

## If I Am Not For Myself: Fighting Antisemitism

Kol Nidrei, the beginning of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, is a time for reflection, repentance and confession for the state of our lives and the condition of the world. And God knows, this world and the human condition are suffering. While we have been struggling to persevere during the plague of COVID-19, it is the plague of racism and bigotry that confronts and shames this nation to our very core. Victims cry out in frustration and lamentation and we need to find more than words with which to respond.

So tonight I turn to Rabbi Hillel's famous call action. He said:

אם אין אני לי, מי לי. וכשאני לעצמי, מה אני. ואם לא עכשיו, אימתי:

*If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if I am for myself alone, what am I? And if not now, then when? Pirkei Avot 1:14*

Hillel's teaching is both a call for self-preservation and a call for social responsibility. Both are sacred Jewish principles. Jewish prophets raised their voices and organized courageous protests to shout down the insolence, arrogance, negligence and sinfulness in their days. They called out leaders and took them to task for tolerating that which is intolerable;

namely, the abuse of the most vulnerable in society: the orphan, the widow, and the stranger.

The voices of the prophets shook with rage against those who mistreated the poor and weak. But the prophets spoke gently with hope and with compassion to those who suffered from poverty and prejudice. The words of the Hebrew prophets have sustained millions with hope, pride and faith. Sadly, their visions have taken far, far too long to come true. Perhaps some can find solace in the fact that things are better now than they once were --- but that's not very comforting to those who continue to experience racism and bigotry. Yes, the gates of freedom, justice and enlightenment are swinging open, but slow change is not good enough for those whose suffering torments them on a daily basis.

The tragic history and brutal ordeal of the oppressed in the United States is sin that must be confessed. *Al chet shechatanu l'fanekha, For the transgression for which we have sinned before You, O God, Creator of all life, for our racism and bigotry that have harmed our brothers and sisters merely because the color of their skin color, the manner in which they worship, the accent with which they speak, or the gender of those with whom they fall in love.*

*Al chet shechatanu l'fanekha*, it is a sin that 155 years after the Civil War we still have communities displaying statues and monuments that celebrate the pro-slavery Confederate leaders.

*Al chet*, it is a sin that schools are underfunded in impoverished areas because they still rely on property taxes for their support. Neglecting schools and underpaying teachers perpetuates disadvantages by robbing children of a better future.

“If I am for myself alone, what am I?” As Jews, we hear the words of Hillel as a call to action to come to the aid of all who are oppressed, of all who suffer the pain of poverty and the brutality of bigotry. We stand with our African American and Black family, friends and neighbors, for equal justice, equal rights, equal protections and equal opportunities.

The first part of Hillel’s message also needs to be addressed: “If I am not for me, who will be for me?” Just as we need to be caring friends and partners with African Americans, Blacks, Hispanics, immigrants, and all who are vulnerable in society, we also have to react to the growing threats against Jews. That there are concurrently rising rates of both racism and antisemitism is not surprising. In her important new book, Professor Deborah Lipstadt notes that “Antisemitism flourishes in a society that is

intolerant of others, be they immigrants or racial and religious minorities.”

We are seeing both in this country.

Lipstadt is famous for defeating in court a Holocaust denier and she warns us about the rise of antisemitism around the world. She is careful to differentiate between antisemitism and racism. They are different in structure, history and contemporary impact. Racial minorities daily face prejudice and hatred. And though it was only a generation earlier during which Jews were denied job opportunities, faced admission quotas at schools and were not able to buy homes in certain neighborhoods, those restrictions are largely illegal today. No, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Jews do not face the same disadvantages as African Americans and Blacks. However, it is not uncommon for Jewish college kids to hear from radical professors and students who dismiss them as “white” or “privileged” and “majority.”

In that context, these labels are associated with oppression of minorities.

That they are used to isolate and denigrate Jews is both unfair and nonsensical. The Jewish family is blessed with people from every race and nation: White, Black, Hispanic, Oriental, Asian, Middle-Eastern, etc. An estimated 6-10% of Jews in America are Jews of Color. And the majority of Jews in Israel are Middle-Eastern.

Regardless of our race, 35 percent of American Jews said they had experienced antisemitism in the past five years, and one-third reported concealing outward indications of their being Jewish. The Anti-Defamation League reported 2,100 significant antisemitic incidents in the United States last year, an alarming increase.

Most violent racist and antisemitic incidents are perpetrated by extremist right wing groups like the KKK and Neo-Nazis. It was white supremacists who marched in Charlottesville, Virginia holding tiki torches and Nazi-like flags while chanting “Jews will not replace us.” I don’t care what your political affiliation is; it was a shameful episode in the history of this nation when the President of the United States responded to those racists and antisemites by saying they include some “very fine people.” It was a message that seemed to empower and green-light the alt-right, white supremacists, and bigots.

