

Yom Kippur Morning Service Sermon – Antisemitism Here and Now

As some of you know, I grew up in Spring, Texas a northwestern suburb of Houston. It was not exactly the mecca of Jewish life. I heard the taunts of Jews killed Jesus. I was asked about my horns. I would have to fight every year to be able to take off for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and not face academic penalties for taking the day. And I would occasionally get into very powerful arguments at football games because I would not stand for a prayer that was offered up at a public high school in the name of a person I did not worship. I had to develop a very thick Jewish skin.

This is probably part of the reason why I have made some of the career choices we have made including coming here to Rockland County. Rockland, as I learned in my research, has the largest Jewish population by percentage of any county in the nation. As a result, schools are closed on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Black and white cookies are abundant, and there are delis around just about every corner. There was even a local Jewish Day school they could attend, a blessed memory. What more could a parent want for their Jewish children?

Perhaps my children, in this multi-cultural society, and in a diversely Jewish county could escape much of the antisemitism I grew up with... Nope.

But before we dive into some of the issues of antisemitism in the county, let's talk about antisemitism in general.

This past June we were blessed to welcome one of the preeminent scholars on the Holocaust, Holocaust denial and antisemitism in Dr. Deborah Lipstadt. Dr. Lipstadt was brought in as a speaker by our Holocaust Museum and Center for Tolerance and Education to share her thoughts related to her new book: Antisemitism: Here and Now.

In her book, Dr. Lipstadt helps of define antisemitism first by answering the question of “why antisemitism?” According to Dr. Lipstadt, antisemitism is not merely just the hatred of Jews, but it is the world’s oldest conspiracy theory, and this is why it is such, in her words, “it is hard, if not impossible, to explain something that is essentially irrational, delusional, and absurd. That is the nature of conspiracy theories ... Think about it. Why do some people insist that the moon landing took place on a stage set someplace in the American West? Despite the existence of reams of scientific and personal evidence to the contrary, they believe this because they subscribe to the notion that the government and other powerful entities are engaged in vast conspiracies to fool the public...”¹

I had never thought of antisemitism this way. It thought it merely to be a baseless hatred that could be abolished through education. But sadly education cannot eradicate what the mind convinces itself to be true. This is why it is so pernicious, ever-evolving, and not easy to define. So rather than defining it, perhaps it is useful to look to our own U.S. State Department which lists contemporary examples of the expression of antisemitism.² Here are just a few:

1. Calling for, aiding, or justifying the killing or harming of Jews in the name of a radical ideology or an extremist view of religion.
2. Making mendacious, dehumanizing, demonizing, or stereotypical allegations about Jews as such or the power of Jews as collective — such as, especially but not exclusively, the myth about a world Jewish conspiracy or of Jews controlling the media, economy, government or other societal institutions.
3. Accusing Jewish citizens of being more loyal to Israel, or to the alleged priorities of Jews worldwide, than to the interests of their own nations.

¹ Liptstadt, Deborah, *Antisemitism Here and Now*, New York, Schocken Books, 2019, pg. 7

² <https://www.state.gov/defining-anti-semitism/>

4. Denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g., by claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavor.
5. Applying double standards by requiring of it a behavior not expected or demanded of any other democratic nation.
6. Holding Jews collectively responsible for actions of the state of Israel.

There are more and I encourage you to go to their website because the list is both real and disconcerting. To continue, let's look more closely at these tropes. The first being "the myth about a world Jewish conspiracy or of Jews controlling the media, economy, government or other societal institutions." This was both the basis for Charlottesville and Pittsburgh both areas of violence perpetrated by white nationalists.

As we know, almost one year ago on October 27, 2018, a man walked into Tree of Life Synagogue, "armed with an AR-15-style assault rifle and at least three handguns."³ Shouting, "All Jews must die," he murdered in cold-blood, 11 Jews and wounded 7 others. This act of extreme violence sent shock waves through the Jewish community and the country.

