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Antisemitism Sermon

This past year was not the first time that I've felt afraid to sit in the sanctuary of my own synagogue. Growing up, my family was very involved in Temple Beth Am in the suburbs south of Boston. **We were there all the time and I not only knew every corner of that building, I felt like it was mine and I made myself at home in every part of it.** I was there in 1981 for Shabbat services on the October weekend after terrorists had burst into a bar mitzvah service at the main Vienna synagogue throwing grenades and firing machine guns. My parents were on the bima or ushering because I remember clearly sitting by myself with a horrible, vivid image of our sanctuary riddled with bullets and bodies everywhere. I also remember how I was obsessed with the use of grenades at a bar mitzvah service, so destructive and unnecessarily beyond murderous. At 11 years old, I intuitively understood that was not just a mass murder, it was a pogrom. It wasn't about killing, it was about the savagery and the malice against Jews. The wall of that childhood sanctuary was solid concrete with stained glass near the top. I knew every corner of that synagogue because I had felt so at home there. You couldn't see outside the wall, but I had never noticed the emergency exit built into it. I kept my eyes there, certain that was where they would come in.

This past October, almost 40 years later, I stood right here and for the first time, started the bar mitzvah service by pointing out the emergency exits. I so appreciate the glass walls of this sanctuary. I can see straight through to both hallways. I'll see them coming and maybe a few extra seconds warning will make a difference.

In 1981, we believed that things happening in Europe could not happen here. This past year, with two antisemitic mass shootings at Tree of Life and Poway Chabad, changed our perspective. Two things immediately surprised me about the Tree of Life of Shooting: one, that it took until 2018 for such a deadly attack on Jews in America to occur. It ironically confirmed why we had been so comfortable here. And two, how did we not see this coming? How did we lose, as Bari Weiss writes, our instinct for danger? The mass shooting at the Poway California Chabad center on Passover confirmed it: it is time to wake up. The ADL reported: “The U.S. Jewish community experienced near historic levels of anti-Semitism in 2018, including a doubling of anti-Semitic assaults.”¹

One of the saddest truths to acknowledge about the rise of antisemitism is that has revealed how deeply divided and distrustful we are of each other in the Jewish community. In the new year, I am committed to fostering a higher degree of collectivity and mutual support in the Jewish community around antisemitism. Let’s not over-romanticize a Jewish past where our ancestors rallied together and all Jews had each other’s backs. Not even the Holocaust united Jews across lines of difference. The Warsaw ghetto was riven with partisan divisions – orthodox, secular, Polish, Russian, Zionists, internationalists - that literally had Jews fighting each other before finally coalescing to create the ZOB, the Jewish Fighting Force, who resisted the Nazi liquidation of the ghetto in 1943. In ancient days, the Hanukkah battle was sparked when one Jew rose to join a Hellenistic ritual and another Jew, Mattisyahu the priest, father of the Maccabees sprung from the crowd and killed him on the spot. So, today’s divisions are not new, but it’s not good. It’s not good for the individual who experiences antisemitism then

¹ <https://www.adl.org/news/press-releases/anti-semitic-incidents-remained-at-near-historic-levels-in-2018-assaults>

suffers the double indignity of not being believed by their own community. It's also not good for the collective Jewish people. When anti-semites are emboldened by Jewish friends who give them cover, the threat to everyone's safety is worse. When a fractured Jewish community draw its resources into smaller and smaller partisan silos, we are less able to build and support institutions that strengthen Jewish life and we potentially do the anti-semite's work for them.

A more collectivist response to antisemitism is good for everyone. The concepts of Jewish peoplehood and the idea that "all Israel is responsible one for the other" are traditional centerpieces of Judaism. But it's complicated and the commitment to a united Jewish family has been weaker and weaker especially today. I have myself argued against unconditional filial piety to all Jews. Just last Yom Kippur you may recall I urged us to consider our commitment to equality for men and women as important an obligation for us, as an orthodox community sees its commitment to gender separation, even if that meant we could not pray together on the holidays. I still believe that as strongly as ever. I would not, however, urge anyone to dismiss the importance of Jewish peoplehood.