We are not surprised that the most violent extremists are on the far right. However, we are also witnessing antisemitism among extremists on the left. In her new book, Bari Weiss, formerly an editor and columnist with the New York Times, documents the disturbing strength of antisemitism on both the right and the left. She notes how a growing number of progressive groups have created a litmus test for Jews:

Whereas once it was enough to criticize Israeli government policy, specifically its treatment of Palestinians, now Israel's very existence must be denounced. Whereas once Jewish success had to be explained, now it has to be apologized for. Whereas once only Israel's government was demonized, now it is the Jewish movement for self-determination itself. (p.88)

Weiss lists a number of examples, but ironically, her book How to Fight Anti-Semitism was published before she was pushed out of The New York Times in July. The reasons she left the Times are heartbreaking for me, a daily subscriber to this nation's paper of record that offers all the news fit to print. Weiss had been targeted by the Twitter and social media crowd for years. But when her own colleagues at the Times joined in, they broke her. They called her a Nazi and a racist. They berated her for "writing about the Jews again." They took to social media, insisting that she be rooted out, even posting axe emojis next to her name. With all the harassment by NY Times employees against Weiss, the paper never took action to protect her.

As a professional journalist, Weiss put herself in the arena. Unfortunately, that arena is growing increasingly hostile for Jews from both the extreme

right and left. But what about those who are not in the arena? What about students?

A frightening outgrowth of antisemitism is the censure and erasure of Jews from certain organizations under the bigoted pretense that any Jew who is active in Jewish life might be pro-Zionist and that puts them beyond the pale. The most recent example is the hounding of former University of Southern California student government vice president Rose Ritch. She was bombarded at school with unrelenting protests because she identified as pro-Israel. She is a victim of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement that has permeated some campuses.

An impeachment campaign was initiated against Ritch. You can imagine what kind of pressure that puts on an undergraduate. But let me conclude that sad saga with an uplifting note from Rose Ritch herself. This USC student, after suffering an unconscionable emotional and social attack, refused to retract her pride as a Jew and as a Zionist. She wrote, "An attack on my Zionist identity is an attack on my Jewish identity. The suggestion that my support for a Jewish homeland would make me unfit for office or would justify my impeachment plays into the oldest stereotypes of Jews, including accusations of dual loyalty and holding all Jews responsible

for the actions of the Israeli government.” Thank God for courageous young leaders like Rose Ritch.

My friends, just as we need to stand up for the rights of the most vulnerable in society, we also need to stand up for ourselves. “If I am not for myself, who will be for me?” Our long history has taught us that if we are not for ourselves, we will suffer disastrous consequences. We must strengthen our Jewish family and community both here, around the world and in Israel. The joy and pride of our Jewish faith and heritage have provided beacons of light to brighten the world. Society needs that light now more than ever. We must not allow antisemites from the extreme right or the extreme left extinguish our light!

And yes, Jews must continue to strengthen partnership with those who suffer at the hands of racists and bigots because if we are for ourselves alone, what are we?

Jews have always been and must continue to be at the forefront of civil rights, of equal rights and justice for African Americans, Blacks, Hispanics, immigrants, gays, lesbians and the transgender. The Torah lists 36 variations of the mitzvah to love and protect those who are most vulnerable in society. The Torah drives home the teaching by making it personal: *The*



*stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens: you shall love him or her as yourself, because you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Leviticus 19:32).*

We began 2020 with a gathering here in the Zwerin Sanctuary of African American and Jewish leaders to celebrate the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Well over a thousand people crowded this sacred space as we came together to reaffirm the historic partnership between Blacks and Jews. American Jews played a significant role in the founding and funding the NAACP and other important civil rights organizations. The Reform Movement’s leader Kivie Kaplan served as the national president of the NAACP from 1966 to 1975. Jewish philanthropists like Julius Rosenwald were the major contributors responsible for the creation of over 2,000 primary and secondary schools and twenty black colleges (including Howard, Dillard and Fisk universities). During the Civil Rights Movement, Jewish activists represented a disproportionate number of whites involved in the struggle.

So when Blacks and Jews came together this past January at Temple Sinai to pray and to sing, we did so in order to declare the need to renew that friendship. We had planned major events and initiatives to fulfill those aspirations. And though the pandemic caused a delay, God-willing, the

coming year will bring new opportunities for us to continue building bridges of blessings that signal a new era of cooperation.

*If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if I am for myself alone, what am I? And if not now, then when?*

Indeed, the time is now! As we begin a new year, still reeling from a pandemic, natural disasters, a divisive political climate and a society that is breaking apart, NOW is the time to stand up for that which is right and good, moral and ethical. Now is the time to stand proudly as Jews and react swiftly and passionately in defense of the most vulnerable in society. Now is the time when we lend our help to the collective weight of good people who join hands to turn the tide of rising racism and antisemitism. Now is the time to confront the extremists and radicals on society's fringes, both right and left, who try to plunge wedges and create divisions between us.

The battle will not be easy. Bigots, racists and antisemites pop up in surprising places. But we can prevail. We must prevail. May God inspire our heart, our spirit, our mindfulness and our love to stand strong for justice, fairness, equality and for the work of peace.