

Confronting Antisemitism  
Sermon for Rosh HaShanah 5780 – Day II  
Rabbi Greg Weisman – Temple Beth El of Boca Raton

This past summer, Tami and I took a vacation to celebrate our tenth anniversary. We went to the Caribbean for days filled with relaxing by the pool, reading on the beach, and maybe a workout or two at the gym. The resort was lovely, with a mix of people from all over the US and the world. If there were any other Jews at the resort, we did not meet them- the sign of a true rabbinic vacation. We met some nice and interesting couples, many of whom were celebrating either milestone anniversaries or were on their honeymoon. We became friendly with one couple, about ten years older than us, who were just married. They came from New England, a place where I had once lived. We bonded at the poolside dance party, enjoyed an Asian-Peruvian fusion dinner, but spent most of our time sharing stories about ourselves, how we met, what we do. Not surprisingly, when they learned that I am a rabbi, their curiosity was piqued. As New Englanders, of course they have met and interacted with our brethren up north. The bride was especially excited to learn this about me, later confessed to us that she had always wanted to be Jewish, and that fate must have brought us together on this vacation.

“Oh really?” I asked. “Why?”

“Well, I just have always loved the Jews I have met, you’re such a family oriented people. When I’ve been to bar mitzvahs, it’s always seemed so lovely and wonderful. Plus, I’m really good at shopping and getting a bargain!”

I have to admit, I didn’t really know how to respond. Of course I knew in my *kishkes* that I, and we as the Jewish people, had just been offended. She had just reiterated a well-worn stereotype, to my face, without thinking twice about it. It was an act of casual antisemitism, in the form of “I like this stereotypical trait that we think Jews have.” She probably thinks of it as a trait worthy of a compliment, not a stain on our people’s reputation. But it was offensive. On the other hand, throughout our conversations leading up to that point, when Tami and I had shared our professional experiences, they had asked honest and inquiring questions, expressed empathy when the topic of the recent tragedies that had befallen the Jewish

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community came up, and generally appeared to be, and I believe are, good, well-meaning and well-intentioned people.

I have to give credit to Tami who was able to find her words faster than I could. She calmly and straightforwardly explained to her the error in her thinking, that what she thought was a quirky compliment was actually an antisemitic aspersion. She immediately apologized, and we didn't return to it for the rest of the trip. I came home relaxed and with something to think about, and I pray they went home a little more informed.

Would that my experience last June was the extent of the antisemitism that our world has to give us, but alas, that tragically isn't the case. The past year has been a painful one for the Jewish community, particularly here in the US, and a disappointing departure from the trajectory we thought we were on. For a few generations we had been feeling the lifting of the fog of antisemitism and the welcoming of our people in ways that we have never imagined before. By so many measures our people are enjoying safety, security, success, and prosperity that Jews have never seen. Our older generations can remember a time when signs reading "No Jews, No Dogs" or "No Jews, No Blacks" were commonly found in businesses and restaurants. Long time Boca residents know the city's own history, but today we can chuckle if we think about how many Jews live in neighborhoods named for that rabid antisemite Addison Mizner; myself included! Antisemitism is no longer acceptable in polite company- thank God- along with other forms of hatred like homophobia, misogyny, and racial animus. But that doesn't mean that there are no more antisemites, or no more antisemitism; in fact, quite the opposite. The hateful events in Charlottesville, Pittsburgh, and Poway headline a litany of antisemitic episodes in the last several years. The list includes seemingly random acts of violence like those in Miami and Crown Heights, graffiti of swastikas and other hateful words and symbols, and public officials showing their mix of prejudice and ignorance by minimizing the significance of the Holocaust, not just to Jewish history but to the history of our nation and of humanity. Just this month, the

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City Council President of Trenton, New Jersey used the phrase “Jew them down” in city council meeting, and when asked about it said that she didn’t think there was anything offensive about it.

That Jews sit in the US Congress, on the Supreme Court, in the White House and throughout the Executive Branch, have been elected to offices throughout the country, have professorships and presidencies of universities, win Nobel and other prizes, and live alongside our neighbors of other faiths are just a few examples of our success in modern America. But we know what’s out there.

To adapt Charles Dickens’ famous words, “In the best of times, it’s the worst of times.” At no moment was that more true or relevant than on the morning of November 2<sup>nd</sup> of last year, when the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* ran the banner headline “...יתגדל ויתקדש שמה רבה...” in memory of the eleven souls who perished at the Tree of Life shooting. If eleven Jews are murdered because they are Jews sitting in shul on Shabbos morning, something terrible has happened. When the local, award-winning secular newspaper makes a poignant statement of support, of empathy, of consolation, and of mourning, something incredibly powerful has happened. The Atlanta newspapers did not mourn for Leo Frank when he was lynched in 1915, they just reported the news. But in the wake of one of the worst tragedies in American Jewish history, the community stood with us, cried with us, mourned with us in the way that we mourn for ourselves.