One contemporary scholar, Yehuda Kurtzer of the Hartman Institute, suggests re-embracing peoplehood and collective responsibility in the face of today's antisemitism. He wrote: "The Jewish people have earned the right to take seriously our existential fears and to have them taken seriously by others—especially by other Jews."²

As we commit to stand with each other in solidarity against antisemitism, we should also understand that all acts of antisemitism are not the same and our

² https://hartman.org.il/Blogs_View.asp?Article_Id=2413&Cat_Id=439&Cat_Type=Blogs

response to them should not be equal. This past year we hosted a professor from Hebrew University on Yom Hashoah named Dr. Amos Goldberg, who shared this idea with us. His general point was this: it is not enough to label something antisemitism. That label alone does not tell us much that is meaningful and certainly doesn't help us formulate a response. For example, a swastika drawn last year in a school bathroom and the Auschwitz gas chambers are both manifestations of antisemitism. But they are so far different from each other and the response we should mount to each one is so far different, it's barely helpful to say they are antisemitic and leave it at that.

A common and effective tool for teaching about antisemitism and any forms of discrimination is publicized by the ADL and called the pyramid of hate. The principle is that the most violent forms of antisemitism are the result of escalations from earlier less violent acts. At the base of the pyramid are biased attitudes, stereotypes, and insensitive remarks. That's the broadest layer; it includes the most actions but also entirely non-violent. Each level gets a little smaller and a little more dangerous. The next level includes name-calling, bullying, and social avoidance. The next level is discrimination including housing segregation, job and education discrimination and more. The next level is violent hate crimes: murder, assault, vandalism and more. At the top of the pyramid is genocide. The lesson of the pyramid is to take antisemitism seriously at every level of incident. When we treat behaviors on the lower levels as acceptable, it creates an environment where antisemitism is normalized and escalations to greater violence emerge.³

³ <https://www.adl.org/sites/default/files/documents/pyramid-of-hate.pdf>

But, the stratification is also a clear reminder that there ARE levels of difference. Taking antisemitism seriously doesn't mean taking it all the same. We have to be much more thoughtful than to treat a middle school swastika the same as a murder. Likewise, we cannot tolerate low level antisemitism on the basis of "no blood no foul." It's going to be complicated sometimes, but we need to prepare ourselves to handle that.

As we try to balance outward-looking universalism with the need to protect ourselves, we encounter real-life decision points without easy black and white answers. I believe there are three overlapping dynamics that, in combination, challenge our ability to come together effectively against the rise of antisemitism. Our visiting professor Amos Goldberg described the first dynamic, "There is a growing tendency among both Jews and non-Jews to label political opponents as antisemitic, a severe accusation that often renders them illegitimate in the public arena." Politics is like an increasingly competitive sport and in an era of the constant campaign cycle, politicians must consistently work to defeat their opponents. We all know that the weaponization of outrage has become a tool of choice in that competition and that makes us doubt the integrity of some accusations of antisemitism. As result, we may be as likely to dismiss another Jew's cry of antisemitism as we are to support them depending on their political position or the person they've accused.

The second dynamic is a tendency to conflate the layers of the pyramid of hate into a single demon called antisemitism to which there is only one legitimate response: destroy it. The third dynamic is an over-wrought insistence on Jewish solidarity and unity even as that unity has been demonstrably weakening. The result of this dynamic is that a Jew who disagrees with applying the antisemitic

label to a person or a situation is not just blind or foolish, but “worse than kapos,” to use Ambassador David Friedman’s term.

