

## Anti-Semitism: A Current Event

Last Friday, as I was visiting my family in Phoenix, we were driving around mid-morning and encountered what looked like a protest on one of the corners. A closer look revealed a group of white men with signs publicly declaring themselves to be white supremacists and inviting others to join them. No hoods, no robes, no hiding. Although we Jews were not being singled out, I nonetheless felt the churning embedded within me in response to 2,000 years of anti-semitism.

With the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Jews have awakened to the fact that anti-Semitism is not a relic of the past but a current event. Over the last decade, the snakes of Jewish-hatred are slithering free all over Europe. In just the last few years:

- In Belgium:
  - Thugs beat up the chief rabbi, kicking him in the face and calling him “a dirty Jew.”
  - Two synagogues in Brussels were fire bombed and another was sprayed with automatic weapons fire.
- In Britain:
  - The cover of the New Statesman, a left-wing magazine, depicted a large Star of David stabbing the Union Jack.
  - A Yeshiva student reading the Psalms was stabbed 27 times on a London bus.
- In Italy:
  - The daily newspaper La Stampa published a page-one cartoon: A tank emblazoned with a Jewish star points its gun at the baby Jesus, who pleads, “Surely they don’t want to kill me again?”
- In Germany:
  - Graffiti appeared on a synagogue: “Six million were not enough.”
- In the Ukraine:
  - Skinheads attacked Jewish worshippers and smashed in the windows of Kiev’s main synagogue and the Ukrainian police denied that the attack was anti-Jewish.
- In France
  - In Lyon, a car was rammed into a synagogue and set on fire.
  - A Jewish sports club in Toulouse was attacked with Molotov cocktails.
  - On the statue of Alfred Dreyfus in Paris, the words “dirty Jew” were painted.

This is but a mere small sampling of what is listed online under (a) anti-semitism, (b) Europe, and (c) 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Hatred of us as Jews is an ancient cancer of the soul that refuses to die. Successive generations of bigots have embraced it, each trying to sell anti-Semitism in a new and more attractive way, with new lies and slanders. For two millennia, we have experienced hatred on the basis of anti-Semitism that built into early Christian and Islamic founding texts. We've endured crusades and accusations of association with the Devil. We've survived public disputations, and charges of desecrating the host, poisoning Christian wells, using Christian blood to bake matzah, and bringing the scourge of the Black Plague to Europe. We've been expelled from England, France, Spain and Portugal. Centuries of Inquisitions, world-wide, attempted to annihilate the Jewish people.

Martin Luther used the power of the newly minted printing press to advance his anti-semitic message, speaking of the Jews as a disease:

*Rulers and Clergy must act like a good physician who, when gangrene has set in, proceeds without mercy to cut, saw, and burnt flesh, veins, bones and marrow. Such a procedure must be followed in this instance.*

In Poland and the Ukraine Chmeilnitzki and his Cossacks murdered more than 300,000 Jews in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

We watched as the promise of the Enlightenment deteriorated into nationalism and new justification for anti-Semitism. Voltaire, the Damascus affair, the Mortara kidnapping, and Wagner, smashed the scaffolding of our belief in equality. Hitler and the Nazis destroyed our souls, our bodies, and in many cases, our hope.

The anti-Semitism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is not novel but it is seeming shocking following a half-century of assumed acceptance. However, that it would reach the shores of this amazing country seems almost inevitable.

According to ADL reports, here in America we witnessed a 57% increase in anti-semitic acts in 2017, following a 34% increase in 2016. Chicago authorities released a surveillance video of a man smashing the front window of a synagogue

and placing swastika stickers on the front door. In Manhattan, passengers on a subway car witnessed anti-Semitic graffiti, including swastikas and the phrases “Jews belong in the oven” and “Destroy Israel, Heil Hitler,” scribbled with Sharpie over advertisements and windows. Anti-semitism on American campuses has been rampant and sprouting up for a decade. Here In Houston, Rice University campus police launched an investigation after a swastika was drawn on the base of a school statue. At U of H, the anti-Israel rhetoric is loud and Jewish students report being incredibly uncomfortable.

At this year’s Yom Limmud, I attended a session given by one of the local very orthodox rabbis. He was addressing the issue of anti-semitism and suggested that there is only one response: more prayer and the performance of more mitzvot. While I certainly endorse both of these activities, his message was not cute and not innocuous. It was much darker than it seems on the surface and one with which I whole-heartedly disagree.

Turn in your siddurim to page 170. Here we find the words of the Yom Tov Musaf Amidah which we are about to recite. At the bottom of the page is the text which I wish to address:

*Umipnei Chataeinu Galinu Mei’artzeinu* – “Because of our sins, we were exiled from our land.”

Per the rabbis, these words reflect a traditional belief that our sufferings are brought on by our actions. If we are hit by a plague, if we are attacked, if we are slaughtered, such occurrences are the result of a lack of Jewish practice and it is God’s way of punishing us. Only in a world of magical belief, can such be accepted.

Norman Lamm, a disciple of Soleveitchik and the Chancellor of Yeshiva University until 2013, made it clear that such a theology died in the gas chambers of Auschwitz. To maintain such a belief in the face of the Holocaust is egregious and an attack on our grandparents and great-grandparents and their generations. And it is a trivialization of Jewish belief.

I am humble enough not to stand before you and propose a cure-all response to an age-old struggle and its calamitous outcomes. But doing nothing is surely no more of an answer than magical belief.

In our modern world, as we celebrate our season of freedom this Pesach, I foresee only one approach: it is to recognize that we have a responsibility to oppose all manifestations of hate. All forms of hate are a direct threat to us as Jews.

What is new in America is that the Hamans and Pharaohs have now come out from under their rock. No hoods, no robes, no hiding. We must stand in strong opposition to (a) White Supremacists, (b) the likes of Louis Farakhan, (c) Neo Nazis, (d) those on the far right and those on the far left, (e) those who condemn people from other countries and other belief systems (f) and all who attempt to devalue human life. We must oppose them not only as Jews but as Americans who care deeply about our way of life!

Perhaps due to our own collective trauma over the centuries, justice for all runs through our veins, heeding us to stand up to injustice anywhere as a threat to justice everywhere. Just as non-Jewish residents of Billings, Montana, placed menorahs in their windowsills during Hanukkah in 1993 to demonstrate their solidarity with the Jewish community following waves of anti-Semitism, we must proudly stand with others who suffer at the hands of hatred. We must not become immune to street corners on which stand White Supremacists inviting others to join their cause.

*An anonymous Jew wrote: Standing on the parted shores, we still believe what we were taught before ever we stood at Sinai's foot; that wherever we go, it is eternally Egypt; that there is a better place, a promised land; that the winding way to that promise passes through the wilderness. That there is no way to get from here to there except by joining hands, marching together.*

I pray that, this Passover, we will traverse the wilderness, with strength and courage, from the slavery of bigotry and intolerance into the freedom of shared rights and the love of all God's creatures.

Chag Sameach.