

On Antisemitism and Solidarity
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Eight weeks ago, on July 12, the congregants at Temple Beth El, a large Reform Temple in Charlottesville, held their weekly Shabbat morning service. This was not a normal Shabbat and they were very scared. Before the Unite the Right Rally in their town, some neo-Nazi websites had issued calls to burn the synagogue down. They had decided to go ahead with services despite these threats but made arrangements to secure the Torah scrolls outside of the synagogue. During the service, they noticed three men dressed in military fatigues armed with semi-automatic rifles standing across the street from their synagogue. As the morning went on growing numbers of neo-Nazis gathered outside some chanting "Sieg Heil." At the end of services the congregants left cautiously in groups through a side door.

It is hard to believe that such an event took place here in the United States just eight weeks ago. It is beyond shocking. Men dressed in military fatigues outside a synagogue in America with some chanting "Sieg Heil." Unimaginable! But it indeed happened.

On Rosh Hashana, Shawn Murphy, Tikkun v'Or co-president, described so eloquently and passionately the frightening escalation of antisemitism over the past year: bomb threats at Jewish institutions, desecration of cemeteries, an increase in the number of antisemitic incidents in the country as a whole, and in Lansing, New York.

The response of the President of the United States to all these incidents was shocking and his response to Charlottesville was particularly alarming. First, there was no immediate, clear condemnation of the rally, followed by his equivocation about good people on both sides and the reference to some fine young men among the neo-Nazi marchers. His response was further confirmation that support for White nationalist racism and antisemitism has moved into the highest echelons of American government and into the White House itself. President Trump's base includes the alt right, white nationalists who are antisemitic and racist and some of the President's closest advisers share that ideology.

As Jews, we must forcefully and effectively resist and fight back against this empowerment and normalization of antisemitism. Since my immigration to the United States over 40 years ago I have felt totally secure and safe as a Jew in the United States. But if I am honest with myself, the events of the past year made me

wonder whether antisemitic realities that I just assume could never happen in America could become part of the American reality. It is really hard to believe it is possible. As a people with a relatively recent history of experiencing genocide, we Jews are understandably fearful.

Like Shawn, I am so deeply moved by the response of Christian churches in Lansing, the Islamic community of Ithaca, and other community groups to the antisemitic incident in the Lansing area earlier this year and was so honored to be able to participate in the interfaith dinner and event last night. The various communities that gathered together in Lansing responded exactly the way I assumed most Americans would to antisemitism. And, I believe that the **most effective way to counter antisemitism is to stand in solidarity with all people across religious, ethnic and racial lines in the struggle to end all forms of racial, ethnic and religious bigotry and oppression.**

Antisemitism is connected to racism and other forms of bigotry and discrimination. In a recent challenging and important article, Eric Ward, who works for the Southern Poverty Law Center, and has spent years studying and infiltrating white nationalist groups, argues that “American White nationalism, which emerged in the wake of the 1960s civil rights struggle and descends from White supremacy, is a revolutionary social movement committed to building a Whites-only nation, and antisemitism forms its theoretical core.” Antisemitism and racism are connected. We must join with African Americans, Muslims, Native Americans and all who are victims of racism, antisemitism and Islamophobia.

For each of us our experience of antisemitism is unique. As I reflect on my own experience, it is determined by the place and time of my life. This is true for all of us. From my conversations with folk who are older, I realize that had I lived through World War II my response to antisemitism may have been very different. Similarly, when I talk to my children about this, I realize how their experience is so different from mine. So here’s a little about my experience of antisemitism.

I was born in South Africa in 1952, seven years after the end of the War. Growing up in South Africa, I was always aware of a latent antisemitism especially among Afrikaners but also among English speaking whites. My earliest memory of antisemitism is when, as a child I accompanied my father to our shul early one Sunday morning because someone had drawn a swastika on the wall of the shul during the night. The police came and someone removed the swastika immediately and a decision was made to keep the incident the quiet. Two things struck me: first, that there was someone or a group of people who hated Jews and identified with the Nazis and second, that my father and my Jewish community made every effort

to keep it quiet. It was clear that this hatred for us was something that needed to be kept under wraps.

Whenever I played in a rugby game against an Afrikaner school, there was always someone on their team who would taunt us: I am going to get that dirty Jew, that expletive Jew. And in the course of the game we would either rough them up, or more often one of us would get roughed up.

And when I served in the army for two months, the latent anti-semitism **burst into the open in great clarity**. On the very first day, the young Afrikaner corporal in charge of our group, divided us into three groups. First came the true, faithful, patriotic Afrikaners, “die ware Afrikaners,” who got the best section in our bunks and were clearly at the top of the pack. Second, came the dirty Jews! When I heard this I immediately felt sense of relief as I knew that we weren’t at the very bottom of the totem pole, there was another group below us. Below us came the traitor, dirty, dirty, dirty (a series of expletives) “red necks,” the English speaking white people who had a fierce historical enmity with the Afrikaners. They were clearly at the bottom of the pack. This was the hierarchy among white South Africans in a country where the majority of whites shared the racist assumption that brown and black people were far below any of us!

