi meeting, or a hateful pamphlet, or a demagogic politician, or even in an act of terror. It resides right here, in this ark, in our hearts, in our hands. In the face of the oldest and most adaptive hatred, the best and most triumphant answer we have to antisemitism is a proud and vibrant Jewish life.

Yes, sometimes the answer needs to come in added security and greater vigilance at the door. But if you consider that the goal of the anti-Semites might be not an explosion, but simply the erosion of Jewish self-confidence; if you consider that the goal might be that the kid who has to evacuate a Jewish pre-school because of a bomb threat when he’s four grows up to be a dad who says, “Why make my kid a target”; if you remember that if this world of ours is a university, Judaism is now more than ever an elective, and each person opts in or out at will; then our shared responsibility to bring Jews of every age into a sense of Jewish meaning, commitment, justice and joy might well go farther than a thousand guard houses in securing the Jewish future.

I offer this sermon because I think antisemitism is serious. And I offer this sermon to bring you my favorite quotation from the late Rabbi Harold Schulweis: “The Holocaust is our tragedy; it is not our rationale.”¹⁹

We are not Jews because of antisemitism. We are not Jews because of Hitler, or even despite him. We are Jews because of God, because of Torah, because of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv; because of justice and compassion and human dignity; we are Jews because of history and song, because of tzedakah and Shabbat and Rosh Hashanah; because of the kugel and the arguments that await at your holiday tables.

May God bless us with courage and vision in this new year: to resist the forces of hatred with all our might; and to be inspiring examples of Jewish blessing with all our might. Because eleven months ago, on a Shabbat morning, tragedy landed in our hearts. And because eleven months ago, on a Shabbat afternoon, the Torah landed in a girl’s arms, and we sang.

Shana Tova.

¹⁹ Quoted in Rabbi Jack Stern, *The Right Not to Remain Silent* (New York: iUniverse, Inc., 2006), p. 155.