That weekend, when the American Jewish Committee invited everyone to “Show up for Shabbat,” our congregations were full. We had an overflow crowd here at the Temple. That Shabbat I was on retreat with our 9<sup>th</sup> graders, and had been planning to spend Shabbat at Congregation Sons of Israel in St. Augustine. Their congregation was excited that our group was going to help them make the minyan. But that night they had an unexpected crowd of dozens and dozens. Some of the Jews of the area who never come to shul came out that night. But even more than that, the largest segment of the crowd were neighbors from St. Augustine who aren’t Jewish, but came to synagogue that night to stand with us.

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We know that this new antisemitism is coming from both ends of the ideological spectrum, from the left and from the right. From the right, it's the white nationalist, neo-Nazi, hatred of Jews that we have come to recognize from generations past. When they marched in Charlottesville and cried, "The Jews will not replace us!" they were reiterating the centuries old conspiracy theory that our people have a power, a global connectivity and the desire to manipulate world events. They believe that we will wield that influence to enable people of color to supplant white, Christian Americans from their position of power. It is scary, because as we saw this year in Pittsburgh and Poway and El Paso and Christchurch, and in previous years in Charleston, South Carolina, in Oklahoma City, and in the lynchings of the Civil Rights era, those motivated by white supremacy are not afraid to use violence, menacing behavior, and threatening language to scare, maim and kill.

From the left, it may not appear to be as threatening, but antisemitism is alive and well. In many circumstances it is based on an animosity towards the world's only Jewish state, and the grotesque double-standards to which so many hold her. On university and college campuses, in the halls of the United Nations, at protest rallies against other forms of hatred and bigotry, we have seen too many people single out Israel and Israelis, and ever more frequently Jews who have no affiliation with Israel other than their Judaism, for condemnation, for exclusion. Scholars who are invited to campus are shouted down by protestors, while admittedly antisemitic heads of state are invited to speak. Students running for campus government leadership positions are subjected to questions about their partiality, or have their positions stripped for voicing support for the Jewish people's right to live in freedom and security in Israel. It is bigoted, it is unfair, and it is antisemitic.

Israel is currently in the midst of a second election process in six months, in great part because there are deep divisions within Israeli society about the vision for her future. Questioning the wisdom of a policy decision or action of the State of Israel is not, on its face an act of antisemitism. It could be just the

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opposite, an act of Zionist patriotism. But make no mistake, holding Israel to higher standards (like impugning its record on civil rights while ignoring the behaviors of Syria, Iran, Russia, and China), declaring that the desire for the Jewish people to live safely in our ancestral homeland is an act of racist colonial oppression, or in its most base form seeking the end of the State of Israel is by definition antisemitism. These beliefs too are the result of a conspiracy theory, that Jews and white Europeans conspired to use their power to displace the “indigenous” Palestinian population and create a Jewish state. In one moment we go from being the victims of the worst genocide humanity has ever seen to being a willing accomplice to another act of white European terror. This false narrative animates this new form of antisemitism that is becoming ever more popular in progressive circles.

It’s particularly painful for many Jews who want to see ourselves in solidarity with other oppressed minorities- minorities which in previous generations we have stood shoulder to shoulder with- and then see members of those minorities lambaste Israel and Zionism in such a hateful way. Even though the historical record disproves the theory, still it persists.

That’s the challenge of confronting conspiracy theories, and why antisemitism has stood the test of time. From deicide to the Blood Libel, from racial inferiority to European colonialism, the lies at the core of antisemitism have made their way around the world while the truth is still putting its shoes and *kippah* on. Whether it is the conspiracy of the right or the conspiracy of the left, we know it to be wrong. But the problem with confronting a conspiracy theory is that it does not respond to reason or logic. It is itself illogical, its reasoning corrupted.

So what do we do? *Schrei gevalt*? Yes...sure. Go ahead and *schrei*. And then get to work. Despite the perniciousness of antisemitism, and its ability to meander its way through history to the present day, that doesn’t mean that we are powerless to confront it. Quite the opposite, we owe it to ourselves and the

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generations that will come after us to do all that we can to minimize its influence now and diminish its capability for future harm.

