

The Return of Anti-Semitism (Rosh Hashanah 2019/5780)

By Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch

We need to speak about anti-Semitism.

Reform Jews speak frequently and eloquently about the Jewish mandate of universal repair. We speak less frequently and less eloquently about our obligations to fellow Jews. If you look at the agendas of our movement's conventions, mass gatherings and public statements – there is no doubt that we are rightly absorbed with the urgency of social justice. No fair critic of American Reform Judaism can accuse us of neglecting Judaism's insistent demand to help make the world a better place.

In this synagogue, in the past two years alone, we have traveled to Germany, Greece, and the American southwest, to learn more about, and express our moral indignation of, the uncompassionate, unworthy, ungenerous and un-Jewish treatment of immigrants and refugees. Two large volunteer task forces, representing hundreds of congregants, work hard every day on social repair.

But, candidly, in our movement we do not speak enough about our obligations to Jews. It is why I spend so much time with you on this. If not us, then who? If we do not care about American Jews, South American Jews, European Jews, Israeli Jews, who will? We do not emphasize enough the central Jewish principle:

Kol Yisrael arevin ze bazeh – all Jews are responsible one for the other. Jewish identity starts there. If you do not feel that, you cannot live a full Jewish life, and you do not understand Judaism as well as you think you do. The pain of a Belgian Jew is our pain. The fear of an Israeli child terrorized by rockets is our fear. The insecurity of Orthodox Jews attacked repeatedly on the streets of Brooklyn is our insecurity.

We seem to think that we have defeated history. All those plunders, persecutions, and pogroms – they are a thing of the past. What folly: There is no past when it comes to anti-Semitism; only eternal vigilance.

Don't forget – never forget – who we really are. We are not a powerful majority. We are a miniscule percentage of the human race. There are 2 billion Christians; 1.6 billion Muslims, 1 billion Hindus – and 14 million Jews on a good day. All of the world's Jews could fit into one Shanghai neighborhood. We are a tiny people, about whom much of the world has ambivalent feelings. We lost a third of our people in the mid-20th century and, under the most optimistic projections, will not recover that number of Jews who lived on the eve of World War II until the middle of this century – a hundred years after the Holocaust.

Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan wrote: “Before the beginning of the 19th century all Jews regarded Judaism as a privilege. Since then most Jews have come to regard it as a burden.” (Judaism as a Civilization).

We need to heighten our sense of the privilege of being Jewish – of being part of a precious, unique civilization handed down to us from the mists of antiquity. We need more אהבת ישראל in our movement – love of the Jewish people - measured, in part, by: what we say and how we say it; what we teach; what we talk about when we gather together; and what we resolve to do.

We need more introspection. We need to learn to love ourselves again. America, this beautiful, generous, free country has lulled us into a false complacency, convincing us that anti-Semitism is a thing of the past, impeding us from recognizing hatred of Jews, even when we see it in front of our eyes.

Anti-Semitic incidences are surging. As bad as things are getting here, they are far worse in Europe. France, Belgium, Germany, Hungary, Poland – even a once-great British Labour Party – they are all infected and getting sicker. And, of course, parts of the Arab world have been anti-Semitic for centuries.

Jews are not the only hated group. The very impulses that lead to the killing of Jews in prayer also lead to the killing of Christians in prayer and Muslims in prayer. The Poway killer was charged with defacing a mosque a few weeks before his attack on the Chabad center. He hated Muslims as well as Jews. The El Paso murderer hated Hispanics. Jews were lower on his list.

That said, anti-Semitism is distinctly and uniquely different. For sure, it is on the spectrum of racisms of all types, but it is the most dangerous social virus in the history of civilization. It spreads like a plague. It is highly contagious. It will infect every healthy social organism within the contagion zone, weakening society’s defenses and devastating the body politic.

Anti-Semitism is a phenomenon of both the right and the left. It has always been that way. For the anti-Semites of the right: Jews invented communism. For the anti-Semites of the left: Jews are rapacious capitalists. Both think that for Jews it’s all about money and exploitation. Both accuse Jews of disloyalty. Both right-wing and left-wing anti-Semites boycott Jews and Jewish business. Both think that Jews have mystical powers to manipulate society; that there is some kind of international plot to pull the strings of the world for the enrichment of the Jews. From the right it is the charge that there is a Jewish cabal – The Elders of Zion. From the left, it is Israel – the Zionist elders – hypnotizing the great powers.

