

With Friends Like These

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Rosh Hashanah Day One

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By a show of hands, how many of you attended Civic Theater's production of *Fiddler on the Roof* earlier this year? I had the pleasure of attending twice, once with my family, and once with my "rabbi hat" on, as I was invited to lead a talk-back conversation after the show about Jewish practices in the musical. I have seen *Fiddler* many times throughout my life, and I even played in the orchestra pit for my high school's production of the show over 30 years ago. Civic's production was by far the most Jewishly authentic.

This was due to the collaborative efforts of Civic Theater's Board of Directors and Michael Lasley, the director of the show, who made it a priority to feature Jewish actors, Jewish rituals, and Jewish cultural expressions of early 20th century Russia, in order to accurately portray Jewish life in the production. To advise him, the director relied upon one of the members of Civic's Board, who is Jewish, and who also, by the way, serves as the cantor of Congregation Beth-El Zedeck.

Cantor Cohen explained Jewish rituals like Shabbat, Mezuzah, and a Jewish wedding. She shared Yiddish words like kvell, naches, and mensch, demonstrated how to pronounce Hebrew correctly, and showed them Eastern European Jewish speech patterns and body language. She also helped them understand what a pogrom was, why the characters responded to the Russians as they did, and that many of the Jewish actors could recognize their own story in the one portrayed in the musical. They also discussed the need for extra security and the threats facing the Jewish People today.

Many of the actors were Jewish, including several members of Beth-El Zedeck: Adrienne Reiswerg, Jenni Carman, the cantor's children Evan Cohen and Sadie Cohen, and the cantor herself, who played Golda, the quintessential Jewish mother, a role that she easily embodied.

Every step of the production was positive and collaborative, and the cantor's suggestions and explanations were well-received and appreciated by the director and the cast, the majority of whom were not Jewish. They gained an appreciation for the Jewish people and Judaism, learning a portion of our story and our outlook on life, including the joys and the sadness. Because of Civic's decision to put on this production of *Fiddler on the Roof*, there are now at least 40 people in the cast and crew who have a connection to the Jewish People that

they did not have previously. They got a glimpse into what it means to be a Jew, and now they are friends and allies of the Jewish People.

In addition to the cast and crew, thousands of people saw the show during its 3-week run, most of them not Jewish. We have to ask ourselves: why were so many people investing so much love and care in a story that wasn't theirs? At a time when Jews often feel alone, perhaps we are overlooking something.

The fear and anxiety that we are all feeling is real. We are experiencing a surge of Antisemitism not seen in several generations. Social media, doom-scrolling, inflammatory podcasts, and outlandish opinions from unfiltered pundits engineered for clicks and likes make it feel like the world is closing in on us.

Organizations like the Anti-Defamation League and Secure Communities Network document antisemitic incidents, and it is important to be informed in this way. But what if we expand our frame of reference so that we include incidents when we felt supported? We all have colleagues and friends who are not Jewish. I wonder what it would look like if we compiled a list of all of the times we had positive interactions with them. How many text messages, likes of our social media posts, or comments on our profiles might we come up with? How many smiles, handshakes, friendly conversations? How many times has someone said "I support the Jewish People," or "I'm here for you?" How many of them, if they knew our convictions, would stand with us as a people because they know us as individuals? Statistics are important, but so are our actual experiences, because these experiences tell our story.

And this story, especially here in America, has largely been one of support and blessing. American Jews are blessed because we get to interact with so many good Americans of all faiths, embodying the *e pluribus unum* upon which the United States was founded. America is not just a place; it is an idea that rests on the concept of a covenant. In pre-colonial times, early American Christians saw themselves as part of Biblical Israel's story, and understood that God's promises to the Jewish People were irrevocable. From their perspective, the existence of Jews in their own time proved that God keeps divine promises and is still active in history. This helped create a favorable attitude toward Jews in America from the outset, and in fact, Jews were actually viewed more favorably than Catholics or Mormons in the early generations of American history.