Punishment Drill: It was also in the army that I encountered the most challenging antisemitic incident in my own life. The Jewish soldiers were punished for some infraction of the uniform code when we attended Friday night services at a local synagogue. At one point, the corporal in charge of the punishment drill at one point, lost his cool, and threw his gun at one of us who was simply unable to do the physically challenging drill. He started shouting, “Do you know who I am? My parents are German and I will finish Hitler’s job!” I was just furious and my fury enabled me to refuse to obey his commands and I marched away and lodged a complaint with the Afrikaner dominee who did nothing other than offer some empty pious words at a morning prayer gathering.

My experience of antisemitism in South Africa was very confusing. While there was latent antisemitism, it really didn’t affect me daily. I think I told you all or most of the incidents of antisemitism I experienced in the first 17 years of my life. I didn’t really feel unsafe. I lived in a comfortable and secure life as a White South African. Antisemitism definitely had its emotional/spiritual scars. Like any prejudice, the victims internalize the negative stereotypes. But beyond the psychic and spiritual scars, I was very aware that anti-semitism was scary to us, but hatred of Jews and Judaism, was dwarfed by the hatred and the massive, cruel, oppression of black and brown South Africans.

As Jews, we needed to name and resist the latent antisemitism, yet we also had to acknowledge that we as white Jews were privileged because of our “whiteness,” while millions of black and brown South African citizens were brutally oppressed. In some ways, maybe we felt secure because we knew that racist oppression of blacks was the core reality of our society.

My experience of anti-Semitism in America has been completely different from South Africa. South Africa was a Christian country and the separation of church and state in the United States offered Jews so much more freedom and opportunity. I was amazed at the creative Jewish counterculture of the 1970's that flourished under these conditions in America. It was this creative Jewish counterculture that drew me to America. I was part of the Havurah movement and was nourished spiritually by the way we freely reinterpreted and recreated our Judaism. I was moved by the important place of Jewish ideas and culture in American life in the academy, in interfaith dialogue, in books, music and on TV.

I was also surprised that despite this reality of freedom and security and some significant power, Jewish institutions focused most of their energy on antisemitism and the Holocaust. For most American Jewish organizations and for most American Jews it is the core of what it means to be Jewish. The Pew Report of 2015 found that when asked to identify the most essential components being Jewish, 73% of those interviewed said remembering the Holocaust was an essential part of what being Jewish means to them. Remembering the Holocaust, was on the top of the list.

Personally, **I have always been alienated from this form of Judaism that clings to our identity as victims in a context where the vast majority of Jews live comfortable and secure lives.** I have devoted my life to teaching Judaism as a beautiful and profound spiritual and ethical tradition that can enrich our personal lives and to building vibrant, joyful, spiritual and ethical Jewish communities that make a positive difference in the life of individuals and in the life of the community, society and world. I am saddened whenever our precious spiritual legacy is reduced to antisemitism and the Holocaust.

Rabbi Ben Zion Gold, a Holocaust survivor, addressed this overemphasis on the Holocaust when discussing the introduction of Holocaust studies into schools. He said that “the result of these required classes on the Holocaust is that our children “who have been learning about the Greeks and how they lived, about the Romans and how they lived, are now learning about the Jews and how they were murdered. Is this all we Jews want to tell about ourselves to the children of this nation?”

In addition to my concern about the focus of American Jewish life on the antisemitism and the Holocaust, it seems to me that there is some similarity

between the situation of white Jews in America to those in South Africa. White Jews in America also live secure and comfortable lives because of our whiteness in a racist society. Black and brown American citizens face the brutality of institutionalized racism that denies them quality education, housing and economic opportunity and subjects them to state sanctioned violence and mass incarceration. **We should not equate the effects of antisemitism in America with the effects of racism.** Racism is the core issue of American life and plays a much more central role in American life than antisemitism.

While it is true that we must take the recent resurgence of antisemitism really seriously and confront it, the fight against antisemitism is very complicated.

There are some realities of Jewish life that make this struggle against antisemitism much more difficult. I want to mention some of these realities.

When antisemitism is used routinely as a political weapon against critics of Israeli policy, it makes it harder for us to fight antisemitism. As a critic of Israeli policy, I have seen countless people, Jews and Christians, journalists, academics, activists who support justice and equality for Palestinians, attacked by the Jewish community as antisemites. Personally, I have been called an antisemite many times. I know how painful these attacks and how effective it often is in silencing criticism of Israel.

While some critics of Israel may be antisemitic, accusing everyone involved in the struggle for justice and equality for the Palestinians, or everyone who supports any boycott of Israel as antisemitic, is one way to ensure that people will not take real antisemitism, real hatred of Jews, seriously. It makes it more difficult for us as Jews to resist real antisemitism. Redefining antisemitism to include opposition to Zionism and Israel, another strategy to silence criticism of Israel, is also unhelpful in fighting real antisemitism.