I have been to meetings of Zionist elders – those international agencies dedicated to world Jewry, such as the World Zionist Congress and the Jewish Agency for Israel. Trust me, these elders, these Zionist geezers, cannot even manipulate their own boards let alone control the world.

Both right-wing and left-wing anti-Semites are convinced that Jews control the media. Both think that Jews have too much influence over, Hollywood, television, and general culture. I must confess that as I was sitting one day in Jerusalem in another boring meeting of the Elders of Zion – sorry, the World Zionist Organization – listening in on the plan to conquer the world, it dawned on me:

“You know what – maybe there is something to these claims of Jewish control.” Because every time I turned on the television in Israel, I saw a Jew. I saw Muslims and Christians as well, but mostly I saw Jews. Every time I walked into a cinema, I saw movies with Jewish actors, Jewish directors and Jewish producers. Every time I walked into a bank, there were Jewish bankers everywhere. Darned Jews.

Both right and left-wing anti-Semites hated us for being a nationless nation, a wandering people with no home. Now they contend that Jewish nationhood is the reason for Jew-hatred. “Jews will not replace us” from the right parallels “check your white colonial Zionist privilege” from the left.

Both right-wing and left-wing anti-Semites hate that Jews are part of a distinctive people. They always have.

For the racists of the secular and religious right, Jews murdered God, or they are descendants of apes and pigs. Jews are a parasitical and inferior people – vermin that threaten the health and hygiene of the world. As T.S. Eliot wrote: “The rats are underneath the piles; the Jew is underneath the lot.” Their worst nightmare is that Jews assimilate into the broader culture. For them, Jews need to be suppressed, exiled, or, barring any other effective solution, exterminated.

For the racists of the secular and religious left, assimilation actually is possible. They want it. But what they cannot abide is Jews who refuse to abandon their distinctive identity, stubbornly clinging to their antiquated faith, setting themselves apart from the rest of humanity. As Chamfort said about the French revolutionaries preaching fraternity. “Be my brother or I will kill you.”

Thus, Jews do something that no others do: We manage to unite the extreme right and the extreme left. They are on opposite sides of the political and religious spectrum on practically everything else, but fold into each other at the extremes – overlapping in agreement on their hatred of Jews. One calls it “Jews will not replace us.” The other calls it “Israel will not replace us.”

Let me dwell further on these two sources of anti-Semitism:

Anti-Semitism of the Right

The anti-Semitism of the extreme right is lethal. These are violent racists who hate many people, not only Jews. They hate African-Americans and Muslim-Americans. They hate Hispanics. They hate immigrants. They hate minorities. They are the ones who burst into Jewish institutions intent on carnage. It is the anti-Semitism of the Pittsburgh attack. It is the anti-Semitism of the Poway attack. It is the anti-Semitism of Charlottesville. It is often deadly in its outcome. It is easier to identify. These haters do not attempt to hide their hatred. To the contrary, they write malignant manifestos of malevolence.

Among the more disturbing trends in the Jewish community is an effort by some to downplay disturbing dog whistles and sanitize sordid sentiments because some speakers of scorn are sympathetic to Israel. "Words don't matter," they say. "Look only to the pro-Israel policies."

When will we ever learn? Hateful words lead to hateful deeds. We have known this for thousands of years. The Bible warns: "There is life and death in the power of the tongue." The environment produces, teaches, accelerates and normalizes anti-Semitism. Hatred, xenophobia, cultural and racial supremacy do not spare Jews even if it appears initially that Jews are not the primary target.

I don't care how you voted: The racism, xenophobia, supremacy and intolerance invoked by the slogan "send her back," is despicable on its face. It is also exceedingly dangerous for Jews because it coarsens and polarizes American society along racial and ethnic lines. American democracy, pluralism, tolerance and decency have been good for our people, ensuring and protecting our equal status.

Chauvinism, xenophobia, hatred, and bigotry are never good for democracy and never good for Jews. Even if we are not the immediate target of prejudice, sooner or later it will come back to the Jews anyway. Does anyone think that that an atmosphere of intolerance can bypass Jews? Does anyone think that threats against mosques do not eventually lead to threats against synagogues?

