

## **ANTISEMITISM IN AMERICA: CONFRONTING A NEW REALITY**

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Okay, I am going to ask you to do me a favor. Everyone stand up. That's it. Okay, take one step to your left. Take one step to you right. Okay, sit down. Now when you go home today you can tell everybody that your rabbi moved you!

Good yontif to everybody and Shanah tovah!

"At last count, Tanya Gersh had received 700 threatening, hateful and anti-Semitic messages. Even now, one arrives every few days. That may seem like a lot, but it isn't. Not compared to before, when they came day and night. Neo-Nazis intimidated the secretaries who answered the phone at her husband's office. They even tried to contact her 12-year-old son. One message read: "You have no idea what you are doing, six million are only the beginning." Another read: "You are surprisingly easy to find on the internet... and in real life." The Gersh family had been living in fear since The Daily Stormer, Neo-Nazi website, started its harassment campaign eight months ago calling on its followers to intimidate Tanya, publishing her photo and phone number, her husband's work address and her son's Twitter handle. The harassment climaxed with a call by The Daily Stormer for an armed march through Tanya Gersh's town of Whitefish, Montana. Attached to the promoting materials for the march was a photo of Auschwitz, decorated with swastikas and a yellow star, superimposed with images of Tanya Gersh, her son, the local Conservative rabbi and the husband of the local reform rabbi who heads a human rights group.

The march, thank God never materialized in Whitefish. But eight months later, Whitefish's most notorious resident Neo-Nazi, Richard Spencer helped organize and lead the night march and rally which took place in Charlottesville, NC not long ago. Spencer drew national attention, you may recall, last November when he led a pro-Trump rally in a Nazi salute just after the election. He was joined in Charlottesville by David Duke, former Imperial Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan as 250 white supremacists marched across the University of Virginia campus with tiki torches, deliberately evoking images of medieval mobs and of Klan cross burnings. Then an even larger number rallied the next day. Decades ago they would have marched with hoods to hide their identity, but this time they showed their faces proudly, unafraid, as they chanted, White Lives Matter, Go the F--- back to Africa, Blood and Soil, and The Jews Will Not replace Us.

Then, just last week, a synagogue in St. Louis gave shelter to African Americans protesting a police shooting. Jew-haters took to their social media accounts tweeting anti-Semitic attacks using the hashtag #gasthejews. The hashtag was used by so many people, tweeted and re-tweeted so many times on Twitter that it rose to be trending. Trending means it was one of the most used hashtags globally on the social media site: #gasthejews.

These three events stand out as among the most dramatic this year. But they do not stand in isolation. In 2016, according to the Anti-Defamation League, there was a 34% rise in anti-Semitic incidents. That's one third more than the year before. In 2017 so far anti-Semitic incidents rose an astounding 86% over 2016. In just the first quarter of 2017 there were 386

incidents of harassment, 155 incidents of vandalism and six physical assaults, putting the year on pace to reach 2000 incidents by its end, here, in America.

For years we have been talking about the rise in anti-Semitism in Europe generally and especially in France and the UK. But at the same time, we have perhaps been in a bit of denial about the reality of the dramatic increase in Jew-hatred right here at home. Many of us grew up in a time when we did not experience the same level of animosity as our parents. For us it is easy to forget stories we have heard from half a century ago about Father Coughlin's hatred being spewed over the airwaves, or Henry Ford disseminating copies of The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, or the Nazi rally, complete with huge Nazi flags emblazoned with swastikas and ushers dressed as stormtroopers, that filled Madison Square Garden to overflowing in the 1930s. These events feel relegated to history. We live with the illusion that 21<sup>st</sup> century America has been freed of the fears and discrimination felt by previous generations of Jews.

But it has not. In a shocking article in Time Magazine after Charlottesville, Jon Meacham delineates a detailed history of white supremacist, Neo-Nazi and other hate groups in this country. I urge you to read it. It's still available online. The upshot of his article is that the undercurrents of hatred in this country have never gone away and have remained a stronger and more pervasive force than we thought, just waiting for the right moment to surface.

So, the question is, now that it has indeed resurfaced, how do we respond to this new reality in which we live?

First, we must call out hatred wherever we see it. We can no longer afford to turn a blind eye. To do so is to risk being caught off guard when the moment comes that this hatred reaches a tipping point in this country.

Many of you will remember the bestselling book In the Garden of the Beasts, which recounts the experience of US Ambassador William Dodd and his family in Berlin in the years leading up to World War II. He came to Germany enamored of the glamor and excitement of Berlin's social scene, and only slowly came to acknowledge and face the reality of a country descending into unbridled hate, discrimination and violence. When he realized, he wrote missives back to his superiors in Washington warning them of what was happening, but they were not taken seriously. The West waited too long to get involved in the fight against the Nazis, and even then did too little too late to save Jewish lives.

