

Though it may no longer be first and foremost in our minds, the battle continues to rage on in the Ukraine. As of recently, Ukrainian forces have not only held their own, but they have begun to push back against the Russian army, forcing them out from previously conquered territories. With the threat of further call ups, mass protests taking place in Russia, and the continued threat of a nuclear response, it is anyone's guess how this will ultimately play out.

All that being said, one of the purported reasons for the invasion to begin with, according to Putin was the de-Nazification of Ukraine. As far back as 2014, Putin referred to Ukraine's pro-Western revolution as a fascist coup,¹ evoking the memory of the German invasion of Russia in World War II, something deeply troubling to us Jews.

As writer Anton Troianovski argues, "The "Nazi" slur's sudden emergence shows how Mr. Putin is trying to use stereotypes, distorted reality and his country's lingering World War II trauma to justify his invasion of Ukraine. The Kremlin is casting the war as a continuation of

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/17/world/europe/ukraine-putin-nazis.html>

Russia's fight against evil in what is known in the country as the Great Patriotic War, apparently counting on lingering Russian pride in the victory over Nazi Germany to carry over into support for Mr. Putin's attack."²

This reimagining or really the utter falsification of modern events has made it increasingly dangerous for Jewish communities in both the Ukraine and in Russia. I know some of you even read the sad but poignant Op Ed by Rabbi Pinchas Goldshmidt, the former chief Rabbi of Moscow. As he wrote for the New York Times,³ "This is my first Yom Kippur in exile ... As the chief rabbi of Moscow, I used to prepare for this holiday for weeks. Some of the work was technical — securing cantors and shofar blowers for synagogues across Russia, or guiding the sick on whether or not they should fast on the holy day. Some of the preparation was more lofty: I would prepare my sermon thoughts while walking daily for early morning penitential prayers, past the bustling cafes on Pokrovka Street, down the hill on Arkhipova Street, up the

² Ibid.

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/02/opinion/moscow-rabbi-yom-kippur.html>

stairs to the pale yellow synagogue, with its dome. In the days leading up to the holidays, one could hear the cantorial choir rehearsing in the wooden balcony of the century-old sanctuary.

For years, we hoped that democratic institutions in Russia would take root. We hoped that Jewish communities could keep their distance from President Vladimir Putin's increasing authoritarianism. His regime's social contract, after all, was that the population would not be politically active, while allowing the authorities to conduct their affairs. Our hopes were crushed.

After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, everything changed. The government began to shift to semi-totalitarianism; the surviving independent media was shut down; protesters were arrested. Soon, I received reports of religious community leaders — priests, imams, rabbis — being pressured to express their support for the military. One day, a government source informed the synagogue that we would be expected to support the war — or else.

It was then that my wife and I decided to leave the country. This will be our first Yom Kippur in true exile from the place we called our home for three decades.”

Sometimes the only act of courage one can demonstrate in the face of totalitarianism and antisemitism is to flee. And there is certainly power, grace and beauty in that. However, sometimes one does not have that choice, and the only act of courage is to stand strong. As I mentioned in my Rosh Hashana Second Day sermon, this year I had the opportunity to attend a CCAR Convention, in person, for the first time, since the start of the pandemic. There were many highlights, including the celebration of 50 years of women in the rabbinate. With the honor of one of the aliyot at our Monday morning service was Rabbi Sally Priesand. Joining her were a group of women, we referred to as the Vatikot, the women who, along with Rabbi Sally Priesand, pioneered the way into the rabbinate. They had so many interesting stories to share, some of which, cannot be shared from the pulpit. They endured, and they persevered to help normalize what should have been accepted and embraced from the beginning.

Following their Aliyah, we got to the section of the Torah service referred to as Birkat haGomel. Birkat HaGomel or benching Gomel, is a prayer of thanksgiving. It is recited in the presence of a minyan. The tradition of birkat hagomel comes to us from ancient days, when one was expected to go to the Beit HaMikdash and make an offering of thanksgiving after one has survived as dangerous journey or recovered from a serious illness or accident. Nowadays it is most commonly done during the Torah service as we have done this morning.

Typically those invited to perform birkat hagomel are those who have had surgeries, cancer treatments, bouts with covid, and the like. But for the first time, at CCAR, it was performed by someone who survived being held hostage in his own synagogue, Rabbi Charlie Cytron Walker. To refresh our memories, as Yair Rosenberg wrote for the Atlantic,⁴ “Most people do not realize that Jews make up just 2 percent of the U.S. population and 0.2 percent of the world’s population. This means simply finding them takes a lot of effort. But every year in Western countries,

⁴ <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/01/texas-synagogue-anti-semitism-conspiracy-theory/621286/>

including America, Jews are the No. 1 target of anti-religious hate crimes. Anti-Semites are many things, but they aren't lazy. They're animated by one of the most durable and deadly conspiracy theories in human history...