Does anyone think that the moral rot of disparaging the weakest of human beings – "Otherising Others" – can be isolated and contained? That we can mark the doorposts of our houses, and that the angel of death can pass over us: That the creeping shadows of intolerance can bypass Jews? Have we learned nothing from our history? Does anyone think that "send the Somalian back," "send the Mexican back," "send the Guatemalan back," do not eventually lead to "send the Jew back?" Does anyone think that talk of an "Hispanic invasion," does not lead to talk of a "Jewish invasion?" That describing caravans of desperate refugees as "infestations" does not license describing Jews as "vermin," and carriers of disease? If anything, this language started against us. Does anyone think it will not come back to us?

And worst of all, "send her back" is fundamentally un-American. In America, where you came from counts for little. Where you are going is what counts. If you believe in the value of life; if you are committed to liberty, and seek for others, as for yourself, the right to pursue human happiness and dignity – this is what counts.

In debating Stephen Douglas during the 1858 Illinois Senate campaign, Abraham Lincoln spoke of his disdain for slavery. Here is what moral political leadership on the race question sounds like. Where are these leaders today?

Lincoln said: "I hate [slavery] because of the monstrous injustice of slavery itself. I hate it because it deprives our republican example of its just influence in the world – enable[ing] the enemies of free institutions, with plausibility, to taunt us as hypocrites. [It] causes the real friends of freedom to doubt our sincerity, and especially because it causes so many good [people] among ourselves into an open war with the very fundamental principles of civil liberty...insisting that there is no right principle of action, but [only] self-interest."

I hate this xenophobia, the racist dog whistles, intolerance, anger, and the questioning of the other's patriotism. I hate it not only because it is unjust on its face. I hate it because it deprives America of its just influence in the world. It enables the enemies of freedom to taunt us, with plausibility, as hypocrites. I hate it because it causes our friends to doubt our sincerity. I hate it because it polarizes the American people, pitting one American against the other for reasons of self-interest, not principle. I hate it because it is always bad for Jews.

Anti-Semitism of the Left

It hardly needs saying that I am a liberal. I have been a liberal for decades, since I first began studying the great liberal philosophers of the Western tradition. I mean by liberalism, a general mindset that emphasizes diversity and tolerance, promoting, as much as possible, the rights and dignities of the individual over the demands of the collective. To the extent that liberalism elevates reason, logic, and evidence as critical tools to preserve and defend individual and group dignity – in this way – Judaism is liberalism.

As opposed to more conservative-minded people, who emphasize conserving age-old values and institutions, I am open even to rapid change that transforms often-entrenched establishments. It is why I am a Reform rabbi. I believe that Orthodox Judaism, while good for Orthodox Jews, needed a dramatic, establishment-shaking makeover.

I believe in moderation. I do not believe that anyone who disagrees with me, even on critical issues is, transparently, and by definition, immoral, racist, misogynistic, anti-Semitic, evil, cowardly, fundamentally flawed, or irredeemably stupid.

I am a Zionist because I am a liberal. Zionism aspired to give dignity to the Jewish people, after centuries of oppression. It succeeded, even beyond its founders' wildest dreams. If you have any doubt about that, try to imagine the Jewish world today without the state of Israel.

Now, if I were to have a purely theoretical conversation, I could accept a form of anti-Zionism that is not anti-Semitic. First, it goes without saying that criticism of Israel is completely

legitimate. Some of us do not always distinguish between criticism of Israel, even if harsh or unfair – and anti-Semitism. Denouncing this or that Israeli policy by anyone, be they Jewish, Palestinian, or other, is not, on its face, anti-Semitic. To the contrary, it is often helpful and motivated by sound principles. No country is beyond reproach. No government is beyond rebuke.

Second, some anti-Zionists, Jews among them, sincerely believe that they are opposing not Israel's national existence, but Israel's denial of another nation's existence. They say they do not want to dismantle Israel, itself, only its occupation of Palestinian lands. I understand how in their minds, this is far from hating Jews, and how offended they may be by accusations of anti-Semitism.

But, in practice, what does anti-Zionism mean? There are 9 million people living in Israel – over 6.5 million of them Jews. Where would they go? Send them back to Europe, as Hamas demands? That is the very racism, decried by progressives, about which I spoke earlier: "Send the Jew back to Europe," as if there is a Europe to go back to. They do not even realize that most Israeli Jews today are not of European descent. They are refugees and descendants of refugees from Arab or Muslim countries that persecuted or discriminated against them.

