

Sermon for Rosh HaShanah Morning
September 30, 2019 – 1 Tishri, 5780
Temple Beth El of Boca Raton
By Rabbi Daniel Levin

In the spring of 2006, Lieutenant Commander Jocko Willink led US Navy SEAL Team Three, Task Unit Bruiser into what became known as the “Battle of Ramadi” – the effort to liberate the war-torn capital city of Al Anbar province from the grips of the Iraqi insurgency. The first major operation kicked off before sunrise and within hours, both SEAL team elements were attacked and embroiled in serious gunfights.

Rolling up behind an Abrams tank, Jocko saw its main gun pointed at a building. He asked the gunnery sergeant: “What’s going on?” The sergeant related that they were engaged with hard-core enemy fighters who were putting up a serious fight.

Jocko looked around. Something didn’t add up. They were close to where one of the other SEAL teams was supposed to be. In the mayhem they hadn’t reported their exact location, but it should have been close. And the group he was with wasn’t supposed to have entered that sector for a few hours.

“Hold what you got, Gunny,” he said. “I’m going to check it out.” The sergeant looked at him like he was crazy or suicidal. They had been engaged in a vicious firefight with enemy fighters who could not be dislodged. With his rifle at the ready, he kicked the door down to find himself face-to-face with one of the SEAL platoon chiefs, who stared at him with wide-eyed surprise.

At that moment it all became clear. In the fog of war, each thought the other was the Iraqi insurgent enemy. It was a blue-on-blue – friendlies attacking one another – the worst thing that could happen.

The next day, the investigation began. There was frustration, anger, and disappointment. How could this have happened? Jocko went back over everything: the list of mistakes was substantial. But something was missing. Who was to blame for this horrible mistake?

“Then it hit me,” he said. “There was only one person to blame for everything that had gone wrong on the operation: me. ... I am the commander.... I am responsible for every action that takes place on the battlefield. There is no one to blame but me.”

As painful and difficult as it was to admit that to the troops he led and his superior officers, Jocko learned that the best leaders don’t just take responsibility for their job, they take Extreme Ownership of everything that impacts the mission. As individuals, we often attribute the success of others to luck or circumstances and make excuses for our own failures and the failures of our team. We blame our own poor performance on back luck, circumstances beyond our control, or poorly performing subordinates – anyone but ourselves. Taking ownership when things go wrong requires extraordinary humility and courage. And that humility and courage is often hard to come by.

* * *

Jewish tradition posited an extraordinary idea in ancient times – the concept that humanity was created in God’s image. We are reminded of the teaching in the Mishna that God created swarms of every living thing but just one human being to teach that to destroy a single human life is as if one destroyed an entire world, but to save a single life is as if one saved an entire world. The Mishna teaches: one single person was created so that one should not say to another, ‘My father was greater than your father’. ... Therefore everyone must say, “For my sake was the world created.”¹

This idea has finally taken root in modern society. For so many years, groups and individuals suffered persecution, discrimination, and slaughter because of humanity’s inability to see other human beings as holy and divine. People used to believe that a person’s status ought be determined by class or skin color, by gender, or ethnic heritage or religious faith. But over time, western societies came to understand that each and every human life is of equal and infinite value, not by virtue of who they are on the outside, but by virtue of their inherent holiness within.

And the realization that every single life is precious changed the world. In America, the understanding of each person’s inherent inner worth is what inspired Abolitionists to fight for the Emancipation of black slaves. It is what inspired the suffrage movement one hundred years ago that gave women the right to vote. It is what inspired Gandhi to lead a non-violent campaign to liberate the people of India. It is what inspired the Jewish people to claim their right to self-determination, and to return to the land of Israel to rebuild their ancient and modern homeland. It is what inspired Martin Luther King to declare on the National Mall: “I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.”

Because we believe a person has essential infinite worth, when a society nevertheless continues to denigrate or demean or marginalize someone we naturally feel overwhelmed with outrage. “It is not enough,” writes Francis Fukuyama, “that I have a sense of my own worth if other people do not publicly acknowledge it or, worse yet, if they denigrate me or don’t acknowledge my existence. It is not the inner self that has to be made to conform to society’s rules, but society itself that needs to change.”²

When black children go to school in a building so neglected that wild mushrooms are growing in the classrooms, where there are no books or materials, and where the teacher cares so little that he arrives in class, writes an assignment on the board, and then proceeds to sit and read the newspaper, they are entitled to outrage at a system that sees them not as individuals of infinite worth, but as people whose futures and education are expendable.