Second, it is important that we recognize the extraordinary support that we do have from the majority of Americans. In Whitefish, Montana the town rallied around the Gersh family, placing pictures of a menorah in all their windows at Hanukkah time to express their Solidarity. In 2014 the city council passed an anti-discrimination ordinance. Many Whitefish businesses will not let Richard Spencer or his followers enter their doors. Following the events in Charlottesville 150 people gathered in Whitefish for a vigil to honor Charlottesville's counter protesters. In Virginia, the Governor of Virginia made a statement that white supremacists should simply "leave this country." As Rabbi Rosten of Whitefish said, "The world isn't filled with hateful people." This country is filled with a majority of good loving people who will stand with us. We need to reach

out to them, to hold on to them, to support them, and to let them know how grateful we are for their support when we are in need.

Third, we must recognize that hatred is beyond politics. There is hatred and prejudice on both the right and the left. Some political leaders have found it expedient to look the other way when those who support their overall goals also spew hatred. Both conservatives and liberals, Democrats and Republicans have allowed the banners of free speech and academic freedom to serve as a fig leaf for the spewing of hatred. Too many of us are too busy pointing fingers across the aisle, delighting in examples of how much the other side has failed rather than actively targeting the hate within their own parties. Conservatives need to tackle the white nationalist elements within their camp and Liberals need to tackle the Pro-BDS elements that nurture anti-Semitism in their camp. Both elements in American politics foment anti-Semitism. As Jews, we must learn to stand for the Jewish people and for Jewish values first, and for American political factions second.

You know that when the Jews left Egypt, they crossed the Sea. The rabbis teach that crossing the Sea was a great moment of revelation when we experienced God most intensely. The people were united in spirit as they sang a song of thanks to God at the Sea. And then immediately after, they complained that they had no food and no water. They became rancorous and divisive... and that is when *Amalek* attacked. Our enemies attack us when we are divided, when we separate from each other and attack each other.

In contrast, at Sinai the Torah says *vayichan sham* – that the whole people were one, united in heart and mind at Mount Sinai. It was because we were united that we merited the receiving of the Torah and God's spirit. We have to stand together as Jews first before all else.

Finally, we must recognize that, as Martin Luther King famously wrote from the Birmingham Jail, Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. The battle against anti-Semitism cannot stand in isolation from the battles against hatred of blacks, Hispanics, Asians, women, homosexuals, transgender people, Muslims, immigrants, refugees, those of a different socio-economic class or any other group. Rallying cries of the white supremacists in Whitefish and Charlottesville should remind us that when any of us are in the cross-hairs of hate, we all are. If to the haters there is no distinction, then to us there can be no distinction either.

Pastor Martin Niemoller was a Lutheran pastor in Germany. He opposed the Weimar republic and welcomed Hitler's rise to power. Even when persecutions first began he did not defend the Jews. On the contrary, he sheltered and protected baptized Christians who were persecuted by the Nazis because they were descended from Jews. But as for the Jews themselves? In one sermon in 1935, he remarked: "What is the reason for [their] obvious punishment, which has lasted for thousands of years? Dear brethren, the reason is easily given: the Jews brought the Christ of God to the cross."

It was only later, when Niemoller himself was pursued by the Nazis, that he understood the error of his ways. I know you recognize these words that he wrote:

First, they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—  
Because I was not a Socialist.

Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—  
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—  
Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak out for me.

This morning we read the story of the near sacrifice of Isaac. There are many beautiful interpretations of the meaning of this story. On the one hand, it is at its most basic level a rejection of the ancient practice of child sacrifice. At the same time, we also see it as a demonstration of Abraham's loyalty to God, of his willingness to sacrifice even that which is most precious to him. Abraham's story is meant both to inspire our faith and sacrifice and to remind God of Abraham's devotion. We pray that if we are unworthy of God's forgiveness and blessings, God should look favorably upon us for Abraham's sake, because we are his progeny.

But generations of Jews over thousands of years saw something else in this saga. Isaac became a literary stand-in for the Jewish people. His near sacrifice was seen as a stand-in for the near decimation of the Jewish people who were martyred again and again by those who could not abide by our very existence.

Indeed, there is one particularly disturbing midrash in which Isaac is really, actually sacrificed. His life taken, he dies on the altar and then the angel resurrects him. Some scholars have seen in this a parallel to Christianity but they miss the point of this midrash in which Isaac is a symbol of the entire Jewish people which will descend from him. Time and again, we as a nation have faced utter destruction but like a phoenix we always rise again from the ashes. The author of this midrash was expressing his faith in the indestructible nature of the Jewish people.

I've often quoted Professor Jonathan Sarna who likes to talk about the cover of a 1966 issue of *Look Magazine* that featured a story titled, "The Vanishing Jew." Dr. Sarna is fond of saying, "And look at that! *Look Magazine* has vanished, and the Jews are still here!" We will always be here. That's God's promise to us. Like the moon that renews its cycle month after month, vanishing in the darkness and then reappearing, shining its light, God promises us that, no matter what difficulties we face, God will lift us up and restore us to our glory.

But we have to do our part too. We have to stand against hatred wherever we see it. We must stand against hatred of Jews and stand against hatred of others. We have to demonstrate to the world the meaning of true love of humanity, what it means that we are all children of one God, that we share together a common fate and destiny. It's because of that commitment that we are disliked by those who hate us. Let us hold that banner aloft proudly, standing for the values of Torah, the love of humanity and the service of God. May we see the day when hatred will cease in our midst and the world can truly be filled with love, and let us say: Amen.