In practice, what does anti-Zionism mean? Create a bi-national state, as BDS demands? Multi-national arrangements between warring peoples never work. Just look at Kosovo, Serbia, Albania, Afghanistan. Even democratic Belgium is at daily risk of splitting apart. Czechoslovakia didn't work either, although the Czechs and Slovaks were the exception to the rule that when separation occurs it is through violence and bloodshed.

To say now – 71 years later – that you are an anti-Zionist – you are opposed to the existence of Israel – is as ludicrous as saying you are opposed to the existence of America because there were people here before the pioneers settled the land. Or that Texas, Arizona, Colorado, and California are occupied territory because they were taken from Mexico by force. Or that you are opposed to the existence of Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon, or Syria, because they were created out of whole cloth by the British and the French after World War I.

Understand what they mean when they say they are not anti-Jewish, just anti-Zionist. They mean that justice requires dismantling the one and only Jewish state in favor of a 23rd Arab state.

And they say it with such venom. The way they speak about Israel is *The Tell* that says more about them than it does about Israel. There is something "canine in the bark and growl" of so many of these anti-Zionists. It is a primal loathing. Hatred of Israel is so overwhelming, that it often stumbles into anti-Semitism, even if it didn't start there. Anti-Israel activism on the campuses and streets of America and Europe has led to verbal and physical assaults against Jews.

Anything goes when speaking of Israel. Israel is never just wrong or mistaken. It is genocidal, fascist, ethnic-cleansing, apartheid, Nazi, rogue, colonial: the worst malignancy of the world. The worst! Worse than Saudi Arabia; worse than Syria, Turkey, Russia, China, Iran, Somalia, Afghanistan.

“But we have nothing against the Jews. Some of my best friends are Jewish,” they protest. They will go to lengths to demonstrate that they are not anti-Semitic. They may even raise money to support an attacked synagogue or restore a vandalized Jewish cemetery. Most anti-Semites of the left do not think they are anti-Semitic. They consider themselves freedom fighters, civil rights warriors, humanitarians.

They puff and preen in a narcissistic attempt to showcase their virtue and moral superiority. It is the siren sounds of virtual freedom fighters – who are always somewhere else when the siren sounds. They “sign their place and calling, in full seeming, with meekness and humility, but [their] heart is crammed with arrogancy, spleen and pride.”

They hold Israel to standards expected of no one else. As if there would be no Islamic terrorism, no ISIS, no Iran, no Syria, no North Korea, no dissension in Europe, no refugee problem, no inequality, no poverty, no economic dislocation – no problems at all were it not for the Jewish state, the source of all of the world’s ills.

There is one uniquely evil and criminal state: Israel. All the rest, no matter their crimes, their illiberal ideology, treatment of their own minorities, their anti-Semitism and racism, their disdain for women and gays, their lack of pluralism, democracy or freedom – none rise to the level of criminal Israel.

By some kind of bizarre new definition of progressive, a Palestinian terrorist can never be guilty because he is in an oppressed group – a victim with no independent moral agency or capacity. Every Israeli response is disproportional, if not downright evil, because, preposterously, they impute to Israelis – and now all Jews – the status of white and privileged. Every Israeli action is either immoral on its face – or whitewashes, “pinkwashes,” or brainwashes a deeper immorality. Even an attack on an Israeli hospital or a rocket fired at a kindergarten are justified as righteous blows against a racist state. Nuance and context are sacrificed on the altar of absolutes – and thus does truth die.

In this way, they seek to strip the right of self-defense from the Jewish state alone. No Israeli use of force is legitimate. Every Palestinian attack, even the purposeful murder of civilians, is justified. It is a kind of moral myopia, sanitizing the sordid and the sinful.

It leads to the absurdity of gay organizations ferociously attacking Israel while ignoring, excusing or even aligning with those who throw gays off rooftops. Or feminist organizations ferociously attacking Israel – while ignoring, excusing or even aligning with misogynistic malefactors who believe a woman’s place is at home, her purpose: to serve her husband. Or liberal churches that ferociously attack Israel but ignore, excuse or even align with those who

persecute Christians. How sad that these people, so often themselves victims of oppression, discrimination, and bias should attack with such misguided vitriol the one country in the Middle East that strives towards – and often achieves – tolerance and pluralism.

I am, of course, aware that some groups that have the word “Jewish” in their name support and give comfort to left-wing hatred of Israel. That phenomenon, too, has been around for a very long time. There have always been Jews and Jewish movements discomfited by the Jewish collective, seeking the acceptance and approval of non-Jews who likewise disdained Jewish peoplehood.