First things first, we need to always be educating ourselves. Antisemitism is an ever-changing virus, mutating from generation to generation, from culture to culture. It manifests differently in the US than in Europe, on the left and on the right, in Christian communities and in Muslim communities. While bookcases full of volumes have been written on the subject, we have to stay as up to date as we can. I cannot recommend more highly two works that were published this past year, Deborah Lipstadt’s *Antisemitism Here and Now* and Bari Weiss’ *How to Fight Antisemitism*. Lipstadt is a Holocaust scholar and professor at Emory University, Weiss an opinion writer and editor for *The New York Times*. In each their own ways they explore the unique characteristics and challenges of how antisemitism manifests itself in 2019 and offer powerful insights into confronting it. [We are privileged and excited to be welcoming Ms. Weiss to Temple Beth El this coming May, where she will share with us directly her wisdom and insights.] Their books, editorials, appearances on television have brought much-needed attention to this issue in the national conversation, and it is incumbent on each of us to take advantage of their wisdom so that if and when we are confronted with antisemitism, in whatever form, we can call it out and shut it down.

Unfortunately, antisemitism doesn’t stand alone. Hatred of any kind spreads like wildfire, as we see in contemporary society. As Eric K. Ward of the Western States Center has eloquently argued, “Antisemitism forms the theoretical core of White nationalism,” which means that the various modern forms of hatred are in many ways interrelated, and its targets are other minority groups like us.<sup>1</sup> The old saying that goes “the hate starts with the Jews but doesn’t end there.” It works both ways, and whenever hate arises against any minority, it will eventually find its way to the Jews. When we see hatred of any kind, let us stand up and speak out against it, for the good of our neighbors and for the good of ourselves.

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At the same time, we need to recognize our allies and thank them when they do so for us. What has given me hope through this last tumultuous year is how the outside community has stood with us in response to the rise in antisemitism. After the shooting in Pittsburgh, I received a text from one of the Methodist pastors in town. She wrote, “Although I will never pretend to understand what the Jewish people deal with on a daily basis, please know that this hateful atrocity has hurt me on a most personal level.” Her church was part of the 2500 residents of greater Boca Raton gathered for a vigil that week, with hundreds of other Christians and Muslims, people of color, civic leaders, law enforcement officials, and clergy of all stripes to say to us Jews “We are with you. We will not tolerate antisemitism.” This congregation and this community is blessed to have strong interfaith partners, and the relationships are getting both stronger and wider with each year. Let us continue to stand together and celebrate the diversity that makes us a stronger bulwark against all forms of hate.

We recognize that for some like Deborah Lipstadt and Bari Weiss, and thousands of Jews and others, confronting antisemitism is not just a concern but their vocation. They work for organizations like the Anti-Defamation League, American Jewish Committee, Southern Poverty Law Center, and American Civil Liberties Union, and their research and activism ensures that the entire world has its eyes opened to the realities of the day, by tracking antisemitic incidents, researching the ideologies that cause them, and offer strong policy suggestions for confronting it. Let me once again highlight the work of Eric K. Ward and the Western States Center, who our movement welcomed to address us at this year’s Consultation on Conscience. As a person of color, he has rejected the temptation of that left-leaning antisemitism that too many in communities of color have embraced, and works to show how Jews and people of color ought to see each other not as enemies but as a band of brothers and sisters in fighting against hate. His multicultural, multifaceted approach is both sobering and inspiring.

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We need that inspiration, because we cannot deny the reality that over the past years we are increasingly under threat. We are here today with the protection of both the Boca Raton Police Department and our own private security team. Each year we seem to need more and more protection. We can admit to ourselves that this is scary. But let's not let our fears blind us from all of the goodnesses that being a Jew in 5780 offers to us. Let us be prudent in protecting ourselves, in standing up for ourselves, without resorting to foxholes and panic rooms. Let our institutions be secure, but hospitable and welcoming. We can be afraid, but let us not be fearful.

Finally, and most importantly, as we enter into this new year, let us remember why we care about antisemitism. Because we are *pro-semites*. We are Jews who are committed to the thousands of years of our tradition. We relish in the opportunities to express and share the values of our Torah and tradition, to teach them to our neighbors and our children. We excitedly await each coming holiday and festival, so that we can sit in the sukkah, light the *chanukiah*, and enjoy that bite of matzah with a sense of simcha, joy. We seek to connect with our souls and the Holy One through moments of worship and prayer.

When we bat down antisemitism, we bat down hate in all its forms. We are commanded to be an *Or LaGoyim*, a light unto the nations, to illuminate the world with our values of love and peace. As we navigate the darkness of antisemitism, let us remember that as we light our festive candles, we diminish the darkness and bring light to this moment and into the world.

Shana Tova.

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<sup>1</sup> From *Skin in the Game: How Antisemitism Animates White Nationalism* by Eric C. Ward, June 29, 2017, available at <https://www.politicalresearch.org/2017/06/29/skin-in-the-game-how-antisemitism-animates-white-nationalism>.