We ask, what were his motivations? In this assailant's delusional mind, he murdered 11 of our landsmen based on the conspiracy theory that Jews are working with minorities and immigrants to replace the white race. We are the ones behind the so-called 'white-genocide.' This is because one of the congregations in Pittsburgh, like us, have allied themselves with the mission and vision of HIAS, the Hebrew immigrant aid society, which provides aid and assistance to immigrants to this great nation of ours.

What is also bizarre is that according to this conspiracy theory is that black people and brown people are not capable of organizing and fighting for themselves, so whenever they do, they must

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/27/us/active-shooter-pittsburgh-synagogue-shooting.html>

be funded and controlled by some nefarious group seeking to destroy the white foundations of the United States. This is why the name George Soros is thrown around so much. For, in their minds, we Jews are the ones behind all evil societal change in one way or another. We are conniving and power hungry and will use others to our own end. Therefore, we must be stopped including by shooting up innocent people whose only crime was to gather together to worship and celebrate a bris.

Sadly, this trope is not the only one prevalent in today's world. There is also the effort to institutionalize antisemitism by claiming that Zionism is a racist endeavor. This antisemitic trope is especially prominent on many of our college campuses and in the fight for some progressive causes like the Women's March. In an editorial for Tablet Magazine by Andrew Pessin and Doron Ben-Atar, they wrote, "While some may see in Israel a prosperous (if flawed) liberal democracy facing unprecedented security challenges, the growing campus orthodoxy sees only an "apartheid regime" founded upon "racism," "ethnic cleansing," and "colonialist imperialism." Zionism, anti-Israelists believe, can be neither defended nor corrected, both because the very idea of a Jewish state in that region depends on dispossession of others and because the concept of Jewish democracy is an offensive oxymoron. Israel, and Zionism, are thus cast as illegitimate, incorrigible abominations. The problem isn't Israel's alleged "crimes," then, but its sinful essence. "A crime," wrote Hannah Arendt, "is met with punishment; a vice can only be exterminated."

A vice cannot be engaged. Evil cannot partake in a scholarly debate. You must under no circumstances "normalize" your relations with it. Anti-Israelists don't want to hear what the other side says at all, nor let anyone else hear it, because to them there simply is no other side: they seek not to study or understand the lone Jewish state in the world (as scholars might do) but

to destroy it. Painting it as an abomination is a crucial part of that strategy. They exchange the mantle of scholarship for activism, or use the mantle of scholarship as a cover for activism.”⁴

Thus, if you are a true progressive, you cannot also be pro-Israel. Or to put it another way, intersectionality is a slippery slope to antisemitism. Hence the banning of the rainbow-colored Israeli flag at the Dyke March in D.C. under the rubric of not allowing ‘nationalist symbols’ while allowing the Palestinian flag to fly freely.⁵ For they may say it’s only about Israel, but really, it’s all about the Jews.

This too, sadly is classic antisemitism a slight derivation, what we might call leftist antisemitism.

“As Jonathan Freedland aptly described, “When Jews call out something as antisemitic, leftist non-Jews feel curiously entitled to tell Jews they’re wrong, that they are exaggerating or lying or using it as a decoy tactic – and to then treat them to a long lecture on what anti-Jewish racism really is. The left would call it misogynist “mansplaining” if a man talked that way to a woman. They’d be mortified if they were caught doing that to LGBT people or Muslims. But to Jews, they feel no such restraint.”⁶

Both antisemitism on the right and on the left are huge problems. However, there is another emergent challenge threatening to undermine our fight against hate, and that is the politicization of antisemitism. Or as some argue, “join my side because your side is the antisemitic one.”