Here’s where it gets even more complicated. When talking about antisemitism today, Trump-era politics is the elephant in the room. Trump’s remarks over the summer that Jews who vote Democratic are disloyal is a stunning example. But this is not just about Trump. Let’s go back to the controversy earlier this year that surrounded Rep. Ilhan Omar, a Muslim, freshman congresswoman, a Somali refugee from Minneapolis. In a few different tweets she used classic antisemitic tropes when talking about Israel and American politics: Jews had the world hypnotized, Jewish money controlled the system, and dual loyalty was at play. President Trump and many Republicans had already bitterly attacked her and other Democratic freshmen, mostly women of color. The attacks at times were racist, misogynistic and inappropriate. There seems to be broad political strategy at work: amplify everything about Ilhan Omar so loudly that she will be seen as the face of the entire Democratic party and launch a concerted attempt to discredit her in any way possible and destroy her career and thereby damage or destroy the larger party too. In a world that refuses to allow for different levels of antisemitic actions, people concerned about antisemitism are forced to start only with the end in mind: an overly strident response to a lower level action on that pyramid; join us in destroying her or consider yourself a traitor and apologist for all antisemitism. So, when charges of antisemitism erupted many liberals including Jews were loath to accept the label. Many rushed to defend Rep. Omar from Islamophobia and Trump’s signature disparagement of foreigners and refugees especially. Because of these overlapping dynamics, many liberals refused to see Omar’s remarks as falling

anywhere on the pyramid of hate, even that lowest level of using antisemitic stereotypes.

The same dynamic is true in an even greater way with Trump himself. His defenders no doubt believe he is not antisemitic. His critics are certain that his stereotyping of Jews and his encouragement of white supremacists are responsible for the rise in antisemitism. They will accept nothing short of Trump's destruction meaning his immediate removal from office or at a minimum his imminent defeat. The divided and fraught politics make it hard for either side to see any integrity in claims of antisemitism by the other side. Battle lines are drawn within the Jewish community and each side accuses the other of bad faith. As we debate and attack each other over which public figure is or is not an antisemite, the truly dangerous perpetrators of hate descend on the streets of Charlottesville and storm sanctuaries filled with Jewish worshippers.

So, what are we supposed to do?

Throughout Jewish history, there have been two main responses to antisemitism from our community. One response is to circle the wagons, deepen our tribalism and strengthen our ability to defend ourselves. This was our deliverance in the Purim story. After Mordecai and Esther gain some power and stop Haman, "The Jews gathered themselves together in their cities and no man could withstand them.... The Jews struck all their enemies destroying them and doing to their enemies as the enemies had planned to do to the Jews."⁴ In 2003, the Israeli Air Force joined the official Polish Holocaust remembrance at Auschwitz by flying attack jets, piloted by offspring of Holocaust survivors, over the remnants of the camp. Swooping over the infamous railroad gate to the

⁴ Esther 9:2-5

camp, the lead pilot was broadcast over the radio promising in the name of the six million, “to be the shield of the Jewish people” against any future antisemitic violence. Google “Eagles Over Auschwitz,” the photos from that event continue to stand as a striking image of what “Never Again” actually looks like. Though we are not a tradition steeped in violence, Judaism says self-defense is a mitzvah.

There is another main response historically to antisemitism: to embrace universalism and join the fight against hatred and bigotry in every form. Perhaps the best statement of this principle is not Jewish but from Rev. Martin Niemoller who wrote during the Holocaust: “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.”⁵

I could not be more proud of the sustained and deep efforts our congregation has made to help people around the world in this past year. Our Gun Violence Prevention Program just won an award for its work, Sinai House continuously helps formerly homeless families gain independence, Project Mensch brings everything from books to food to poor children many of whom are recent immigrants at Highland Elementary School. And when a family of asylum seekers from Congo arrived here just a few months after Pittsburgh: we had one member drive to Richmond in the middle of the night to pick them up, one family offered a house rent free, another began tutoring the kids, another became their translator and close advisor, doctors opened their practices to the family, a lawyer gave dozens of hours to prepare their papers and literally walk them

⁵ <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/martin-niemoeller-first-they-came-for-the-socialists>

through the ICE check in procedure, and others gave thousands of dollars. All this happened during the very same months of these antisemitic shootings. I am so proud to see how this congregation lives the core Jewish values as a response to antisemitism: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself, do not stand idly by, do not oppress or wrong the stranger.”

