

“Confronting Antisemitism”

Kol Nidre Sermon
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Temple Beth El
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If you spend a lot of time with rabbis, as I do, you’ll find that every year there are themes that emerge in many High Holiday sermons. This year, for instance, many of my colleagues are talking about the sabbatical year and what it means to take a step back. Last year, at the height of the pandemic, resilience and hope were popular themes. In 2019, in reaction to the Tree of Life massacre and a rise in antisemitic violence, many American rabbis across the United States spoke about antisemitism, often for the first time. In the past couple years, other issues have commanded our collective and communal attention, but the sad fact is that the disturbing problem of antisemitism has only gotten worse.¹

In May of this past year, we saw a rash violence against Jews. A man set fire to a synagogue in Brooklyn.² Fireworks were thrown at Jews in Times Square.³ In Los Angeles an Orthodox man was chased by a caravan of cars and Jewish diners were attacked in a restaurant.⁴ According to the Anti-Defamation League, 2020 had the third highest number of antisemitic incidents on record—2,024.⁵ Half involved harassment, and there were 750 incidents of vandalism.⁶ Those numbers reflect a 60% increase in the past five years. 60%!⁷ Even here in Maine we have been affected. You all walked by a police officer to enter the sanctuary this evening, something we have done since 2019, largely in response to the Tree of Life shooting. Just this week, a Buxton man was charged in federal court for threatening to kill all Jews with his AR-15. It is no wonder that we might feel just a little bit more cautious than we did about being Jewish.

Unfortunately, this sort of antisemitism has a long history in America. While this country has been a safe haven from the blatant, religiously sanctioned antisemitism of Europe, we have struggled with it here as well, from the overt hatred of Father Charles Coughlin and Charles Lindbergh in the 1930s to the covert discrimination embedded in college admission quotas that endured through the mid-20th century. Unlike in Europe, however, antisemitic voices were not often state sponsored, as former head of the Religious Action Center Rabbi David Saperstein

¹ There is still much debate about whether to hyphenate antisemitism or not. The Associated Press just changed their policy to exclude the hyphen following calls by experts among them scholar Dr. Deborah Lipstadt. See more here: <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/anti-semitism-or-antisemitism>.

² Troy Closson, “Man Charged in Arson at Brooklyn Synagogue and Yeshiva, Officials Say,” *The New York Times*, May 22, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/22/nyregion/brooklyn-synagogue-arson-arrest.html>.

³ Dovid Efuno, “‘Frightening’ Firework Attacks Target New York City’s Heavily Jewish Diamond District,” *The Algemeiner*, May 20, 2021, <https://www.algemeiner.com/2021/05/20/frightening-assault-firework-attacks-target-jews-in-new-york-citys-heavily-jewish-diamond-district/>.

⁴ “Police Investigate Possible Jewish hate Crime Attack at Beverly Grove Restaurant,” CBS Los Angeles, May 19, 2021, <https://losangeles.cbslocal.com/2021/05/19/police-investigate-possible-jewish-hate-crime-attack-at-beverly-grove-restaurant/>.

⁵ “Audit of Antisemitic Incidents 2020,” Anti-Defamation League (ADL), <https://www.adl.org/audit2020>. The highest was in 2019. The ADL started tracking in 1979.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ “ADL’s Audit of Antisemitic Incidents,” Anti-Defamation League (ADL), <https://www.adl.org/antisemiticincidents>.

has noted. After World War II, it grew increasingly rare for public figures to openly espouse antisemitism or court antisemitic voters.⁸

But we are in a different moment now. The rise of social media, the radicalization of the right, and the attacks on Jews from the left, particularly over the issue of Israel, have ripped off the veneer of civility that had kept American antisemitism hidden.