While, of course, I support Palestinian aspirations to self-determination; and while I still support an independent state of Palestine living peacefully side-by-side with Israel if the Palestinians ever decide that this is what they want: It is simply false and morally obtuse to equate the Palestinian liberation movement with the American civil rights movement or anti-colonialism. Yasser Arafat was not Martin Luther King. Mahmoud Abbas is not Gandhi. Israel is not imperial Britain. And those Palestinians gathering weekly on the Gaza fence, launching mortars, fire balloons and setting Israeli fields ablaze – are not disciples of non-violence. They are not protesting their lack of civil rights; they seek to deny Israelis their rights. Otherwise, they and their Western supporters, would be turning their ire not on Israel, but on the civil rights-denying Hamas government.

Liberals should be focusing on the central ideological struggle of our times: The clash between democratic pluralists and anti-democratic authoritarians. We should plant ourselves firmly on this side of democratic liberalism – supporting those in Hong Kong, China, Russia, Venezuela, the Muslim world, Poland, and Hungary, and Palestinians – who fight for democracy, tolerance, civil and human rights, gay rights, minority rights, women’s rights, within their own societies. They are the ones who most need our liberal support and sensibilities.

It is proper to point out that Israel still has a long way to go. But it is also proper to acknowledge that Israel’s Arab minorities enjoy freedoms and economic security that can only be dreamt of anywhere else in the Middle East. It is proper to point out that Israel must do better in safeguarding minority rights. But it is also proper to acknowledge that Israel, unlike all of its neighbors, is democratic, pluralistic, multi-cultural, and tolerates dissent.

The message that I want to deliver on this high and holy day is of the spirit. Fighting back starts in your heart, your Jewish soul. Stand up and be counted as proud Jews. Do not cower. Do not cringe. Do not crouch. Do not quiver.

Do not consider Judaism a burden. It is a privilege beyond measure. Never forget: You are the heirs of kings, prophets, freedom fighters, poets, teachers, and moral guides who revolutionized human thought. You belong to an ancient people that changed the world. Commit and recommit to the future of our people – to Jewish education, Jewish self-determination, and collective Jewish dignity. Your love of these principles – more than the hate from those people – will determine the future of Judaism.

One summer day I found myself in Munich, and decided to spend the morning in Dachau. Dachau was an evil place. Not as many people died there as in other concentration camps, but Dachau became the symbol of Nazi atrocities because of its location in the heart of a Munich suburb.

I was struck by the utter normalcy of the place. Dachau is a town. It has everything every other town has. It was a town back then as well. To get to the camp you walk about a quarter of a mile from the parking lot. You cross a street and some houses. I arrived early so everything was quiet, normal. I saw a typical German family walking down the neighborhood lane. They were young parents. The mother was holding in her arms her bouncing, bubbly baby, and a shaggy dog was prancing along with them. I spent a long time looking at this family, just letting my mind wander as they faded away and became small specks in the distance. Nothing was out of the ordinary.

From inside the concentration camp, you can see homes that abut the main building used to process prisoners. You can still see the hooks on which they hung prisoners for hours, lashing them with whips and canes. Typical red-roofed houses literally overlook the torture room. The roofs are studded with antennas and satellite dishes – all the trappings of normal modern life. It is what you would expect to find in any middle-class neighborhood in the Western world.

I am not suggesting that there is anything wrong here. I am certainly not suggesting that the younger generations are personally responsible for the deeds of their parents and grandparents. I simply noticed that people are prepared to live right on top of the place where some 200,000 souls were brutally imprisoned, and where some 30,000 were killed. Their first view in the morning as they drink their coffee is overlooking the outer perimeter wall into the concentration camp square where tens of thousands of starving, bedraggled, beaten, and tortured prisoners lined up every morning for roll call and selection.

And I thought to myself: In the end, life moves on. Your tragedies are your tragedies, but others get on with life. Thousands of visitors a day, including group after group of German youth, visit those twenty acres, shaken and distraught. But the people who live right outside overlooking that spot, they live normal lives there. They have families there. They raise children there. They have pets. They have satellite television.

Your tragedy is not their tragedy. They live as if nothing happened there. After all, it has been 74 years since the liberation of Dachau.

In the end, Jewish history is your history. The Jewish future is your responsibility. Jewish destiny is your responsibility. Jewish life is your responsibility.

May we prove worthy; and may we endure, now and forever.