One of the best illustrations of the equality of Jews in America occurred on July 4, 1788, when a parade was held in Philadelphia to celebrate the ratification of the Constitution. Benjamin Rush, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, tells us that there were clergy marching together as a demonstration of American religious freedom. He wrote, "The rabbi of

the Jews walking arm-in-arm with the ministers of the gospel was a most delightful sight.” While Rush doesn’t name the rabbi, it was most likely Jacob Raphael Cohen, who led the Mikveh Israel Synagogue in Philadelphia.

Rush’s good friend Jonas Philips, the most prominent Jew in Philadelphia, was also at the parade with his wife Rebecca and their 21 children. Their son Naphtali, a teenager at the time, later recalled that, at the community meal following the parade, there was “a separate table for the Jews, who could not partake of the meals from the other tables; but they had a full supply of soused salmon, bread and crackers, almonds, raisins, etc.” Yes, even back in 1788, Jews loved lox, and this uniquely American celebration featured kosher food. These public images of equality were unimaginable almost anywhere else on Earth in 1788.

This was not a one-off. John Adams famously wrote, “I believe mankind is indebted to the Hebrews more than any other nation.” Adams was also the first statesman in modern times to dream of a Jewish restoration to the Holy Land. In 1819, he wrote to the prominent American Jew Mordechai Emanuel Noah, “I have always longed to see the Jews restored in Judea an independent nation.”

Even before Zionism existed as a Jewish movement, American evangelical William Eugene Blackstone petitioned President Benjamin Harrison to promote the establishment of a Jewish state in Ottoman Palestine. This appeal was signed by John D. Rockefeller, J.P. Morgan, and several industrialists, religious leaders, and newspaper editors, including the editor of *The New York Times*, which, by the way, was a pro-Zionist paper when it was under Christian ownership. Only later, under Jewish ownership did it oppose Zionism and the state of Israel.

When Herzl convened the First Zionist Congress a few years later, he invited Christian allies, including his close friend Pastor William Hechler, who reminded Herzl that Zionism was not only a political project, but, from a Christian perspective, a biblical one.

Even during past surges of Antisemitism in American history, American decency and the value of equality turned the tide against the forces of hatred. Henry Ford was a notorious Antisemite who used his newspaper, *The Dearborn Independent*, to disseminate lies about, and terrible accusations against, the Jews. His campaign of hatred eventually encountered public condemnation and legal resistance. A similar thing happened with Charles Lindbergh. After he delivered a nationally broadcast speech accusing Jews of pushing the United States into World War II, newspapers, political leaders, and Christian clergy across America denounced his words as bigoted and un-American.

In 1913, Leo Frank was wrongfully convicted of the murder of 13-year-old Mary Phagan in Atlanta, Georgia. Newspapers across America declared the trial an Antisemitic farce, and by

June 1915, over one hundred thousand letters from across the country, including those from Senators, Governors, and Pastors, poured into the office of the governor of Georgia, demanding that he commute Frank's sentence.

When the Ku Klux Klan firebombed synagogues in the South, American southerners turned against the Klan, horrified as acts of Antisemitism were committed in their name. To these southerners, Jews were seen as one-third of a community of "three great faiths," and Jewish clergy were afforded great respect.

Even at this moment, when there are those who promote the same bigotries as Henry Ford, with media platforms bigger than Charles Lindbergh, it is our duty to recognize that there are more people who love and support us than our fears often allow us to perceive.

Our Rosh Hashanah liturgy tells us that God takes stock of all people on this day. Let us do the same. And when we do, we will discover that, even in our time of uncertainty, the question is not if friends of the Jews exist, but whether we can recognize them and accept their friendship when it appears.

One group that consistently supports the Jewish People, which most Jews still have not fully acknowledged or welcomed, is evangelical Christians. If asked why they care so much about the Jewish People and a Jewish state on the other side of the world, which I have done on many occasions, the response of the overwhelming majority of them has little to do with bringing about End Times, and mostly to do with God's words to Abraham in Genesis 12, "I will bless those that bless you and curse those that curse you, and through you all of the families of the earth will be blessed."