Yes, antisemitism today is coming at us from both the right *and* the left. Many of us are perhaps more familiar with right wing hatred. When we hear that antisemitic violence has increased by 60%, we may think of white nationalists marching in Charlottesville chanting, “The Jews will not replace us.” And the threat from the right is very real. Antisemitism, as Eric Ward explains, “forms the theoretical core of White nationalism.” Ward, from whom I’ve been privileged to learn, is a nationally-recognized expert on authoritarian movements and preserving inclusive democracy. He argues that when White nationalists saw the Civil Rights Movement, the advancement of LGBTQ rights, and the election of a black president, they wondered how all these ‘inferior’ people could triumph? Their answer? The secret backing of Jews who work to brainwash White people and control our government.⁹ These sentiments, and the violence that accompanies them, have moved from the far right to the center as political figures from the former president to leaders in the House and Senate have espoused antisemitic statements, used antisemitic tropes in their messaging, and courted antisemitic voters.¹⁰

But we are kidding ourselves if we think that today’s antisemitic resurgence is coming solely – or even primarily – from right-wing neo Nazis. We must also confront the rising antisemitism on the left, a phenomenon that is often tied to criticism of Israel’s policies towards the Palestinians. Remember those incidents I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon, the attacks at restaurants and in Times Square? All of them occurred in May, during the most recent conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians. Those attacks came from the left, not the right, and many were committed by Muslim Americans, African Americans, and other traditionally liberal minority groups.

Let me be clear, criticism of Israel is not inherently antisemitic. Many of you have criticized Israel’s policies and I, myself, denounce many of the actions that the Israeli government has taken, from the silencing of women to appease the Orthodox minority, to the oppression of Palestinians both inside Israel and in the occupied territories. Israel can and should do better and we have a right and obligation to call upon it to do so.

But what we see now on the left is an environment where *any* support of Israel is considered evidence of racism or fascism. As our kids go off to college often on politically liberal campuses, they face a litmus test. Support Israel? Then you can’t partner with progressive organizations on any other issue, from LGBTQ rights to Black Lives Matter. Rabbi Cantor Angela Buchdahl wrote in 2018, “Opposition to Israel has increasingly become a

⁸ Rabbi David Saperstein, “Understanding Today’s Antisemitism,” Central Conference of American Rabbis Webinar, August 3, 2021.

⁹ Eric K. Ward, “Skin in the Game: how Antisemitism Animates White Nationalism,” *The Public Eye: Summer 2017*, June 29, 2017, <https://www.politicalresearch.org/2017/06/29/skin-in-the-game-how-antisemitism-animates-white-nationalism>.

¹⁰ Dove Kent, “Don’t Fall for ‘Both-Siderism’ Trap on Anti-Semitism,” *The Forward*, November 29, 2018, <https://forward.com/opinion/414867/dont-fall-for-both-siderism-trap-on-anti-semitism/>

necessary precondition for all other progressive commitments. Some groups will only allow Jews...to participate if they take a ‘disloyalty oath,’” decrying Israel as racist or fascist. To make condemnation of Israel “the litmus test for Jewish involvement in any social justice cause is antisemitism, plain and simple.”¹¹

This doesn’t happen only on college campuses. Too often there is a resounding silence from progressive allies when Jews are attacked and targeted. Boaz Munro, the grandson of Holocaust survivors, wrote a provocative piece this past May entitled, “Dear American Progressives: Your Jewish Friends are Terrified by Your Silence.” I suggest you read the entire essay. He contrasts the deafening silence over the attacks on Jews in May with the swift and public backlash against anti-Asian attacks as a result of Covid. He writes, “Jews are the only minority group in America you’re withholding allyship from because of the actions of a foreign state.” Allyship, Munro says, should not be conditional. Progressives do not refuse to support the Chinese-American community because of the Chinese government has perpetrated genocide against the Ughars. Liberals don’t stay silent in the face of anti-Muslim acts because Saudi Arabia is bombing children in Yemen. Only Jews are offered conditional support; support that is withheld because of the actions of a foreign state with which many of us disagree!¹²

We have to call antisemitism out, no matter where it comes from. Rabbi David Stern shares, “If you find yourself rationalizing or minimizing the antisemitism of someone from your political party, and railing against the antisemitism of the opposition, then you are reducing antisemitism to a partisan political cudgel, and cannot claim to be taking it seriously.” He argues that we must call out antisemitism among our political allies.¹³ This is not easy, but it is necessary.