Malik Faisal Akram traversed an ocean to accomplish his task, flying from the United Kingdom to America in late December. On January 15 (this past year), he took Colleyville's Congregation Beth Israel hostage for more than 11 hours. When it was all over, Akram was dead and his captives were not. The hostages escaped after their rabbi engineered a distraction, drawing on security training he had received from the Anti-Defamation League and other communal organizations. Something else most people don't realize is that many rabbis need and receive security training.

Speaking about Jews as symbols is always uncomfortable, and that's especially the case when bullet holes are still fresh in the sanctuary. But the sad fact is, that's why the Texas congregants were attacked in the first place: because Jews play a sinister symbolic role in the imagination of so many that bears no resemblance to their lived existence.

After Akram pulled a gun on the congregation, he demanded to speak to the rabbi of New York's Central Synagogue, who he claimed could authorize the release of Aafia Siddiqui, a Pakistani woman serving an attempted murder sentence in a Fort Worth facility near Beth Israel.

Obviously, this is not how the prison system works. "This was somebody who literally thought that Jews control the world," Beth Israel Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker told *The Forward*. "He thought he could come into a synagogue, and we could get on the phone with the 'Chief Rabbi of America' and he would get what he needed."

(I have met) Angela Buchdahl, the rabbi of that New York synagogue, and I think she would make an excellent chief rabbi of America. But no such position exists. Jews are a famously fractious lot who can rarely agree on anything, let alone their religious leadership. We do not spend our days huddled in smoke-filled rooms plotting world domination ...

The notion that such a minuscule and unmanageable minority secretly controls the world is comical, which may be why so many responsible people still do not take the anti-Semitic conspiracy theory seriously, or even understand how it works. In the moments after the Texas crisis, the

FBI made an official statement declaring that the assailant was “particularly focused on one issue, and it was not specifically related to the Jewish community.” Of course, the gunman did not travel thousands of miles to terrorize some Mormons. He sought out a synagogue and took it hostage over his grievances, believing that Jews alone could resolve them. That’s targeting Jews, and there’s a word for that.

As the “The Anti-Defamation League, which tracks anti-Semitic behavior nationwide, found 2,717 incidents in 2021. That's a 34 percent rise from the year before and averages out to more than seven anti-Semitic incidents per day.”⁵

As the American Jewish Committee has noted in their report that came out last year, “Among the report’s key findings:

- One in four American Jews say they have been targets of antisemitism in the last 12 months;
- Four in 10 American Jews have changed their behavior out of fear;

⁵ <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/antisemitic-incidents-hit-a-record-high-in-2021-whats-behind-the-rise-in-hate>

– Four out of 10 of all Americans have personally witnessed antisemitic incidents;

– And 82% of American Jews say antisemitism has risen over the last five years while only 44% of the general public believes that to be the case.”⁶

And these are not just the Jews who, as one author put it, wear the Jewish uniform. It is not just ultra-Orthodox Jews who are the targets of hate. Colleyville is a Reform Congregation. Tree of Life is a conservative congregation. Those hate us and seek to do us harm are unable, unwilling, or really have no desire to make any sort of differentiation. To them, a Jew is a Jew.

And lest we not delude ourselves it is on the right and on the left. Political beliefs may be different in their motivations, but the end result is the same. Whether it is the Russian Government, a deranged individual, or the work of small or larger hate groups, antisemitism continues to rear its ugly head.

⁶ <https://news.wttw.com/2021/10/26/report-finds-antisemitism-rise-america>

In the past we have spoken about ways to combat antisemitism including the importance of interfaith dialogue and partnership. Of helping trying to change the conversation from denying the right of Israel to exist to disagreements over Israeli policies, for which I think many of us struggle with. Of challenging those with whom we agree, more so than those of whom we disagree and calling out any and all of their hate, including antisemitism. Or to borrow from the world of Harry Potter, “There are all kinds of courage .. It takes a great deal of bravery to stand up to our enemies, but just as much to stand up to our friends.” Today, I would like to argue that there is one more way to respond as well. This response comes from a story that CNN correspondent Dana Bash, nee Dana Schwartz⁷ who recently hosted a special on CNN entitled Rising Hate: Antisemitism in America tells about her son.⁸ “In the weeks leading up to Chanukah last year, (her) then-10-year-old son told me that (her) thought he wanted a Jewish star necklace. It was a rather soft ask, so (she) quietly let it go.

