

In the spirit of Yom Kippur, I would like to take the opportunity to confess something this evening. I used to be an Antisemitism denier. As we learned on Rosh Hashanah, I was a child and teen in the '80s and '90s, two generations separated from the Shoah. This was a time when survivors were speaking about their experiences, and the State of Israel was a symbol of hope for all Jews.

I was in middle school when the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum opened, and when Schindler's List won the Academy Award for Best Picture of the Year. My family came to the United States in the early 20th century, and no one experienced Antisemitism for almost a hundred years. I grew up in a time when American Jews collectively came together to free millions of our fellow Jews from Soviet Russia, with the full support of the American government. I saw the hope that came with the Oslo Accords, when it seemed like Israel might actually make peace with its Palestinian neighbors.

Every now and again, you might have heard about people saying something anti-Jewish, but those incidents were few and far between. Every year at the Passover Seder, one line from the Haggadah seemed out of touch with that reality: “For it was not just one enemy who has risen up to destroy us, but rather in every generation they rise up against us to destroy us...” For much of my youth, I thought, “not in my generation. That doesn’t happen anymore.” Growing up, it really felt like Antisemitism had been relegated to the dustbin of history. In recent years, we have been shown otherwise.

We live in a time of heightened anxiety. Antisemitism comes from people who act with intent and from people who act out of ignorance. It comes from both sides of the political aisle. It is based in deep-seated millennial hatreds, and current misinformation about the State of Israel. Sadly, it is emblematic of what our people have had to live with for thousands of years.

In the hopes of making a full confession, I must also tell you that I hate talking about Antisemitism. I hate that our conversations about

Antisemitism can sometimes exaggerate the problem, portraying our moment as if it were Germany in the 1930s, which diminishes the achievements of American Jews, and the fundamental difference of America. I hate when Antisemitism takes over all Jewish discourse, where Jews are more interested in hearing about attacks on Jews than a meaningful teaching from tradition that will inspire them to embrace Jewish practice, learning, and spirituality. However, I hate Antisemitism even more, so we've got to talk about it.

The statistics are shocking. According to the FBI, Jews, who make up 2.4% of the American population, are the victims of 63% of religiously motivated hate crimes. All I have to do is recite some place names, and you'll know exactly what I'm talking about: Pittsburgh, Poway, Colleyville. There are also attacks that might seem like street crime, but are clearly Antisemitic. On the streets of Brooklyn, New York, assaults on observant Jews are a near-daily occurrence.

The increase in Antisemitism has happened for several reasons. One factor is social media. Thoughts that people once kept to

themselves are now shared on these platforms. We live in a time of distrust of our institutions, and this mistrust is a breeding ground for conspiracy theories, leading to a revival of the oldest conspiracy of them all.

However, Antisemitism is appearing in places where we least expect it. In a 2021 study of Jewish college students, six out of ten reported feeling unsafe on campus. Antisemitism on campus leads to the mainstreaming of Antisemitism because colleges and universities train the leaders of tomorrow. Another report from 2021 found that highly educated Americans are more likely, not less likely, to be Antisemitic than less educated Americans.

Several months ago, award-winning author Dara Horn wrote a scathing article in *The Atlantic* about the state of Holocaust education in America. She lamented that it is doing a very poor job in reducing Antisemitism. Horn explained that the Holocaust does not teach about Antisemitism, only the final stages of Antisemitism, and students learn nothing about Jews, Judaism, or Jewish culture. These classes are more

of a history of Germany in the 1930s and 40s, as if somehow hate arose out of nowhere, ignoring nearly two thousand years of various degrees of persecutions in Christian Europe.

