



“THE SHOFAR CALLS FOR OUR OWN CONCERN”

Its cultural influence has been surprisingly deep and long-lasting. It has raised concerns among those who sensed an underhanded anti-Christian theology and also brightened the hearts of those who saw it as a route to get kids reading. Today, after 7 books, 8 movies, and an ongoing creative stream, Harry Potter is making a splash on Broadway as well. From 1997 until today, I find Bar and Bat Mitzvah students and their siblings reading Harry Potter when I meet them to being our meetings. Like it or not, Harry Potter has transformed the life of its author J.K. Rowling and made a lasting cultural impact.

So, it was interesting and moving to hear of the author of Harry Potter speaking out alarmed about a much older, dominating culture force. Last month, J.K. Rowling wrote herself directly into the current British political debate regarding Antisemitism. In response to another author, she declared: “How dare you demand that [Jews] lay bare their pain and fear on demand, for your personal evaluation?” Quoting the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, Rowling continued, “It is the [Jew’s] adversary who is obliged to use words responsibly, since he believes in words. The anti-Semites have the right to play.” Sartre was condemning those who think that harsh language on serious topics can ever be viewed as mere wordplay. Rowling reminds us that words have power, in the real world not just in fictional spells. Earlier this year, Rowling clarified that she and other non-Jews had to press Antisemites to defend their prejudiced position, as she tweeted: “Most UK Jews in my timeline are currently having to field this kind of [nonsense], so perhaps some of us non-Jews should start shouldering the burden.” Actually, she didn’t say it that politely, but then again when confronting Antisemitism or any prejudice, rougher retorts may often be appropriate. (Quotations from JTA, “J.K Rowling takes on ‘anti-Semite’ fellow author in Twitter spat over Corbyn” Times of Israel, August 28, 2018)

The underlying cause of a 2018 Antisemitism debate amongst British authors is Jeremy Corbyn, who became the head of the British Labor Party in 2015. Certainly the United Kingdom has plenty of pressing policy issues upon which to focus, such as Brexit for example. However, Jeremy Corbyn’s Antisemitic statements have garnered a great deal of attention, giving that he currently heads the opposition and may one day be Prime Minister. In mid-August, Great Britain’s three major Jewish newspapers jointly published a front-page article warning of ‘the existential threat to Jewish life in [their] country that would be posed by a Jeremy Corbyn-led government.’ (Isobel Thompson, “Jeremy Corbyn’s Anti-Semitism Scandal is Spiraling out of control”, Vanity Fair, August 15, 2018)

Many of you have likely read the articles and books of former British Chief Rabbi Jonathon Sacks. At the end of summer, Rabbi Sacks spoke out against this political leader’s unacceptable and long track record of comments.

“We can only judge Jeremy Corbyn by his words and his actions. He has given support to racists, terrorists and dealers of hate who want to kill Jews and remove Israel

from the map... he is using the language of classic pre-war European anti-Semitism.... He has legitimized the public expression of hate, and where he leads, others will follow.... we have learned that the hate that begins with Jews never ends with Jews.”

(George Eaton, “The hate that begins with the Jews Never Ends with the Jews”, NewStatesman, August 29, 2018)

Rabbi Sacks purposely cites European, and not just British, Antisemitism. It is far flung, depressing as that may be in the 21st Century. Antisemitism shares commonalities across Europe, even as it displays its own local flavor. We have been following, and I have been discussing, French Antisemitism for several years now. A recent author described the ironies of French Jewry’s contemporary situation, saying:

“French Jews, who are the country’s most-accepted minority—Roma and Muslims are the least—do not face “low-level ethnic cleansing,” and the media has hardly been silent about anti-Semitic violence. But anti-Jewish sentiment is high. Although 89 percent of French people see Jews as “French like the rest,” 35 percent say they “have a particular rapport with money,” 22 percent believe they have “too much power,” and 40 percent believe that “for French Jews, Israel counts more than France.” And while the Interior Ministry logged fewer anti-Jewish crimes in 2017 than in 2016, those that did occur were more violent in nature.”

(Karina Piser, “What France Means When it Talks about “Anti-Semitism”, The New Republic, August 15, 2018)

So, in general, French Jews are held in high regard and have succeeded socio-economically. However, they have also suffered in the face of language that has turned to violent action, coming from sources as wide-spread as nativist political parties and from within the Muslim community. Alain Finkielkraut is a French philosopher and public intellectual. He was born in Paris to Polish Holocaust survivors. Hear his concern:

“I’m extremely worried—as much for French Jews as I’m worried for the future of France. The anti-Semitism we’re experiencing in France is the worst I’ve ever seen in my lifetime, and I’m convinced it is going to get worse.... Due to the increased hostility Jews are facing, especially in certain suburbs of Paris, many feel the need to leave where they’ve lived for a long time...”

