



## “RESPONDING TO THE FLAMES OF ANTISEMITISM”

This Ner Tamid's fire symbolizes God's abiding presence. However, fire can represent evil as well. Such was the intended message when an arsonist destroyed the synagogue where I worked in college, as it has been so many times across our history. Therefore, many of us assumed Antisemitism was behind this month's devastating synagogue fire at Adas Israel in Duluth, Minnesota. Horrible as it was, that disaster does not appear to be Antisemitic. Our worst assumptions were born from history and our historical moment.

(Note: I spell it Antisemitism. I retained each quoted author's own spelling.)

Consider a story told by Rabbi Israel Meir Kagan, the Chofetz Chaim, just over one hundred years ago.

In a small town, a rabbi was employed to teach the boys [only the boys, I am sure], but the townsfolk couldn't afford to pay the rabbi. So they took turns bringing the rabbi and his family food as his pay. Eventually, the rabbi's children moved away and his wife died. The townspeople kept bringing him food. Then the rabbi retired, unable to teach any longer. A new rabbi was hired to teach the children. The townspeople forgot about the old rabbi. Just one woman kept bringing him food. For five years, alone, she would bring him food each day, climbing up the stairs to his small apartment, until the rabbi died.

Sometime later, the war came and wrought huge destruction on the shtetl. That kind woman and her children died, leaving her young grandchildren vulnerable, in the face of the Antisemitic scourge. Another woman, not Jewish, bravely led the first woman's grandchildren up a set of stairs to an apartment, and hid them, and fed them. After the war, the grandchildren came out, slowly down the stairs, and eventually learned the story of how their late grandmother had cared for the rabbi in that same, secluded apartment and, then, that another kind woman had protected them in turn. (Rabbi Shmuly Yanklowitz, *Pirkei Avot: A Social Justice Commentary*, CCAR Press, 2019, p.381-2)

Let's draw three levels of insight from that story: about Antisemitism, about allies, and about the focus of our Jewish lives. The ADL finds that 2018 recorded the third highest number of Antisemitic incidents in the United States in the forty years they have been publishing their annual findings. This is down a bit from 2017 but the 2018 total is 48% higher than the number of incidents in 2016 and 99% higher than in 2015. (<https://www.adl.org/audit2018>) Antisemitic acts have been coming from the right, the left, and Islamic directions.

Specific shootings are on our mind, but there has been an increase in all sorts of Antisemitic events recently. I invite you to join us on Friday evening October 25th, to respond to the first anniversary of the attack on Tree of Life Congregation in Pittsburgh. Bring your friends to hear Doron Ezikson, Regional Director of the ADL

in Washington DC. As the American Jewish Committee is casting it, that is surely a weekend to "Show Up For Shabbat."

Lately, our attention has been drawn to the rebirth of Antisemitism in our land, or maybe we are just aware of it anew. The United States is not alone in this situation. Just this week, Ahmed Shaheed, the United Nations Human Rights Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, released a report expressing the "serious concern that the frequency of anti-Semitic incidents appears to be increasing in magnitude and that the prevalence of anti-Semitic attitudes and the risk of violence against Jewish individuals and sites appears to be significant..." ([https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Religion/A\\_74\\_47921ADV.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Religion/A_74_47921ADV.pdf)) Amazingly, that's a United Nations report.

This awareness has led Baltimore Hebrew Congregation to address security concerns in the past few years. We are thankful to have received significant government security grants and saddened to have assessed you with a much-needed security charge. Thank you to Marc Plisko, Jo Ann Windman and our Security Committee, but our response shouldn't end there. Please thank our off-duty police officers, who have been taking such good care of us as well.

A number of books have been released recently exploring Antisemitism and the cultural-historical context that underlies our current security needs. Deborah Lipstadt of Emory University has provided us with a wonderful set of conversations that help us understand the issue and how we might respond. Lipstadt acknowledges that:

"The fact that you have a Jewish heritage does not automatically equip you—or anyone else, for that matter—to know what to say when challenged by someone who minimizes the significance of antisemitism today." (Antisemitism: Here and Now, 2019, p. 91)

Thus, I have accepted an appointment as one of the two chairs of a community-wide Task Force on Antisemitism. Many would have hoped that we would no longer need to be confronting contemporary Antisemitism now, in 2019. But we do. The Task Force's scope involves understanding the current sources of this Anti-Judaism, educating and coordinating our Jewish community and working beyond our community. Our initial focus includes helping Jews and non-Jews understand that those who hate Jews don't hate us for anything we do. Let's not blame the victims, the Jews in this case. As Deborah Lipstadt clarifies:

"Antisemitism is not hatred of people who happen to be Jews. It is hatred of them because they are Jews." (p.19)

Any prejudiced dislike of a whole group is just that, a prejudice. Jews are not responsible for those in any age, who have accused us of being different, of killing anyone, of controlling anything, or of possessing any set of traits or values even. Sure, you might dislike someone who stole something from you, but even if that person is Jewish, it doesn't mean there is an basis for disliking "The Jews."