It **is** possible to find verses that support a tribal, inward focus but it’s also **impossible** to find the fullness of Judaism without opening our hearts and homes to others and without the imperative to help anyone who is oppressed, degraded or left behind because of their identity or because of discrimination.

There is a third important response to antisemitism: listen to your inner Jewish voice. Deborah Lipstadt talks about being a subject not an object. The best response to the past year is to not allow your Jewish identity to be an object of somebody else’s imagination. Rather, make yourself and your Judaism the subject of a greater engagement with what concerns you. Bari Weiss boils it down: “The Jews did not sustain their magnificent civilization because they were anti-anti-Semites. Our tradition was always renewed by people who made the choice in the face of tragedy that theirs would not be the end of the Jewish story, but the catalyst for writing a new chapter. The long arc of Jewish history makes it clear that the only way to fight is by waging an affirmative battle for who we are.”⁶

It’s pretty trite for the Rabbi to stand up on Yom Kippur and tell you to come to temple more often. But you should come to temple more often. I’d like you to come to services, it’s just more fun with more people but we are bursting with lots of opportunities: learn more about Judaism in one of the many classes we teach,

⁶ Bari Weiss, NYT, Sept. 6, 2019, “To Fight Antisemitism, Be a Proud Jew,” <https://nyti.ms/34qloow>

check out the library here, play mah jong, go to a Sinaites youth event like a dinner out, adult theater outings, volunteer with us at a Wider Circle, etc, etc.

Rabbi Yisroel Goldstein, the Chabad Rabbi who was shot in Poway wrote the next day: "Today should've been my funeral. I do not know God's plan. All I can do is try to find meaning in what has happened.... a reminder, most of all, to never, ever, not ever be afraid to be Jewish.... We are a people divinely commanded to bring God's light into the world.... That is what I pledge to do with my borrowed time."⁷

As for me, your rabbi, I'm certain this past year will not be the last time I feel afraid in the sanctuary of my own synagogue. Like my childhood temple, I've come to feel very much at home in this building. I know every corner of it, now including the location of every panic button and every path to follow out of every door in the sanctuary, Bet Am or classrooms. But I'm not keeping my eyes on the emergency exits anymore.

I am entering 5780 with a renewed understanding of the importance of Jewish peoplehood. I will not be a blind loyalist to the tribe over any and all principle but I embrace the idea that each of us is responsible in times of danger for every other member of the Jewish community. We must keep our vigilance high and be ready to respond as Mordecai did to Haman. Meanwhile, we must also reach out in love, friendship and trust to the larger community. We must lift up the fallen, clothe the naked, and keep faith with those who sleep in the dust. We must rise above the political strategies of this time. I'm going to step out on limb. Politics is not my business like it is literally for many people in this room. But before I conclude, I'm talking directly to you. You probably didn't create this

⁷ Rabbi Yisroel Goldstein, NYT, April 29, 2019, <https://nyti.ms/2lQbIS2>

current model of politics in which labeling opponents as antisemites is a go-to part of a candidate's strategy. It's an increasingly ubiquitous move on the left and the right and you may feel like you have no choice but to run with it. But in fact, you have significant power to influence how the game (so to speak) is played. Using antisemitism as a political weapon should be taken out of your playbooks and you should push your colleagues to do the same. If you think it is the only way for your candidate to win, your candidate probably needs better policies or a better wardrobe or a dozen other things. If you think you have some kind of obligation to do anything possible to destroy the opponent, remember Mordecai's words to Esther (4:13-14): "do not imagine that you of all the Jews will escape with your life by being in the king's palace. On the contrary, if you keep silent in this time of crisis, relief and deliverance for the Jews will have to come from another place... Who knows, maybe you achieved your high position for just such a crisis." Everyone's got a role to play in fighting antisemitism, yours is particular pressing. For all of us, most importantly, we must heed the voice that calls inside us: our Jewish neshama is asking for attention. Our sense of connection to Jewish history, people, and traditions is heightened. Let us use this awakening to build a world that is better, kinder, stronger and more full of love, peace, and light.

Gamar chatima tovah.