So what do we do in the face of antisemitism? First, we have to be more Jewish. Rabbi Andy Gordon calls us to “double down on being Jewish” by living proudly as Jews, celebrating our Jewish traditions, and living our Jewish values.¹⁴ Now, some might think that the answer to hatred is to assimilate even more; that “accommodating ourselves to the demands of our surrounding society” will somehow save us.¹⁵ But Rabbi Gordon and I, and pretty much every other rabbi who has written about this topic, think being more Jewish, rather than less, is the way to go. After all, what rabbi is going to tell people to be less Jewish?

I want to offer a slightly more nuanced perspective on why we should be Jewish from Alana Newhouse, founder of Tablet Magazine. I’m going to quote her at length and I recommend you read her provocative article. She writes:

¹¹ Rabbi Angela Buchdahl, “Yom Teruah: Sounding the Alarm for Anti-Semitism,” September 9, 2018, <https://www.centralsynagogue.org/worship/sermons/yom-teruah-sounding-the-alarm-for-anti-semitism-rosh-hashanah-5779-2018>.

¹² Boaz Munro, “Dear American Progressives: Your Jewish Friends are Terrified by Your Silence,” *Medium*, May 31, 2021, <https://boazmunro.medium.com/?p=b24068fcf488>.

¹³ Rabbi David Stern, “Antisemitism,” September 29, 2019, https://www.tedallas.org/uploads/transcripts/RDS_Sermon_RH_2019_Antisemitism_Final.pdf.

¹⁴ Rabbi Andy Gordon, “Double Down on Judaism,” October 2, 2019, <https://rabbiandygordon.blogspot.com/2019/10/rosh-hashanah-morning-sermon-double.html>.

¹⁵ Bari Weiss, “To Fight Anti-Semitism, Be a Proud Jew,” *The New York Times*, September 6, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/06/opinion/sunday/to-fight-anti-semitism-be-a-proud-jew.html>.

“There is also something unique about the relationship between American Jews and America that I fear has become frayed—and I fear that fraying is the cause of our current problems, and also America’s.

From the very beginning, there was a tacit agreement made between this country and its Jews: You, America, give us liberty and freedom from the extreme degradation and oppression we experienced everywhere else and, in turn, we Jews, will gift you with our ... Jewishness. With Jewish thinking...with the ideas and impulses, honed over thousands of years, that could help a country create an unmatched economy, unparalleled creative industries and artistic and literary cultures, social and civic organizations, and more.

America, at least so far, has kept its side of the bargain. But we have not.

...We did not safeguard particularly Jewish thinking, and we did not—for some completely understandable reasons—demand that our fellow Jews stand guard over their inheritance and their communities, and strengthen their Jewish sense of self. Instead, many of us ran—into secularism...—having come to believe that no matter what we knew or did, we would always, essentially, be Jewish...

... We are living through the negative side of the American Jewish paradox: The less Jewish we are, the less American our country becomes.

... You are free to assimilate; you always have been. But you can’t abrogate both Jewish knowledge and Jewish experience and still be meaningfully Jewish. By diluting your Jewishness, you are depriving America of the gifts your ancestors brought here, and in doing so you are damaging a country that has been good to us.

Being face to face with Jews, and having to acknowledge our difference, and decide whether we were worth accepting, was good for Jews—and good for America....

Jews who asserted the particularity of their nationalism, their religion, their ethnicity, made America a better place to live for everyone...America needs its Jews to be Jewish again—now more than ever.”

Our first response to antisemitism should be to be more Jewish, not just for ourselves, but because our unique way of living makes America a better place for everyone. It invites our country to be better.