⁷ https://www.cnn.com/2022/08/19/us/antisemitism-in-america-cnndoc-essay/index.html?fbclid=IwAR3dVfliwcq8bYJFICKI_1uyRPb0NXNYVRgHGGu93HPQb3tSKVHQGeWMZYzY

⁸ <https://www.cnn.com/videos/us/2022/08/19/antisemitism-rise-america-dana-bash-vpx.cnn>

To be honest, (she) wasn't sure how (she) felt about the idea of him wearing his Jewish faith so prominently in public. It is not that (she) was embarrassed or ashamed -- just the opposite. (She has) always been extremely proud of (her) Judaism. (She) display(s) a mezuzah on the outside of the door of (her) home, as is the Jewish custom. But wearing a Jewish star is something (she) had never considered for (herself), much less (her) young son. (She) never bought it.

Then, halfway through the eight days of Chanukah, (her) son somewhat sheepishly asked if (she) had gotten him the only thing he had asked for, a Jewish star. (She) admitted that (She) hadn't and asked what made him want one.

He said that a lot of his Christian friends at school wore crosses, and that he wanted to wear a symbol of his own faith. He told me (her) is a proud Jew.

To hear this come out of (her) young son's mouth was jaw dropping.

That he takes such pride in his religion -- one preserved and practiced for thousands of years through countless generations of (her) family -- made me incredibly emotional.

(Dana) immediately thought of (her) great grandparents and aunt -- Hungarian Jews who were not particularly observant but were murdered by the Nazis during World War II anyway.

(Dana) thought of (her) grandparents, who escaped the Nazis and miraculously made it to the US only two months before Pearl Harbor. They became patriotic Americans who never took for granted the ability to practice their Judaism freely.

Without knowing enough to make those connections, (Dana's) son was asking to take up that mantle because it is his blood and in his heart. So, (she) said yes. (They) got the Jewish star and a chain to go with it.

What (Dana) did not say -- what (she) was ashamed to even admit to (herself) -- was that (her) young son showing the world that he is Jewish made (her) nervous. (She) knew what, in his innocence, he did not. (She) knew that antisemitism is on the rise in America. (She) knew that gunmen had launched deadly attacks at synagogues in Pittsburgh and Poway, California, because they hated Jews. (She) knew that antisemitic incidents were increasing on college campuses. (She) knew that conspiracies about Jews were among the oldest on the planet.

What (Dana) did not know is what (she) learned in talking to experts and victims (for interviews)-- that wearing a Jewish star can actually be a tactic in combating prejudice against Jews.

Ambassador Deborah Lipstadt, special envoy to monitor and combat antisemitism, arrived at (CNN's) interview wearing a beautiful gold Star of David necklace.

When (they) got to the part of the interview when (Dana) asked for some solutions to curb hate against Jews, Lipstadt -- a world-renowned expert on antisemitism -- said that she started wearing her Jewish star more frequently as antisemitic attacks started to rise.

"I can walk into a room and someone might not know it, might not identify it," Lipstadt said, referring to the fact that she is Jewish...

It's been more than half a year since (Dana's) son got his Star of David necklace. He wears it every day -- sometimes under his shirt, sometimes out for everyone to see. He says he has never had any negative issues.

When (Dana) ask why he likes wearing it, he replies simply, "It's my identity, mom." ... It turns out that normalizing the practice of and pride

in Judaism is one of the antidotes to prejudice -- something that (her) young son understood innately.”

Even with the ongoing rise of antisemitism, something which should have died long ago, especially after the Shoah, it is all the more important to stand up with pride for ourselves, our Jewishness, our Jewish heritage, our history, and for our future.

Being Jewish is both a burden and a blessing. Sadly, it all too often puts a target on our back. But we cannot allow this hate to fester and turn aside. On Yom Kippur, we speak a lot about the Sefer Chayim, the book of life and choosing life to reengage in with our best selves. It means accepting and embracing who we are, no matter the circumstance. For that is the only way we can make real change happen.

Thus as we recall the Sefer Chayim, we are also reminder that wherever hatred festers, we will stand tall. Where animosity looms, may we and our allies have the courage and wherewithal to call it out.

Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt was able to leave Russia and arrive safely in Israel. Rabbi Cytron Walker and several members of his community survived being held hostage. But in many ways, our hero can and should

be Dana Bash's son who wears his Magen David openly and with pride.

He is reminding us that we are strong not because of what others have done to us our sought to do to us. We are not strong because we have survived. No, my friends, we are strong because we are Jews. And we will continue to gather, celebrate, observe, live and breathe our tradition no matter what others say about us or may try to do to us.

So whether you wear your symbols outwardly, or if you observe tradition quietly in your own way, living proudly as Jews is the first and foremost way to combat the scourge that is the longest lasting hatred.

It is our prayer that hatred and intolerance forever leave our midst in the year to come. But until that day comes, may we all continue stand proud and tall as Jews.

L'shana Tova