



On Antisemitism, Israeli Elections, and US Midterm Elections

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I've been asked to speak this morning about the rise in antisemitism, about the Israeli election results, and about our upcoming election on Tuesday.

First, let me give you a chance for a temperature check. Turn to the person next to you and in one minute tell them: What are you afraid of? What gives you hope?

When Donald Trump became a candidate for president in June of 2015, I was packing up my house in Los Angeles and just about to move across the country to begin as senior rabbi here at CBE. By the summer of 2016, I was convinced that he would win. However, it was clear that almost no one around here thought he had a chance. By those High Holy Days, I felt I needed to try to convince you to take him seriously. Though I'm not supposed to speak for or against candidates for public office before an election, I decided I had to warn that Donald Trump was an existential threat to democracy in America and to the Jewish people. I was not being partisan, it wasn't about favoring one candidate or party, but it was about trying to defend the very system that we depend upon for our safety and well-being in this country.

If you remember the night of the election, people were in abject despair. The day after, in response to widespread requests, we opened our sanctuary for people to come and cry and speak about their fears. One week after the election, we again opened our



doors to the larger community, and thousands of people came here to organize resistance to the many threats by the new administration — against immigrants, against Muslims and Jews, against the free press, free and fair elections, health care, reproductive health care, the social safety net, etc. Over the course of that year, 10,000 people participated in 40 working groups to defend democracy and human rights. I spoke about these issues every week for years, trying to comfort you in your fear, trying to restore your hope.

Privately, I was trying to assess the danger to Jews. I formed a group with colleagues to read and talk to experts. I didn't want to alarm anyone, I didn't want to cause panic, but I also wanted to be clear eyed. One night in December of 2016, I sat with friends to make a list of the signs of danger we've learned from our history. We were concerned that as the country changed, things that were shocking to us in 2016 might become normal to us by 2019 or 2022, and we might become desensitized and then fail to accurately see the threat to our people. The items on the list were color coded yellow, orange, and red.

Our list was remarkably prescient. Within a few months of Trump's inauguration, items from all three categories had taken place. These are some of the items:

Yellow: media access to president is restricted.

Right wing media gains viewership.

Mainstream media normalizes Trump actions.

Appointments are made that undermine government agencies.

Further militarization of the police;

Increase in unemployment;

Uptick in hate crimes.

Orange: mass rallies;



big drops in stock market;
growth in firearm purchases;
Building the wall;
Ban on immigrants or refugees;
Mass deportations.
Red: Muslim ban;
Disregard of the rule of law by the president.
Other government branches and agencies allow that disregard of the law.

I know that many of you were making lists like this in 2016, renewing your passports, and identifying safe havens where you could move. We didn't even imagine Charlottesville, Tree of Life, family separation, the rise of white nationalist militias and replacement theory, an attempted coup through a violent attack on the US Congress, that Paul Pelosi would have a hammer through his head or that there would be 291 election deniers on the ballot in this election, 171 of them favored to win and 70 more in close races. We did not imagine a global pandemic and global inflation making everything more precarious.

And we did not imagine the virulence of antisemitism and antisemitic violence that is normal now. But what we did understand, both intuitively and intellectually, was the correlation between the health of liberal democracy (small l, small d) and the wellbeing of America's Jews. The more a democracy protects minorities, immigrants, and women, the better and safer it is for Jews. And the opposite is true as well.

In the last two weeks alone, Donald Trump and Kanye West threatened Jews, Nazis saluted on a bridge over LA in solidarity, Kyrie Irving refused to say that he's not



antisemitic after spreading antisemitic content, and the FBI warned of a credible threat of terrorist violence to synagogues in New Jersey. At other times in the last five years we've faced stabbings and beatings and swastikas. Hostages in a synagogue. Defaced gravestones. This is our life now, and we know that it's related to the racism, xenophobia, and hate that Donald Trump unleashed.

So what is going on?