If you don't know about this teaching of contempt, then you can't understand Antisemitism. It is not like other hatreds. It is not about Jews being less than, but rather a conspiracy theory that Jews secretly hold power over everything, and coordinate that power to direct events to our benefit. Of course, the record of history proves this to be untrue, but you can't tell that to an Antisemite. Antisemitism is non-falsifiable. Any attempt to discredit it can and will be spun to validate Antisemitic claims. Jews can be capitalists or communists. We blend in with everyone else, or we stand out by dressing differently. We are weak and stateless, or we are too strong with our own state. We invented Covid, which could kill you, and we came up with the Covid vaccine, which could kill you. These are not rational arguments, and it would do us well to remember that only Antisemites cause Antisemitism.

When things were not going well for a community, country, or society, it looked for a scapegoat to explain why they were not to blame, how someone else is causing them harm. The Jews were often that scapegoat, but in reality, these were places with a cultural sickness.

Our time of declining trust, has resulted in, among other things, a toxic partisan political moment. Regarding Antisemitism, we tolerate and excuse it from our own team, while we vociferously point out and condemn it from the other team. Unfortunately, this undermines our ability to fight it. In reality, “Far Left” and “Far Right” are unhelpful terms. They are arbitrary designations, and they don’t tell us anything about Antisemitism.

When one member of Congress speaks of Jewish space lasers, and another member of Congress talks about Jews being “all about the Benjamins,” they are both dealing in the Antisemitic trope of conspiratorial Jewish power. At that point, the D or the R that sits next to their name is irrelevant. When Black Americans promote Holocaust denial, or Kanye West tweets about going “Death-Con 3” on the Jews,

we can't point to Neo-Nazis or White Supremacists, even though those are so-called "Far Right" talking points. A 2016 Anti-Defamation League survey found that 23 percent of African Americans, 19 percent of U.S.-born Hispanics, and 31 percent of foreign-born Hispanics hold Antisemitic views, compared with only 14 percent of the general U.S. population, upending our assumptions about where Antisemitism resides.

Instead of thinking of Antisemitism in terms of Left and Right, I invite us to think about Antisemitism in a different way, in terms of some of the classical enemies of the Jewish People. This will help us call out all of its forms and confront it effectively. Dara Horn has written about Purim Antisemitism and Hanukkah Antisemitism, which I call Haman and Hellenism.

Haman, the villain from the Purim story, is the most obvious and easiest to identify. One quote from the Book of Esther tells us all we need to know. "There is a certain people, scattered and dispersed among the other peoples in all the provinces of your realm, whose laws are

different from those of any other people and who do not obey the king's laws; and it is not in Your Majesty's interest to tolerate them. If it please Your Majesty, let an edict be drawn for their destruction...." (Esther 3:8)

Haman unambiguously tells us who he is, what he wants to do, and why he wants to do it. He has an all-encompassing conspiratorial mindset, and he uses mechanisms of power to accomplish his goal. We can see Haman today in Neo-Nazis and individuals like Louis Farrakhan, in Holocaust denial, in the spreading of conspiracy theories and the suspicions of Jewish power. While Haman's hatred is full-throated, he also clearly makes himself known.

Next, we come to Hellenism, the spreading of Greek culture in the ancient world that led to the revolt of the Maccabees and the holiday of Hanukkah. Hellenism was not an assault on Jews, but rather on Judaism. To be like the Greeks and embrace Greek culture, Jews had to abandon Judaism and Jewish culture. Hellenism did not attack Jews physically, but instead asked us to reject our tradition in order not to be treated like second class citizens. But then along came Antiochus who

outlawed all Jewish practice by penalty of death, and the Jews who retained their culture, led by Judah Maccabee, revolted. And thank God they did, because we would not be here if they hadn't.

This threat has reared its ugly head a few times in history: the Spanish Inquisition and Soviet Russia are prime examples. "Be like us, drop your Judaism, and you'll be ok." For a while, until the persecutions, tortures, and murders. Today, we see this in progressive circles, both on college campuses and in advocacy groups, where Jews who are committed Zionists have to check their Zionism, and sometimes their Judaism, at the door in order to be accepted as part of the coalition. Some of the loudest voices of those who fight for the advancement of social, racial, gender, and environmental causes have bought into the lie that Israel is an imperialist, settler-colonialist state, and see the Star of David as a symbol of oppression. They do not see the reality that Jews are a minority, nor do they see that Israel is a vanguard of progressive causes.