Evangelical support for the Jewish People derives from the same reasons as the early Americans I spoke of a few moments ago. Just as early Americans saw the presence of Jews in their time as a reminder that God's covenant was still active, so too do the overwhelming majority of evangelical Christians see the Jewish return to our ancestral homeland, the desert blooming, and the expansion of Jerusalem as a fulfillment of biblical prophecy, meaning that God keeps divine promises. Herzl did not see his mission in this way, nor do most liberal Jews today, but these Christians certainly do.

In addition, they are ashamed of the Antisemitism that has been perpetrated by Christians in centuries past. And while there certainly are voices that espouse Christian Nationalism and see Jews as pawns for their Messianic visions, we must have the courage to distinguish between those who wish to support us and those who wish to use us.

Another wealth of friendship is found in the Hindu community. We have so much in common with them! They are an immigrant community of an ancient people, with a tradition

grounded in ethnicity, shared culture, religious practice, and centered on a homeland. Sound familiar? Their modern state was formed in 1947 after a period of British colonialism, war, partition, displacement, and constant threats of Islamism. Check. Check. Check. Check. Check. Several years ago, at a local multi-faith event, I found myself in a conversation with a Hindu man who was reading about Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, the man who modernized the Hebrew language. I found this odd, until I learned that there is a project within the Hindu community to modernize Sanskrit, and this man was part of a group that wanted to learn how Ben-Yehuda made Hebrew contemporary for everyday use. Many Hindus look to us as a model for how to organize, advocate for their own interests, and thrive as a diaspora community, even as they like to joke that their civilization is 2,000 years older than ours.

In recent months and years, the Persian ex-pat community has stood with us, just as we have stood with them. Ours is a relationship that goes back 2,500 years, since the time of Cyrus, the founder of Persia, who allowed the Jews that were exiled to Babylon to go back to Jerusalem and rebuild their capital and holy city. Some did gratefully, but others stayed, building a thriving Persian Jewish community and even working in the Persian court over the millennia. Most recently, at rallies for a free Iran, Persians wave the old Persian flag, with the lion and the sword, alongside the American and Israeli flags.

Members of the Church of Latter-Day Saints have become great friends and show up in droves to Jewish community events to support us and learn about our traditions. Catholics today see us as “older brothers in faith,” a phrase coined by Pope St. John Paul II, and Church doctrine vehemently rejects Antisemitism, collective guilt of the Jews, and the claim that Christianity has replaced God’s covenant with the Jewish People. We also have a long track record of advocacy and partnership with mainline Christian and Black communities, and the opportunity is ripe to revive those relationships.

Despite how current events may divide us, many in the Muslim community are more receptive to Jewish engagement than we might assume. A personal story demonstrates this. Several months ago, I attended the Muslim community’s Civic Iftar, an event attended by elected leaders and members of Indianapolis’ local, state, and federal law enforcement community, along with hundreds of members of the Muslim community, to conclude their daily fast during the month of Ramadan. It also happened to be the same day of the terrorist attack on Temple Israel in West Bloomfield, Michigan. All day before the event, I was apprehensive and hesitant to attend, but upon arriving I received expressions of support and friendship from the leaders of the Muslim community, as well as Muslims in local law enforcement. All condemned the attack and communicated that they want the best for both of our communities.

My Muslim colleagues were the first to reach out to me with messages of support after October 7, 2023 and subsequent attacks on Jewish communities, just as I have reached out to them to express the same, after attacks on Muslim communities.

The entire multi-faith community is aware that extremism is rising in our faith traditions, and we acknowledge that it is in all of our best interests to call it out and eliminate it, not just for the sake of curbing Antisemitism and eradicating the conspiratorial thinking that comes with it, but also to build a stronger multi-faith American society.

And yet, many of us are still wondering about those who stayed silent, friends who have not spoken out on our behalf during our times of need. I attribute this to ignorance, not malice. Media bias and misinformation, combined with competing commitments, left many people paralyzed or even afraid of backlash or cancellation if they were to speak out for us or stand with us. Perhaps we must have the courage to give them another chance, extending some *רחמינות*, *ruhmunis*, some compassion regarding their confusion, reach out for their friendship, and ask for their help and solidarity.

Some radical ideologies have completely turned on the Jews. We must not pander to those who don't want us around them. Good riddance to them. Or maybe a more colorful expression, if you prefer.