This way of thinking is inherently wrong, as Lipstadt wrote, “we must make people aware that antisemitism is not solely a problem of the Right or the Left, but that it exists in both arenas. It might be more institutionalized on the left, but we are also seeing it as an element in the rise of right-wing nationalism both in the United States and abroad. We cannot let those on the left –

⁴ <https://www.tabletmag.com/scroll/257840/the-silencing-of-pro-israel-students-on-campus>

⁵ <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/d-c-dyke-march-barred-jewish-pride-flag-lgbtq-space-ncna1015786>

⁶ Lipstadt, Deborah, *Antisemitism Here and Now*, New York, Schocken Books, 2019, pg. 201

progressive people who are dedicated to righting long-standing wrongs – blind themselves to the antisemitism that has tragically insinuated itself into some areas of the political left.

Similarly, we must forthrightly acknowledge those on the right who say they are merely trying to protect “European culture” as the Antisemites and racists that they are.”⁷ Antisemitism is not a left issue or a right issue, it is a human issue!

As I wrote in a note to the congregation following the production of that hateful video, “A Storm is Brewing in Rockland,” Sadly, antisemitism is becoming an increasingly partisan issue, while being excused if one supports the politician or party of the person spewing the hate.

Antisemitism is antisemitism, and it must be called out and condemned regardless of who is speaking it. To all politicians I say, stop using Jews and/or Israel to further your political ambitions. Your use of us, only further endangers us from those who would seek us harm.”⁸

Which brings us back to Rockland. As many of you undoubtedly know, Rockland is home to not one but two types of antisemitism: the more generalized one we have been speaking about, and also a very specific anti-Hasidic version. Now I will readily admit, I am no expert on Rockland, as I have only lived in the county a little over three years and hence, I am not privy to all of the ins and outs. What I do know is that my some of my neighbors mentioned to me how thrilled they were to discover that when we bought the house, I was not ‘that’ kind of a rabbi.

Therefore I would like to borrow from a recent High Holiday sermon from Rabbi Dan Pernick, one of my local colleagues who has thirty years in the county under his belt who said, “And lest any of us sit smugly and say, well, it is their ox which is being gored, not mine, let us remember that for those who hate, there is little to no difference between Hasidic Jews and us.

⁷ Liptstadt, Deborah, *Antisemitism Here and Now*, New York, Schocken Books, 2019, pg. 220-221

⁸ <https://rhythmguitarabbiblogspot.com/2019/08/a-storm-is-brewing-but-not-one-as.html>

Even for those who do not hate, there is a serious lack of knowledge. A large segment of the non-Jewish community and even a significant segment of the Jewish community do not understand the difference between Hasidic Jews and modern Orthodox Jews, between an Orthodox rabbi wearing a kippah and a Reform rabbi wearing a kippah, between a Hasidic Jew and you. For all too many, a Jew is a Jew.

For over thirty years, (Rabbi Pernick has) listened to students in Orangetown, Clarkstown and Bergen counties complain about the anti-Semitic taunts and insults they have had to endure in the public schools. Virtually all of them, as well as their parents, didn't want anything done because they didn't want to stand out.

While such an attitude is understandable, it means that we have also been enabling this type of attitude to develop. The problem, my friends, is that far too many of us do not want to confront the forces of hatred.”⁹

This is not to say there are not real challenges in the county. Many of you know these better than I. I am not here to dismiss your worries or fears or to denigrate them in any way. There has been real damage done to this county and the issues of corruption and over development are real issues. However, in the words of Rabbi Pernick, “Yes, we have a messy and uncomfortable situation in Ramapo. The local Hasidic communities played a role in this, but so did local political leaders.

The answer is not to vilify the religious identity of some of the residents, but rather to deal with the very real issues that are the problem, including the corruption which sent Ramapo's non-Jewish, Town Supervisor to prison.”¹⁰ Simply blaming the Hasidic community for all of Rockland's problems ignores many of its larger structural, organizational, and political issues.

⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/RocklandisOne/posts/736647930096530>

¹⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/RocklandisOne/posts/736647930096530>

Do some in the Hasidic community have a role to play, absolutely. But they are not the only ones at fault including some of our statewide officials and politicians. It is incumbent upon us to fight for Rockland County, but what we cannot do is let the fight turn into an antisemitic narrative.