Further, in our day, just because many Jews support Israel, doesn't mean that Jews are responsible for its policies and actions. Jews, like so many other peoples, have a right to express a desire for self-determination in their land, even if Israel finds itself in complicated relationship with the Palestinian people. Critique of Israel's policies is one thing by Jews or by others, but there are moments where such questions veer off the road of normalcy. As Lipstadt observes: "...myopic focus on Israel is antisemitic in consequence, if not in intent." (p.181) This year's Israeli elections, both of them, show that there is huge dispute amongst Israelis, so naturally there is among non-Israelis as well. However, those focusing on Israel's short comings only, may just be ignoring all those other countries, their issues, and, so often, their lack of elections.

Antisemitism in big and small ways, in public and private ways, and in any number of surprising ways has crept onto college campuses, social media, and into public discourse. Mark Yudof, President Emeritus of the University of California Berkeley states:

"In an age of exquisite sensitivity on some campuses to microaggression, or language that subtly offends underrepresented groups, the ironic toleration of microaggression against Jews often goes unnoticed." (p.181)

Why have we reached a moment where thankfully it seems increasingly unacceptable to express prejudice against those of color, of different nationalities and of different sexual and gender understandings, and, yet, for some it is okay to point fingers at Jews and to label Jews for behaviors ascribed to them? Let me be clear, all these things are unacceptable. We have been hearing stories and holding our breath, but this is a year to explore the issue of Antisemitism reborn or uncovered. In March, BHC's Women of Reform Judaism will dedicate its annual Interfaith day to this crucial issue. There will be more opportunities in the broader community. And on Yom Kippur, please join together for my 3pm discussion to discuss responses to Antisemitism.

The Chofetz Chaim's story told of Antisemitic violence, but it also described unusual cross-cultural kindness. This past June, 40 of us traveled with BHC to Poland and Germany. We learned of the Holocaust up close. That tragedy is part of why we travelled and an important historical legacy. However, we also learned that Poland, despite its historical and current Antisemitic challenges, has had more citizens honored as Righteous Gentiles during the Shoah than any other European country, both numerically and by percentage. We must depend upon ourselves but remember that there are others who understand the impact of anti-Jewish prejudice upon Jews and upon society as a whole. As a BHC past president observed last week: In Duluth, the fire fighters ran into the burning synagogue to save the Torah scrolls. Let's assume that those Duluth Minnesota firefighters weren't Jewish.

Deborah Lipstadt provides multiple examples of the individuals and organizations that are by our side. She writes:

"We Jews do not stand alone, but have many allies who are acting not just out of solidarity with the Jews in their midst but also because these [Antisemitic] incidents represent assaults on the society of which they are part. Isn't that an—if not the—essential part of this story?"(p.233)

My initial tale points to those who would shelter us during pogroms. However, there are others who might call out a stereotype or attack. Just this year, there have been university leaders, as far-

flung as the Chancellor of the University of Tennessee- Knoxville or the student government at Colorado State University, who have called out Antisemitic actions against Jews on campus or student supporters of Israel. Sure, there could be more such responses, but they exist. Yes, the responses are often too slow or not strong enough, but let us not ignore our allies. As Bari Weiss advises in her recent book:

"Make sure you are listening closely for the single voice that will mean more to you than the braying mob. Pay it forward by being that voice for someone else." (How to fight Anti-Semitism, 2019, p. 177)

Our focus shifts so quickly to those who would condemn us, through intent or accidentally. However, we must just as quickly connect with those who will stand by us, in front of us, even when it may not be popular. In response, we should be willing to stand in support and relationship with others who face prejudice. Soon, the final section of our Shofar service states:

"We're accustomed to the feeling of something going wrong...  
When a ram's horn is sounded in a city  
do the people not take alarm?"  
(Mishkan Hanefesh p.279)

Let that Shofar call be not only a response to the fires of Antisemitism. Let us also recognize the potential allies in government, religion, law enforcement, and more who have been called to alarm with us. And there are others who need aid in response to their own threats.

Finally, my initial small-town story calls us not only to recognize Antisemitism and to seek out allies. The story was built around the study of Judaism, the passing down of tradition over generations, and the practice of kindness. Our Judaism must be one that shelters us, but it also should be one that is vibrant, transferable and alive. I found the story in the writing of Rabbi Shmuly Yanklowitz, who then comments:

"Living with kindness inspires others to act with kindness... Ultimately,... 'we don't rely upon miracles' to ensure a vision of a repaired world (Jerusalem Talmud Yoma 1:4). Instead, we can live with constant inspiration and radical giving, expecting nothing in return." (Yanklowitz, p.382)

Rabbi Yanklowitz, a respected Orthodox social justice leader is speaking at BHC in March. Come hear him, but don't wait for him to engage, we can help one another through BHC Cares and we can help others through BHC Justice. Keep your eyes open for our Blood Drives. Donate food to our GEDCO Cares food drive; the bin is near the chapel. And I know that our members are involved in a myriad of excellent causes beyond BHC. We love hearing about them. Finally, these acts of loving-kindness and Tikkun Olam grow out of Jewish knowledge and community. Our Youth Education program, Shabbat Torah Study and all our learning efforts lead us to action, even as they build our community.

The story's apartment stairs were climbed by those in hiding, those who cared for them and those who taught and learned. May we be among those who recognize Antisemitism, respond hand in hand with allies, and embrace a Judaism far more robust than a simple response to hatred. Ken Yehi Ratzon.