We derive many of our perceptions of the world from our interactions on social media platforms. Social media may be a reflection of real life, but it is not real life. When dozens or hundreds of comments appear beneath a post, they can create the sensation that the public has rendered a verdict. However, an online pile-on is not a referendum. Volume is not consensus. A few dozen people repeating the same accusation can still represent a tiny and unusually activated fraction of a community. There really are millions of decent Americans who reject hate and truly believe that we are all equal.

Despite the challenges of the current moment, this place and time is truly unprecedented. Let us think about it this way: for the first time in the 3,000-plus years of the Jewish experience, there are more non-Jews than Jews who care about the well-being of the Jewish People.

We must hold two equal truths: we are living in a scary time, and we are living in a fundamentally unique time and place compared to any other point in history. For two thousand years Christians oppressed us, or tried to convert or kill us. Life was not much better for Jews living in Muslim lands. We are right to be suspicious, and Jewish history has trained us to expect betrayal. But even decades before Rabbi Jacob Raphael Cohen walked arm-in-arm with his

fellow clergy in 1788, Jews in America had begun to experience a degree of acceptance and equality not found anywhere else.

Tradition has a name for what we owe America after 250 years: *Hakarat HaTov*, “recognition of the good.” In other words, gratitude. In traditional practice, Jews are guided to start each day with a statement of gratitude, and even, or especially, in this challenging moment, we must express profound gratitude to live in a nation that does not merely tolerate Jewish life, but makes possible its flourishing, and allows us to be fully American without surrendering our identity.

America has not always lived up to its own ideals. Its history is marked by acts and periods of injustice, exclusion, and failures that wounded many communities, including our own. Yet America’s greatness has never rested on perfection. It rests on the enduring power of its ideals and the willingness of citizens to continually struggle to live up to them.

Just like each new day, we must begin our efforts with *Hakarat HaTov*, because while fear narrows, gratitude expands. Fear counts its enemies, while gratitude counts its friends. Vigilance may help us survive, but gratitude reminds us what life is for. Our friends are out there. It is our job to recognize, engage, and reciprocate that friendship.

This day, Rosh Hashanah, is commonly referred to as “the Jewish New Year.” But this is actually incorrect. Today is the New Year of the World, as it celebrates God’s Creation, where every living being is called to acknowledge God as Creator and Sovereign. The Psalm for Rosh Hashanah, Psalm 47, which we just heard beautifully sung by the cantor and choir, invites all peoples to clap their hands and shout to God with joyous music. It affirms God as Sovereign over all humanity, and tells us that all peoples will gather, with the people of Abraham. All are summoned to sing praises to God, as God ascends to the divine throne with the sound of Teruah and the blast of the shofar. The shofar is a uniquely Jewish instrument, but its call is for all humanity: to coronate God, to announce universal redemption, and to herald the beginning of the messianic age.

The universal appeal of *Fiddler on the Roof* comes from its common themes of family, tradition, and generational change. In fact, the show has been translated and performed in nearly twenty languages, including Arabic, Hindi, and Japanese. And yet, despite its worldwide fame, it is a uniquely Jewish story. Civic Theater’s production “understood the assignment,” as the kids like to say, and leaning into the particularism, created connection and awareness among those who are not Jewish in our local community. The fiddler may represent the human condition’s precarious balance of life’s struggles, but the music he plays is distinctively Jewish.

At the beginning of the show, Tevye famously says, “every one of us is a fiddler on the roof trying to scratch out a pleasant, simple tune without breaking his neck.” This Rosh Hashanah, every one of us is invited to be a Ba’al Tekiah, the one who sounds the shofar. We must speak with the resonance and clarity of the great shofar, making our voice heard in the mosaic of faiths and ethnicities that is America. Let its broken calls share our pain. Let its booming blasts declare our conviction.

Especially today, when we do not hear its sounds, may we be the shofar that calls all peoples to join the people of Abraham, summoning everyone to march arm-in-arm, and work to bring about the promise of America, and God’s vision of universal human dignity. Shanah Tovah and Shabbat Shalom!