We know now what we didn't quite understand then: this is much bigger than Donald Trump. We are experiencing an international phenomenon, as expressed in Italy in the victory of Giorgia Meloni, in Sweden in Ulf Kristersson, in Hungary with Viktor Orban, in Russia with Vladimir Putin—a trend miraculously just reversed in Brazil with the defeat of Jair Bolsonaro.

Most relevant to us, the Israeli elections of this week brought in the most racist and farthest right leadership Israel has ever seen in Itamar Ben Gvir and Otzma Yehudit, or the Jewish Power Party, which is now, as part of the Religious Zionism Party, the third largest party in the Knesset and the one with the most sway. As Jo-Ann Mort writes in the New Republic, "Famously known for his youthful embrace of Meir Kahane and Baruch Goldstein (who murdered 25 worshippers in a mosque in Hebron in 1994), Ben-Gvir is the hideous face of a festering 55-year-old occupation. A leader of a network of feral, hard-right activists, he once bragged of pulling a frontpiece off then-Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's car, adding to the incitement that led to Rabin's murder. Just a week before the election, he showed up at a demonstration in East Jerusalem's Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood to harass Palestinian residents by pulling his



pistol from his belt holster. Significant violence in the West Bank and East Jerusalem is inevitable as settlers take back control of the levers of government ... While liberal Israeli Jews ignored the occupation, ... extremist settlers like Ben-Gvir were planning their takeover not only of Hebron, home to Ben-Gvir, but of secular, free-flowing Tel Aviv. The occupation has smashed straight into the Tel Aviv beachfront.”

It is bad. But like we are doing here, there are many Israelis and Palestinians working for a better future, for an end to the occupation and for equitable, diverse, and inclusive society. They will not give up. And we will not give up on them. And when we hear antisemitism in the guise of anti-Israel rhetoric– not political critique, which is valid and warranted– but Israel as a stand-in or metonymy for all Jews, Israel as uniquely and irredeemably evil, we must interrupt and name that antisemitism. Our teens and college students need support navigating this nuanced and tricky terrain. This is something we provide at CBE, but could do better.

Periodically a kind of authoritarian, nationalist, fascist insanity grips many countries in the world simultaneously. It happened 90 years ago and it’s happening again now. It’s in response to destabilization, whether by war, mass migration, depression, or inflation, added to the long term effects in this country of unfettered capital and extreme inequality, toxic meritocracy, changing demographics and the challenge to white supremacy, and changing gender roles. People are anxious and afraid and angry and suffering and vulnerable to populist messages. They are looking for someone to blame. And when people are looking for someone to blame, we tend to be high up on the list.

But this is not a moment to panic. I am not panicking and I do not think you should be either. Panic is not helpful. Moreover, history does not actually repeat itself. As Mark



Twain said, “History rhymes.” There are clear resonances between this period and the interwar period of the previous century, but there are also important and meaningful differences.

It is true that according to the ADL, antisemitic incidents are at the highest point of any time in the last 40 years, and have tripled since 2015. Despite this, the Jewish people in America are thriving more than any Jewish population in any country at any time in history. In a recent book called *Awakenings*, Rabbis Josh Stanton and Ben Spratt summarize a number of surveys of the American Jewish experience. They report that the number of Americans who identify as Jewish is growing rapidly – from 5 million to 7.5 million since 1990. More non-Jews are marrying Jews– literally loving and becoming family with Jews– than ever before, and we are seeing a national surge in conversions to Judaism. It is also true that Jews hold more wealth, access, and power in America than in any diaspora community of the past three thousand years. And multiple national surveys over the past decade report that American Jews are consistently the best-liked and most well-respected religious community in the United States. The danger out there is real, but so is the protection.

There was a fascist, Nazi movement in this country 80 years ago that sought to take over power through violent means. Rachel Maddow tells the story in her new podcast “Ultra.” Eighty years ago, antisemitism was mainstream in America and intermarriage was unusual and discouraged. American Jews are in a significantly stronger place now. That movement was stopped then, and I believe we can stop such forces now.