That brings us to the second thing we can do to fight antisemitism. We can, in the words of lawyer and activist Bryan Stevenson, “get proximate.” We have to get close to those in our community who are suffering. This is our mandate as Jews, for we are called upon to repair the world. When we get to know others and they get to know us as people and then as Jews, we can help decrease antisemitism. Through our work with the Capital Area New Mainers Project we have gotten to know the Muslim community in Augusta. If you ask them about Jews, they’ll talk about the warm welcome they have gotten from our community and how the Jewish community supports them. Long before CANMP, our Temple members were working to get to know people and to dispel myths about Jews.

One Temple member tells a story from her time when she worked as a school librarian. One year a third-grade teacher came to the library in tears. A little boy in her class, we’ll call him ‘Henry,’ had announced that he “hated Jews” after the teacher read a Chanukkah book. “A 7-year-old hears this kind of language somewhere, probably at home, and repeats it.” It turns

out this librarian and the student had a special relationship before this incident. Henry didn't know she was Jewish but she thought that letting him know might help. Later that week the librarian came to the class, read a book about Chanukah and showed the kids her menorah and candles. The student looked uncomfortable and "as if on cue one of the other kids raised a hand to tell me that Henry hated Jews." She responded that people hate what they don't understand and that people can change their minds. She says, "I was a few steps from the classroom when there was a gentle tap on my back, and looking down I saw big brown eyes in a reddened face. My face may have been a little red too. "I wanted to tell you something. I was only kidding when I said that thing." "Oh. Thanks for telling me. That's good to know." Quick hug, and he was back to class. Neither of us cried." That little boy is now a minister with a ministry that emphasized forgiveness.

When we get to know others, and when we are proudly Jewish in front of them, we help to dispel the hatred or fear or confusion about Jews which they might possess. Those can be lifelong lessons.

Lastly, we need to have a bit of perspective. Yes, it is perhaps harder to be Jewish now than it has been in the recent past, but overall, in the scope of Jewish history, we are incredibly lucky and we know it. The recent Pugh Study of American Jews shows that while 53% of us feel less safe than we did five years ago, only 5% of all U.S. Jews report having stayed away from a Jewish event or observance as a result.¹⁶ We take reasonable precautions, build relations with our local law enforcement, and keep on being Jewish, not because we are persecuted, but because Judaism is central to who we are.

We have so many reasons to be Jewish.¹⁷ If you ask our Hebrew school kids why they are Jewish many of them will talk about the friends they have made, how they love learning Hebrew, and how they want to learn new tunes and new prayers. If you ask our Torah study attendees, they'll talk about the satisfaction they get from diving into the text, uncovering new meanings and continuing a discussion that has gone on for thousands of years. Those who attend services regularly will talk about the spiritual recharge that comes from taking time out to connect to God, tradition and one another. Those who attend social events like our Wine Tasting will talk about how wonderful it is to gather with community and to support Jewish life in Central Maine. All of us have different reasons for being Jewish. We appreciate the mandate to stand up for the stranger, widow and the orphan. We love to question and to argue. We feel that this community is home. And, some of us are just here for the food. We love Judaism for all these reasons, and not because we have been persecuted.

No matter how we connect to Judaism we have an obligation to lean into Judaism, to help non-Jews understand who we are and what we value, and keep perspective. None of us know what tragedies the next year might hold, but we do know that a rich Jewish life will continue in our community. We will dance with the Torah, kvell at b'nai mitzvah, passionately discuss our sacred texts, comfort those who are ill or in mourning, and take a deep breath as we enter into Shabbat together. We will embrace our Judaism. That embrace ensures that the year 5782 will be a year of blessing for us all. Shanah Tova.

¹⁶ "Jewish Americans in 2020," Pew Research Center, May 11, 2021, <https://www.pewforum.org/2021/05/11/jewish-americans-in-2020/>.

¹⁷ Rabbi David Stern, *Ibid.* He shares a wonderful list at the end of his sermon. This section is inspired by his work.