In addition to Dara Horn's categories of Haman and Hellenism, I would suggest three more. The first is Amalek, the tribe that, almost immediately after the Israelites left Egypt, attacked those who lagged behind as they were weary and worn out. There was no warning sign nor discernible reason for their attack. The Torah merely tells us that they did not revere God. The Bible also informs us that Haman descended from Amalek.

Today, Amalek are kids who want to be subversive by attacking soft targets like painting swastikas on schools, synagogues, and Jewish cemeteries, as well as assaulting observant Jews on the streets of New York, a trend has increased exponentially in recent years. The actions of these youth stoke fear, and I presume that they are not church-going young men who receive moral instruction. They are certainly not Haman, who calls for genocide, but their behavior, if not discouraged or mitigated, leads to moral relativism and evil.

Also in the Torah, we find the Erev Rav, a term commonly translated as "mixed multitude." (Ex. 12:38) Tradition explains that they

were non-Israelites who joined the Israelites on their journey out of Egypt. In essence, the Erev Rav took advantage of the panic and rode on Israel's coattails. Tradition also says that they were ones who pushed for the building of the Golden Calf and complained about the lack of food in the wilderness, stirring up unrest in the entire community.

The Erev Rav today are those who seek to use a Jewish stereotype to their advantage. If they are need of good legal assistance, they want a "Jew lawyer," and if they want to save money on their taxes, they get a "Jew accountant." Or, to get votes in an election, they falsely claim that they were descended from Jews who fled the Nazis. They want all of the perceived benefits of being connected to Jews, not understanding that they are furthering Antisemitism.

Finally, we come to Korah, the cousin of Moses and Aaron who led a rebellion against them in the wilderness. He challenged their leadership and proclaimed before the Israelites, "The entire community is holy, all of them, and Eternal One is in their midst. Why do you raise

yourselves above Eternal's congregation?" (Numbers 16:3) In essence, Korah says, "I demand that you treat everyone as holy!"

Of course, everyone is holy, and Korah's language of holiness and equality is attractive and resonates with the egalitarian impulse within us. This is why so many are swayed to his side. But Korah used his alluring rhetoric as a cudgel to tear down the Torah's institutions, and Moses' and Aaron's leadership, in order to gain power for himself.

Korah is very popular today, using the language of human rights and equity to spread his nefarious message. He exists in those who criticize Israel's right to exist because of its occupation of the Palestinians, conveniently leaving out all that the Palestinians have done to continue the conflict and reject peace. Korah is the BDS movement and anti-Israel campaigns. You can find Korah all over colleges and universities, at anti-Israel Middle East departments and anti-Jewish churches and mosques. He is found in the part of the Black Lives Matter movement that links the killing of Black men by police in America with the killing of Palestinians by the Israeli military, and blames Israel for

the deaths of young American Black men because Israel trains American policemen. Korah exists in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion departments in colleges and businesses that minimize claims of Antisemitism because Jews are no longer considered a minority, and therefore are undeserving of the protections and advocacy that minorities receive. And the worst part is that some Jews are spreading these deceitful messages.

Korah Antisemitism is just as dangerous as Haman Antisemitism, but reveals itself in a different way. Haman is explicit about his genocidal goals. Korah is dangerous because his rhetoric is attractive and we are easily lured by his language. Even after Korah's rebellion failed, he had sown enough doubt and dissent among the Israelites that they were left divided and unsure of themselves. If we don't realize Korah's duplicity today, we too will be left speechless and divided.

Antisemitism is not about Left and Right. It is about identifying our enemies Haman, Hellenism, Amalek, The Erev Rav, and Korah, and countering them when they appear.

In the face of all of this, there is still good news. Despite the rise in Antisemitism, there has never been a more prosperous and successful time for the Jewish People than ours. Never before have the Jewish People had sovereignty in a strong state of our own, and so much personal and collective liberty in the Diaspora. Jews today have unprecedented power and influence, just not as much as the Antisemites would claim.