So what do we do?



Obviously we vote. One thing we learned painfully from the Trump administration is that just because someone is Jewish does not mean they're good for the Jewish people, for our safety or wellbeing. The Trump administration was full of Jews, including his family, but nothing has so endangered us in our lifetimes as his administration and the movements it unleashed. We have to actually look at what candidates stand for, and it has been proven that those who stand up for minorities, immigrants, and women, and the right of Israel to exist, create the best conditions for Jewish safety and wellbeing. So we vote and ensure that everyone we know does the same. We work to defend this election and to protect the next one. We invest in civic education. We re-embrace politics and the language of politics, for politics is the non-violent way to negotiate differences. We invest in access to the ballot and ultimately in campaign finance reform. We invest in state legislatures and down ballot candidates over the long term.

In addition, we in particular need to understand antisemitism. Just because we're Jewish doesn't mean we understand it. It is confusing. It comes from all parts of the society and the world, the right and the left, the bottom and the top. Many people around us do not take it seriously because it is cyclical and for much of the cycle it is underground and quiet, and we are successful and thriving.

For thousands of years, everywhere we've lived, we have been in a middle position between the powerful and the powerless, given access to status, wealth, and success. And the more we've succeeded, the more vulnerable we've become, because it is our very success that has been used against us, used as evidence that we are dangerous and secretly in control. And when there is a crisis, and those in power and those who are powerless both need someone to blame, we are frequently that target.



I'm going to admit something. Twenty years ago, even ten years ago, the people who talked about antisemitism a lot seemed to me to be hyper-sensitive, overreactive, replaying old trauma in new situations, and prioritizing anti-Jewish slights over the oppression of other groups of people. I no longer feel that way. It is easy to underestimate antisemitism because it is easy to underestimate the power of words. But we now have seen that words are extremely dangerous because words turn into actions.

We need to understand that the crazy conspiracy theories about us are not arbitrary and they are not inevitable. They come from specific times in history and from people with specific agendas. We need to learn the origin and development of the lies told about us so that we can understand what is happening to us now and can teach others why it matters. It matters not only for our own well-being, which of course is vitally important. It matters because history teaches that when we get attacked, there's danger for everyone.

Last year we began to read the book *Anti-Judaism* by David Nirenberg as a community. It teaches the history of the ideas of antisemitism. When we can see how and why something started, it loses its power over us. We are going to continue to read this book together on Shabbat after services, starting in a couple of weeks. Buy it now. Start reading it now. In our first session, we'll review the first several chapters, and then we'll continue reading together.

This is a concrete contribution we have to make – to understand our particular role in this moment in our country. To talk about it with both Jews and non-Jews who care about us – and to build deep, long-lasting relationships with non-Jewish people and



communities, like our partnership with Antioch Baptist Church – so that more and more people know how to respond to antisemitism, know how to refute the lies, and know how to stand for us and with us.

This week in Torah we meet the very first Jews. And the very first thing we are told about ourselves by God is this:

I will make of you a great nation,
And I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
And you shall be a blessing.*
I will bless those who bless you
And curse the one who curses you;
And all the families of the earth
Shall bless themselves by you.”

The 13th century French commentator Chizkuni imagines that God is saying here, “You must never think that there are no people on earth who are psychologically close to you and are potential champions for you, for I love those who love you and hate the one who hates you.”

There will always be haters, but look around – look around and see. There are so many who are psychologically close to us, there are so many who are champions of us, there



are so many who love us and whom we love. Let us save and build the liberal democracy of equity, diversity, and inclusion that we all deserve.

And as you taught us, Dylan, we should always care about our family. And as you taught us, Leo, “When it comes down to it, we are proud to belong to a people, a nation, a tribe - we are a part of a community - the family of Abraham and Sarah.”

Shabbat Shalom.