(Robert Sarner, “Controversial Jewish analyst Alain Finkielkraut is worried for France’s future,” Times of Israel, August 24, 2018)

Some of you would prefer the celebratory creativity of Harry Potter this evening. Equally, Rabbi Jonathon Sacks’ work could offer quotes on Torah, family, or personal development. Some of you may wonder why we welcome 5779 with words of alarm and concern. After all, we gather here in our prominent Sanctuary in safety, on the same night that several thousand of us gathered

openly at Oregon Ridge State Park for Rosh Hashanah Under the Stars. We take for granted Jewish integration in the United States. I focus on Antisemitism this evening, because Rosh Hashanah calls not only for self-reflection and celebration. Our New Year also calls out for us to be aware of our world and to speak out. Rabbi Sacks and Alain Finkelkraut are sounding the shofar of their own communities and we should listen as well. They tell us to be alert. As surely as tomorrow's Shofar beckons to us. During our third and final Shofar section, our prayerbook declares:

"Summoned to battle injustice,
we heard the rebuke of our prophets:
Cry aloud, spare not—
lift up your voice like a shofar....
To speak out and never grow weary;...
to work for that day, and to know it will come."
(Mishkan HaNefesh, p.281)

Yes, we need to look inside and correct our behavior during this season. Yes, we need to care about the raft of injustices to be found each year in our world and our land. Yet, we also need to be willing to speak out for our people and ourselves. The Shofar calls for us to be prophetic in being alert and aware of the consequences of the speech and actions of others. As Rabbi Sacks stated, "the hate that begins with Jews never ends with Jews." Speaking out against Antisemitism is facing up to all prejudice. As Alain Finkelkraut warns, what falls ill for the Jews, for one group, will fall ill for an entire country.

I am leading a BHC trip to Poland and Germany in June not only to recall history. We also want to learn of the contemporary reality for Jews and minorities in those countries. There are still a few seats available.

Risk exists for Jews and their countries not only in Britain and France. The ongoing danger of Antisemitism continues in other European countries, such as Hungary. However, it is surely not limited to that one continent. We know of the ongoing stream of hatred that stems from Iran, Hamas, Hezbollah, and, sadly, so much of Islam. This summer, the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Mahathir Mohamad declared:

"There is one race that cannot be criticized, if you are anti-Semitic, it seems almost as if you are a criminal... anti-Semitic is a term that is invented to prevent people from criticizing the Jews for doing wrong things."
(AP in Times of Israel, August 16, 2018)

No, I am not surprised to hear such hatred from the leader of Malaysia, a country that is 60% Muslim. At the same time, his comments sound exactly like what Britain's Jeremy Corbyn has said. They both conflate criticism of Israel with Antisemitism. No one should be declaring that Israel can't be criticized. Rather, Israel shouldn't be criticized out of proportion to the attention paid to other countries and their policies and deeds. Ageless Antisemitic tropes should not be bandied about in response to support of Israel. Malaysia may have no Jews, but its leader's hateful words have impact on a global stage. All the more so, attitudes in lands where Jews do dwell should concern us.

And let us not be caught up in American exceptionalism. The ocean doesn't protect us in a time of globalization and there is plenty of native born Antisemitism as well. The torch-led chants in Virginia were just a year ago. Theirs are not the only voices that trade in Antisemitic images, phrases, and hatred. As fully American as we are, we should be aware of Antisemitism as well.

Tomorrow's shofar calls us to be alert, not to panic. It calls us to aware and willing to stand up against injustice, including, but not limited to, when we are the target. We are thankful to the work of the Baltimore Jewish Council, the ADL, the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism and others. Our Shofar calls us to watch our own words and intentions and to listen to those of others as well. Michael Fishbane, book, Sacred Attunement, teaches that

"Everything depends on one's focus or attention." (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2008, p.41) It is okay to celebrate and to enjoy fantasies such as Harry Potter. However, Judaism and reality remind us to remain attentive and focused on the world's dangers. Others should speak out, but we are the ones who must hear the Shofar's call. Ken Yehi Ratzon, May it be God's will.

*Throughout this sermon, Antisemitism is written as found in each source.