America has been, and still is, an essentially different country from all other countries in which Jews have previously lived. In nearly every case of Jewish oppression in history, the government was the instigator of Antisemitism and anti-Jewish policies. In America, we are treated as equals and individuals, stemming from the promise of George Washington to the Jews of the Touro Synagogue in Newport, Rhode Island in 1790, where he said, “All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship...For happily the government of the United States...gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance...” Currently, both the House of Representatives and the

Senate have bipartisan task forces focused on combatting Antisemitism, and, despite some of its flaws, President Biden and his administration should be praised for the recently released comprehensive plan to fight Antisemitism.

Additionally, the Christian world is different from even fifty years ago. They are proving to be our best allies in the fight against Antisemitism. But there is even better news. A Pew survey came out in 2019 that stated that Jews were the most-liked religious group in America. This same study also found that the more Americans knew about Judaism, the more they liked Jews, which supports Dara Horn's observations in her essay in *The Atlantic*. Unfortunately, this pro-Jewish vibe is lost when we only focus on Antisemitism. While we should never stop fighting hate, we should also cultivate more Philosemitism. In the wake of many of the attacks on Jews and Jewish institutions over the last few years, the Jewish community has stood shoulder to shoulder with religious leaders of all faiths and elected leaders from all levels of

government. While Antisemitism is old, this phenomenon is new, and should be celebrated.

While we must be ever-watchful against Haman and Hellenism, Amalek, the Erev Rav, and Korah, we must also be mindful of the presence of Jethro among us. Jethro was the Midianite priest and Moses' father-in-law who joyfully welcomed the Israelites. Jethro respected and loved Israel, and came to their aid. He was in awe of God's miracles in Egypt and acknowledged God's moral vision and the meaning of the Exodus. Because of this, tradition regards him as a true friend. In fact, Jethro was the person who coined the phrase, *Barukh Hashem*, "Blessed be the Eternal," a well-known phrase used by Jews to express thanks to God for the goodness in our lives. In America, we have been blessed with countless Jethros, and there are more now than ever. *Barukh Hashem!*

We have 2,000 years of fear drilled into our psyche, but we must not let fear determine our course in this day and age. Instead, we must hold two equal truths. One the one hand, we must always be vigilant of

Antisemitism and speak out against it in all its forms. On the other hand, we should recognize that America is a country built on the principles of liberty and equality, a place where we are treated as individuals and can build relationships with those from all ethnic and religious communities.

Several months ago, a congregant asked me what we can do in the face of Antisemitism. I responded, “be proud to be Jewish, and don’t let the haters mess with you.” In full disclosure, I used more colorful language at the time.

We must have a thriving Jewish identity, which includes, but is not limited to, love of the State of Israel, engagement in synagogue life, regular practice of Jewish ritual, raising Jewish children, and elevate Jewishness to a primary element of our identity, knowing that it is an inheritance from our ancestors and a bequest to our descendants. While this may not stop Antisemitism, it will strengthen our self-confidence, attract friends and admirers, afford us positive reasons to flourish, fortify

our sense of Jewish self-worth, and offer the best rejoinder to those who would seek to destroy us.

We must be educated in the beauty and complexity of our own tradition, and share it with others, working on grassroots initiatives, person to person. We must leverage our connections with multi-faith, multi-ethnic, and civic communities to break down barriers and destroy stereotypes, which will lead to mutual understanding and respect.

In the past 80 years, America has made remarkable strides in reducing Antisemitism. Does the recent revival of this conspiratorial hatred mean that the post-World War II period was an anomaly; or is this resurgence only a small blip in a trajectory that is trending towards equality and harmony? Our efforts will decide that answer. Let us come together to identify the threats, be united in our defense, and build coalitions, so we can to repel Antisemitism and create a world of pluralism, understanding, and peace. *Ken Y'hi Ratzon*. May this be God's will.