When women go to work and are forced to endure daily comments about their bodies or their dress, or suffer unwanted advances or sexual harassment or assault, they are entitled to outrage at a system that sees them as objects for someone else’s gratification.

And when our blood boils with outrage we produce the greatest soul-destroying toxin in the universe: resentment.

¹ Mishna Sanhedrin 4:5

² Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018, pp. 9-10.

Resentment is the spiritual poison that is released when our needs are not met, when we feel undervalued, belittled, or discounted. Resentment is the number one toxin that destroys relationships. It is not simply the poison produced from experiencing intolerance and hate. It is also the poison that causes intolerance and hate.

Antisemitism is often called “the oldest hatred.” It is a shape-shifting virus that Deborah Lipstadt likens to Herpes – it lies dormant until stress and a hospitable atmosphere awakens the infection.³

Eighty years ago, the Nazis were able to combine two perverse theories into an explosive recipe for hate. In the aftermath of World War I, the brutal consequences of the Treaty of Versailles assaulted the German people’s sense of dignity and self-worth. Hitler played on the Germany’s sense of victimization and resentment by pinning blame on the Jews for their misery and misfortune. In addition, theories of eugenics taught that Jews themselves were subhuman, and so not entitled to the same human dignity and respect to which Germans themselves felt entitled. Germany’s emphatic embrace of resentment and hate transformed mechanized murder into a moral good and genocide a moral response.

We see the same profession of victimhood and resentment by today’s modern antisemites. The advent of globalization and the massive disparity of wealth between the elite and most Americans has prompted a wave of resentment and sense of victimization across the right wing. The Neo-Nazis who marched in Charlottesville chanting “Jews will not replace us” subscribe to a perverse theory that white Americans are victims of a global conspiracy by Jews who diabolically pull the world’s to replace them with non-white immigrants. It’s the Jews who are to blame.

Robert Bowers, may his name be blotted out, who killed eleven people and injured seven at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh in the deadliest attack ever on a Jewish community in the United States, was attracted to websites that promoted that same sense of victimhood. He bore deep resentment toward the Hebrew Immigration Aid Society for their work in assisting participants in the Central American caravans moving toward the United States. The day of the attack, he wrote in in a hate-filled internet post: "HIAS likes to bring invaders in that kill our people. I can't sit by and watch my people get slaughtered. Screw your optics, I'm going in."

Bowers and others on the right cultivate a sense of their own victimhood with Jews as the oppressors. It’s easier to blame the Jews for their grievances than to take responsibility for building a better life.

But antisemitism does not live only among Neo-Nazis, white supremacists, and other dangerous right wing hate groups who nurse their own sense of resentment and victimhood. It is just as pernicious on the left.

There is a growing sense of a culture of victimhood and resentment that animates groups who claim historical discrimination and marginalization. Both Jewish and black Americans suffered discrimination and hatred. In response, Jews embraced liberal values that called not simply for Jewish liberation but equal rights for everyone, regardless of gender, race, country of origin, or religion. It is no accident that Jews were at the forefront

³ Deborah Lipstadt in conversation with Yehuda Kurtzer. Shalom Hartman Institute Jerusalem – July 8, 2019

of the fight for civil rights in America. Among the founders of the NAACP were Henry Moscowitz and Joel and Arthur Springarn. It was Rabbi Dick Hirsch that gave Martin Luther King his first office in Washington at the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism.

But at the same time Jews enjoyed certain privilege that Black Americans did not. Jews, for example, could use the benefits of the GI bill to reap the advantages of a college education while Black GI's were constrained by being denied admission to most colleges and universities. As Jews advanced in professional accomplishments and grew more wealthy and powerful, Jews came to be seen as part of the power structure that contributed to a system of racial prejudice and oppression.

In this environment grew the stereotypes of Jewish wealth and conspiracy theories of Jewish power. And into this environment came the resentment of Jewish power not only in America, but in Israel as well.

Despite the precarious circumstance of Israel's birth, and the persistent threat of violence and war, Israel has grown to be an extraordinarily prosperous and powerful nation. The prism of victimhood sees the power of Israel's military and the weakness of the Palestinians and automatically confers on the Palestinians the moral purity of the victim without ever asking what responsibility they bear for their own plight. The natural right of Jews to self-determination in our ancient homeland is instead recast as an illegitimate white colonialist enterprise that supplanted and oppressed the rightful indigenous people.

