

“King of Israel:” Who Speaks for Us?
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This was a weird week. Every time I turned on the radio or glanced at the headlines, there was discussion of “Jews.” “King of Israel” trended on Twitter. On Tuesday, the president said in the Oval Office, that Jewish people voting for Democrats, “shows either a total lack of knowledge or great disloyalty.” The president clarified his remarks on Wednesday, explaining, “In my opinion, you vote for a Democrat, you’re being very disloyal to Jewish people, and you’re being very disloyal to Israel.” Also on Wednesday, in a strange and somewhat confusing tweet, the president quoted Wayne Allyn Root, a Jew by birth, who has since accepted Jesus. The quotation read, “President Trump is the greatest President for Jews and for Israel in the history of the world...the Jewish people in Israel love him like he’s the King of Israel. They love him like he is the second coming of God...But American Jews don’t know him or like him...It makes no sense!”

Wayne Allyn Root is right about one thing, this makes no sense. For one, the theology is pretty religiously inconsistent. In all seriousness, I want to clearly and definitively say that this behavior is antisemitic. There is a long history of questioning Jewish loyalty, of suspicion that Jews are loyal only to fellow Jews, or to the state of Israel, rather than the country of their citizenship.

Professor Deborah Lipstadt, author of the book “Antisemitism: Here and Now,” shares a somewhat humorous definition of antisemitism. She writes that an antisemite is someone who “hates Jews more than is absolutely necessary.” There is wisdom behind this definition. It is reasonable for someone to have ideological differences with people who do not politically support them. Over 70% of Jews voted for Hilary Clinton. But, Trump has a lot of adversaries. To single out this one particular group *as* Jews, to give Jewish disapproval a different weight than other non-supporters, to imply this lack of support is a demonstration of disloyalty... that is antisemitism.

The President’s remarks are also dangerous. Trump says that accusations of antisemitism are unfair. One might hear his words and think that Trump is actually a

philosemite- a Jew lover. Yair Rosenberg made this argument in the Washington Post a few days ago. A philosemite is someone who makes positive, simplistic, sweeping generalizations about Jews. It is a phenomenon that, history has taught us, sits just a few steps away from antisemitism. Still, even if you subscribe to that theory, that nuanced distinction is lost on the radical, white supremacist portion of Trump's base. Our president's words simply fuel the hatred of those in our country who see Jews as the architects of all evil. It is unforgivably irresponsible for the president of our country to ignore the power and impact of his speech.

But what I found most confounding and misguided about this whole episode- is the notion that you can really speak about "the Jews." As if we are a monolithic people, with one set of beliefs and opinions. There are very few things you can say that would apply to all Jews. I guess you could say, "All Jews are monotheists" or "All Jews don't believe that Jesus was the Messiah." Those statements *would* certainly eliminate the President's pal Wayne who he quoted in his tweets. Trying to make a statement with which all Jews agree is notoriously futile.

You know the old saying, "Two Jews, three opinions." Our penchant for disagreement is not a bug, its integral to the operating system of every Jewish person. Argument is the backbone of the Beit Midrash- the Talmud is largely a transcription of legal debates. And we don't *just* argue with one another, we argue with God. We are the people *Yisra-El*, meaning that we are God-wrestlers. When we're not happy, we take it straight to the management.

So, it is suspicious to me when someone stands up to speak for "Jews" or when someone makes a sweeping statement about what "Jews" should or should not do. You may disagree with this sermon, you may think that I have gotten this all wrong. I certainly do not purport to speak for the Jews. No one person can encompass the diverse thoughts, and beliefs of the Jewish people. We don't have a pope or a Chief Rabbi who rules us all. Very simply: there is no longer a King of Israel.

In a moment of discomfort and alienation- who do we look to for "the Jewish response?" Who *does* speak for us? No one speaks for us because there isn't just one "us."

The president cannot assume to know what is “good for the Jews,” and no one Jewish voice can claim that they know what is “good for the Jews.” That is okay. No single Jewish movement can contain the beliefs of all of the Jewish people. No one political party can contain the beliefs of all of the Jewish people. We are a pluralistic faith in a pluralistic country with the freedom to practice our religion however we see fit.

So, how do we respond, as Jews, when someone tries to define us- when someone elects himself “King of Israel,” when someone tries to speak for us? What do we do?

I propose two responses. The first is to deepen our relationships outside the Jewish world; the second is to invest our energy within the Jewish world. I believe they are equally important.

First, we respond to the hate we experienced this week by embracing the non-Jews who have borne the President’s animus before us. The President’s comments this week are not an aberration and they are certainly not a surprise. Sherrilyn Iffill, the President and Director for the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, captured this cruel moment perfectly: In “one summer,” Iffill observed, “The President of the United States has unleashed hideous, abusive attacks on Blacks, Latinos, migrants, the city of Baltimore, a Black congressman, Muslim, Palestinian-American, Puerto Rico(*sic*) & African American congresswomen, Jews. And it’s not yet Labor Day.” This week may have felt different for us because this week, it was about us. It got personal. But we do not live up to our highest Jewish ideals if our response loses sight of the victims who came before us, and those who will surely follow.

This is not an easy task. We are taught at a young age and reminded all too often that when hate is in the air, it’s never good for the Jews. There is thus an understandable tendency to turn inward and withdraw when we feel vulnerable.

But we have risen to the challenge again and again, organizing and protesting alongside those targeted in this political climate. We did this not in spite of our Jewish identity, but *because* of it. Because we believe that all people are created *b’tzelem elohim*, in the image of God and that all people should be treated with respect and dignity. This week’s troubling discussion of Jewish disloyalty is a call to double down, to deepen our

relationships with those who share our values and who are willing to fight for those values, side by side.

And when we show up in coalition with others, we show up as Jews. Because antisemitism does not have a single home, it lives on the right and on the left. When we stand up and speak out we must do so proudly as Jewish Americans. That is our right as Americans, and it is our obligation as Jews.

The second response looks within the Jewish community. I just told you that we have to look out for others who have drawn the Presidents ire -- but we also have to look out for ourselves. In the face of hate, we need strong Jewish voices prepared to offer smart, thoughtful responses. To speak out, as Jews and precisely *because* they are Jews. To those who wish to define us as one thing -- as a monolith, as “the Jews” -- what can be more important than lifting up the diverse Jewish voices that truly represent us.

There are many noble causes to support and many people who need our help. Sometimes it can feel like Jewish organizations aren't where we want to put our time and attention. But, we need strong voices representing Jewish values in the public square. I encourage you to find a Jewish organization that you feel *does* speak for you- that says what you think needs to be said- that makes you proud- that reflects your values. Support that organization- with your time, with your money. Read their emails, do their action items, send them thank you notes. Our Jewish organizational leaders who are in the fight are exhausted. Help to amplify the voices of those who you *do* want to speak for the Jewish community.

There is no King of Israel- we tried it in ancient Israel, it didn't work. When someone speaks about “the Jews,” we should all be very suspicious. And we shouldn't wait for the speech to be about *us* to sound the alarm. Martin Neimoller's wise words are often quoted, and it is easy to take his wisdom for granted. But it is incumbent upon each of us to speak out for ourselves and for others, before it is too late. Tonight I end with his stirring words:

First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a socialist.

Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out— because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.