Similarly, when the Prime Minister of Israel so wholeheartedly supports President Trump and ignores his silence or tacit support for antisemities, and his appointment of people to positions of power who are racist and antisemitic, it makes it more difficult to fight antisemitism. It also makes it more difficult for us to stand in solidarity with anti-racist resistance in our country.

It is striking that in response to Charlottesville, the German chancellor, Angela Merkel, issued a quick denunciation, of “naked racism, anti-Semitism and hate in their most evil form.” It took Benjamin Netanyahu, the Prime Minister of Israel three days to issue a statement and then he merely tweeted “Outraged by expressions of anti-Semitism, neo-Nazism and racism. Everyone should oppose this hatred.” He had no response when the President talked about “two sides.” He was silent earlier in the year when the President made no mention of Jews on International Holocaust Day, erasing the Holocaust’s victims and the anti-Semitic

ideology behind the mass murder. When challenged Netanyahu responded, “This man is a great friend of the Jewish people and the State of Israel.”

When rightwing Jews honor and support people like Steve Bannon who will be honored at the Superstar Gala of the Zionist Organization of America next month, it also makes it more difficult for us to fight antisemitism. **The notion that if someone supports Israel, by definition they are not antisemitic, an idea that has taken hold in Israel and in segments of the Jewish community, is simply untrue and dangerous.** It leaves us, as American Jews, confronting real antisemitism here while Israeli leaders and American Jewish leaders ignore it because they believe that anyone who supports Israel could not be antisemitic.

We must fight antisemitism but we can't really do so without also challenging the use of antisemitism as a political weapon and condemning the alliance between Israel, right wing Jews, and the racist Trump administration and its key supporters many of whom are both racist and antisemitic.

These are issues we must discuss openly at this critical time. I am sure most of you share my fears of antisemitism and I am sure there is a wide array of opinions about what I have said today. I am eager to hear your responses. **What is most important is that we create a space in our congregation for a open and honest conversation about antisemitism and that we name and effectively oppose antisemitism. That is where we must start.** Our congregation has always devoted a lot of energy anti-racist work. Now we need to expand that work to include work against antisemitism. This is our challenge and I am sure we are up to the challenging task.

In conclusion, I want suggest with six possible responses for us to effectively resist antisemitism and end with a reflection on an event today in Washington DC.

1. Let's have an open conversation in our community about our experiences of antisemitism. Let's create a safe space in which we can share our fears, our confusion and our questions.
2. Let's stand together to name and resist all manifestations of antisemitism. Let's do this as individuals and as a community.
3. Let us create a meaningful Jewish life rooted in the spiritual and ethical teachings of our tradition Let's give voice to a joyful Judaism of justice and love for all.
4. Rooting ourselves in a Judaism of love and justice, let us integrate our resistance to antisemitism with resistance to all bigotry and hatred, and to all forms of racism and oppression.

5. Inspired by our values let's stand in solidarity with our African American and our Native American brothers and sisters and all people of color in the struggle to end white supremacy in America. Let's continue to build strong relationships with African Americans in our community. Let's show up with them and for them. Let's support the Black Lives Matter movement and other efforts to undo white supremacy. Let us open our hearts to our Native American guests later today and develop a close relationship with them.
6. Let us be clear that antisemitism is hatred of Jews and of Judaism, not opposition to the policies of Israel. Let us challenge those in Israel and in our community who confuse opposition to Israeli policy with antisemitism. Let us stand in opposition to those in Israel and America who make alliances with antisemites because they support Israel.

Today, as we fast, there is a major March for Racial Justice in Washington DC. When the organizers scheduled the march, many Jews who wished to participate were disappointed that the organizers had not realized that it was Yom Kippur.

Here is what Lauren Korfine wrote me about this a few days ago:

“I really appreciated how the organizers of the march responded when it was pointed out to them that they scheduled the march on our holiest day...they acknowledged the error, acknowledged that it was hurtful as it excluded Jews, they affirmed that we need to build an inclusive movement, that they will march in solidarity with Jews who are also feeling the rising tide of anti-Semitism, and they hoped that “Jews in synagogues across the country will pray for racial justice — lifting up black and brown people, Jewish and non-Jewish — in hope for safety and wholeness.”

As we pray here today, we stand with those who are praying with their feet. Let us stand together at this scary moment with all people to work for a world free of antisemitism, and all other forms of hatred and oppression. Let us dedicate ourselves to building relationships with our neighbors in Lansing, with the African American community, with other faith communities, all of us united in building a just and equitable society for everyone.

Let us stand together, proud to be Jewish, eager to act on our values at this critical time.

Let us boldly support an America, an Israel, and a world based on justice, equality, compassion and freedom for all - here, there and everywhere!

G'mar Chatima Tova! May all be sealed in Book of Life!