Criticism of Israel's policies has morphed into full-blown antisemitism. In the name of progressive rights for the oppressed, Israel is singled out as the only nation in the world whose right to exist is called into question. Bari Weiss in her recent book *How To Fight Anti-Semitism* notes that Anti-Zionists will say they care about religious minorities, but are curiously silent about the treatment of Uighurs in China, the Rohingya in Myanmar or the forced modern exodus of Christians from the Middle East.⁴ They will say they care about the rights of indigenous people to self-determination but ignore the plight of nearly 30 million Kurdish people scattered in Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria who have no country of their own. And of course, there is no discussion of the continued violence perpetrated against Israel by terrorist groups like Hamas or Hizbullah, or condemnation of Iran's repeated promises to wipe Israel off the map.

Because Anti-Zionists conflate support for Israel with promoting injustice and oppression, Jews themselves must check their Judaism at the door or risk accusations of dual-loyalties. A UCLA student who applied to the student judicial board was asked at her confirmation interview if her affiliation with a Jewish sorority and Hillel would make her biased and unable to adjudicate student affairs. At the University of Virginia, Jewish student activists were barred from admission in a minority student coalition to fight white supremacy.⁵ Last year, two professors at the University of Michigan professor refused to write letters of recommendation for students applying for study programs in Israel.⁶

⁴ Bari Weiss, *How To Fight Anti-Semitism*. New York: Crown, 2019, pp. 108-109

⁵ Ibid, p. 88.

⁶ <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/10/10/second-professor-university-michigan-declines-write-recommendation-letter-student>

Alan Johnson wrote in *Fathom Journal*: “Antisemitic anti-Zionism bends the meaning of Israel and Zionism out of shape until both become fit receptacles for the tropes, images and ideas of classical antisemitism. In short, that which the demonological Jew once was, demonological Israel now is: uniquely malevolent, full of blood lust, all-controlling, the hidden hand, tricky, always acting in bad faith, the obstacle to a better, purer, more spiritual world, uniquely deserving of punishment.”⁷

To me, there is no question that people who have suffered displacement, persecution, and discrimination deserve to be outraged, but is resentment the solution? We who have suffered from denigration, hatred, and violence can spend our lifetimes assigning blame for our plight, but what does it get us?

Those who feel left behind by the transformations in the global economy or who feel threatened by the changes in American culture can blame the elites in New York and California or blame immigrants coming from Latin America, but their resentment won't change their lives for the better.

Those who feel victimized and marginalized by a system built on racism and misogyny can blame the white power structure, or take umbrage at cultural appropriation and micro-aggressions, but stifling rational discourse and freedom of speech won't make the difference we need.

And for us as Jews, nursing our resentments isn't the right path either. Certainly we must take antisemitism seriously. We must call out bigotry on the right and say with full voice this cannot stand. We must call out intolerance on the left and say with full voice that anti-Zionism is antisemitism.

But if we truly want to advance the cause of justice and the eradication of prejudice then we need more than righteous indignation. Instead, we simply need righteousness.

Righteousness demands that we be truly honest with ourselves and recognize the privileges we enjoy as Jews in America. Righteousness also demands that we work for justice to ensure that marginalized groups are given fair access to opportunities to learn and grow and prosper. Righteousness demands that we not simply fight antisemitism, but all the other “isms” that denigrate, objectify, and oppress.

Righteousness demands that we support law enforcement and honor those who work to keep us safe. Righteousness also demands that we examine our biases and prejudices and insist that we police with fairness, kindness, compassion and restraint.

Righteousness demands that we that we reject chauvinism and xenophobia and work to ease the way of the stranger. Righteousness also demands that we grow more sensitive to how a changing world impacts those who feel shunted aside though they tried to be honest, and loyal, and play by the rules.

Righteousness demands that we support, protect, and defend the State of Israel and work to promote her security and prosperity. Righteousness also demands that we implore Israel's leaders to work for the values and principles of equality, fairness, and inclusion for all its inhabitants on which the State itself was founded.

⁷ <http://fathomjournal.org/the-left-and-the-jews-time-for-a-rethink/>

We cannot become trapped in a vortex of victimhood, resentment, and blame. We must instead take Extreme Ownership for the future we want to create. Let the sounding of the shofar drown out the voices of hate, and call us to renounce a culture of victimhood, resentment and blame. Let the shofar instead call us to righteousness, to come together to take responsibility for what our world has become, and make it our individual and collective mission to remedy injustice, fight intolerance, and eradicate hatred. This is how we must live. This is how we must lead. This is the fight we must win.