Thus “there are ways to challenge frustrating developments in Rockland County without putting a target on the back of Jews writ large. It is one thing to challenge the actions of a person or persons. It is another to indict a whole community. Anger towards Jews leads to violence towards all Jews. For as we know, when one Jew is assaulted simply for being Jewish, we all become targets to be assaulted. Lest we forget, the communities that were attacked in Pittsburgh and Poway were not ultra-Orthodox communities.” To an anti-Semite, we are all the same.

So what can we do in the face of increasing antisemitism both here and in the nation? For one, we have to acknowledge it and call it out wherever it rears its ugly head, no matter the person or persons speaking it. Secondly, we have to work harder to bring ourselves closer to one another. Maybe this means joining a synagogue or committing to support a Holocaust Museum or the ADL. Or ideally, all three. No one else is going to take on the battle of fighting antisemitism if we do not lead. Third, we have to stop turning on each other. We may have different political beliefs, but we are all either Jews or people who have chosen to bind ourselves to the fate of our people. Thus confronting antisemitism is something we all must do.

We also need to find allies. This means we need to work on building connections and relationships with other religious communities, communities of color, and the like. We need to work to make their causes our causes and help them understand why our cause is their cause. But what we cannot do is let them fall into the traps of casual or deliberate antisemitism.

We need to support Israel. In the words of NYT writer Bari Weiss, who will be coming to speak here in Rockland in the spring, as she wrote in her book *How to Fight Anti-Semitism*,

“Supporting Israel does not mean – I cannot believe I have to say this – never criticizing it. On the contrary, it means demanding that Israel live up to its ideals. But it is also important to hold in tension Israel’s flaws with the fact that it is a political and historical miracle.”¹¹

Thankfully we also live in a time and in a place where our local elected officials and authorities, for the most part are on our side. Unlike the recent and not so recent past, it is our police who rushed into the synagogue in Pittsburgh. It is our local Clarkstown police who are not only present during our High Holy Day services but have also helped us work to make our building and you safer and more secure. To them and to our off-duty police officers whose presence here today, we are tremendously grateful.

And there are so many other ways as well to fight antisemitism. But more than that, we also cannot, we must not give into despair. As Dr. Lipstadt argues, we need to reject the victimhood of Judaism, we need to not focus on the oy, but instead find the joy in Judaism. After Pittsburgh, we held a rally of solidarity at the JCC. It was standing room only. Elected leaders and officials and Jews of all denominations gathered in the gym to mourn, to share our fears, and to embrace one another. And following that, we held a Shabbat of solidarity here with our friends at Congregation Sons of Israel along with other faith leaders from our community. We may have grieved together, but we also celebrated Shabbat together.

Antisemitism may be the world’s oldest conspiracy theory. It may be impossible to eradicate. But you know what, we Jews have been around for a pretty long time too. And we are not going anywhere either. On this Yom Kippur, this most solemn and somber day of the Jewish Year, let us recommit ourselves to standing strong, standing up in the face of hate and intolerance, and standing proud as the Jewish people. We stand with each other. We stand with Israel, and we

¹¹ Weiss, Bari, *How to Fight Anti-Semitism*, New York, Crown, 2019, pg. 193

stand strong in the face of hate. Or in the words we tell ourselves at all times in good and in bad, *Am Yisrael Chai*, the Jewish People Live! And no matter what the world throws at us, we will not be afraid.

In the words of Bari Weiss, “There are many forces in our world insisting, again, that all Jews must die. But there is a force far, far greater than that. And that is the force of who we are. We are a people descended from slaves who brought the world ideas that change the course of history. One God. Human dignity. The sanctity of life. Freedom itself.

That is our inheritance. That is our legacy. We are the people commanded to bring light into this world.

Do we believe in our own story? Can we make it real once again? I believe that we can. And that we must.”¹²

Am Yisrael Chai!

L’shana Tova,

Rabbi Benjamin Sharff

¹² Weiss, Bari, *How to Fight Anti-Semitism*, New York, Crown, 2019, pg. 206