

Antisemitism, Israel, and the Jewish Outlook
Temple Israel, Second Day Rosh Hashanah 2021

They say that a Jewish optimist is the one who says, “Things can’t get worse.” Amidst the upheavals and tragedies of Covid-19, we have also weathered a continued alarming increase in antisemitic acts in this country and Europe, as well as public vilification of Jews during yet another albeit short war in Gaza and southern Israel. While we tend to look for connections, we don’t have to look too far to see them here. Antisemitic outbursts always go up when there is increased suffering and tension in the world. That is an old story. Why should Covid-19 play out any differently than the Bubonic Plague in the fourteenth century? A recent report by researchers at Tel Aviv University documented how online antisemitic conspiracy theories started to spread almost as quickly as the virus itself. It was not the Chinese but the Jews, the libel went, who created the virus so that Jewish scientists could control the world’s population with their vaccines. Irrational discourse finds a way to translate itself into hatred and violence. And then with the outbreak of hostilities last spring between Hamas and Israel the criticism of Israel spread, fostered by an often biased and hostile media. Renewed ammunition went to those who would do damage to Jewish people and institutions throughout the world.

I went to Israel this past June for a few days on a solidarity mission organized by our Jewish Federation of Northern New Jersey just after the cessation of hostilities with Hamas. Our small group consisted of Conservative, Reform and Orthodox rabbis and Federation leaders led by Federation CEO Jason Shames. I needed more Covid tests than I can count, including blood work upon arriving in Israel. I noted that after all my years as a Jewish youth and now a rabbi I finally had the opportunity of bleeding for Israel. Not quite like Isaac in this morning’s Torah reading, thankfully. But I was grateful to be in Israel if just for a few days. We visited Ashkelon, where my uncle took our group to the roof of his apartment building, and we could see the building next door to his with a huge hole at the top. Then we saw a private house in Sderot completely bombed out. Pieces of kitchen counters lay across the front yard in what had

once been a beautiful home. You can see all the videos and images on TV and the newspapers but it is not like looking at the face of destruction with your own eyes. And it is difficult not to take it personally when your uncle was almost taken out. I was overcome with feelings of shock, anger and vulnerability. And I did not have to scramble into a shelter in response to an air raid siren. My uncle told me he heard the sound of the explosion in the middle of the night and it was scarier than anything he had ever heard. He thought it was his own apartment building that had been hit and about to fall down on him. And this coming from a veteran of Israel's wars who took a bullet in the Sinai.

Israel's conflict with Hamas involves an element of antisemitism, although the distinctions between the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and what we might call traditional antisemitism, can be imagined more as a series of Venn diagrams. I do not think that the Hamas who rule in Gaza make any distinctions between Israelis and Jews, and I am sure they would include our own Temple Israel in their list of targets if their missiles could travel this far. The targets in southern Israel were not legitimate military targets by any stretch of the imagination. The IDF does not fire missiles from the tops of apartment buildings. The buildings that were hit in southern Israel, by the missiles that broke through the Iron Dome defense system, were targeted because Jewish Israelis lived there. They were civilian targets clear and simple.

I learned so much in that quick trip to Israel about the work that our Federation does and contributes to. We visited a trauma center, an immigrant absorption center, a center offering support for victims of domestic violence. Our Federation dollars go directly to works of tzedakah in Israel. And I saw how critical that help is right now. The Israelis I met were experiencing a real kind of shell-shock, the scare of nightly missile attacks following months of quarantine from Covid-19. Our support, and our presence, testified to the truism that the Jewish people are always there for each other, forming one family across the world.

We always come together as a people, but it tends to be adversity that ignites the instinct of fraternity. That is too bad. I wish Jewish identity were not bound up with the anti-isms: antisemitism, anti-Zionism. Zionism itself was a movement that was created in the late nineteenth century in response to European antisemitism. But it is important that we remember not to define ourselves through the eyes of those who hate us.

After the holidays, I will be devoting my adult education lecture series this year to the history of antisemitism. It has taken me a long time until I was ready to do so. Antisemitism, I have always believed, is not an element of Jewish history but of the history of the non-Jews around us. The post-Holocaust theologian Emil Fackenheim famously wrote that in the wake of the Shoah we now have an eleventh commandment: Thou shalt not forget Auschwitz. I have always hated that lesson. Talk about a negative commandment! Jewish observance, mitzvot, should be celebrated with joy, not mired in the memory of genocide. In a powerful new volume of reflections on contemporary antisemitism entitled *People Love Dead Jews: Reports from a Haunted Present*, Dara Horn writes that she “made a point of...asking people at my public talks if they could name three death camps, and then asking the same people if they could name three Yiddish authors—the language spoken by over 80 percent of death-camp victims. What, I asked, was the point of caring so much about how people died, if one cared so little about how they lived?” I decided many years ago that I would devote my learning and teaching to Jewish living, not Jewish suffering and dying. I focused my graduate work on Jewish life in Germany before the Nazis and was only forced to study the history of Nazi Germany for my orals. But eventually, the specter of antisemitism catches up with us. It has always been there, haunting us in the shadows.

It is almost impossible on the college campus today to embrace Jewish living without facing anti-Israel protests. Alla and I brought Laurence to college a week ago today. I had to have the talk with him about being mindful, as a strongly identifying Jewish student, of the toxicity of campus discourse about Israel, if it can even be elevated to the level of discourse. Jewish students today are liable to be

vilified as Jews because of association with the State of Israel. That is where being anti-Israel becomes antisemitic, when a disagreement, even outrage, against the policies of a government becomes condemnation and vilification of an entire people and faith, when Jewish students are asked to disavow Israel, not the policies of a government, but their very identity as Jews.

I was so excited to visit Israel in June because the Knesset had just approved a new government. Yes, the government said from the outset that it was not going to approach any major change in relations with the Palestinians, the cause of so much animosity against Israel, and Jews, throughout the world. But yet it was a new government, a centrist government. A government that included for the first time an Arab party representing the concerns of Israeli Arabs, and a government that excludes the ultra-Orthodox parties that seek to establish a theocratic state that would prohibit the free practice of Judaism as we know it. This new government has given me so much hope for the future. Our mission group met with two Palestinians from East Jerusalem and we talked about the changes. One was a gentleman about my age or a bit older, who spoke with excitement and expectation about the changes in Israeli politics. For the first time in his life he felt that the government represented him because of the inclusion of the Ra'am Arab party. But the other Palestinian we met with, a younger woman who spoke fluent Hebrew and lived her whole life in East Jerusalem, said it made no difference to her. The Israeli government has never considered the residents of East Jerusalem to be full Israelis, she said, and she did not expect that to change.

That was sad to hear. Sometimes we feel exasperated that things cannot get worse. But will they get better? Deborah Lipstadt, the Emory professor who has been chosen by President Biden to serve as the administration's ambassador to combat antisemitism, concludes her recent book, *Antisemitism: Here and Now*, with two stories that give grounds for hope. Okay, you have to get through the whole book that outlines all the things we have to worry about until you get to the end where she gives us hope. She talks about two stories about antisemitism at Emory, one from a few years ago and one from a half a century

ago. In 2014, huge swastikas were painted on a Jewish fraternity. But after that happened, the university president and the student government spoke out in support of the Jewish student community, and the entire campus wore blue for a day, and draped blue sheets from their windows, to show support for the Jews and opposition to antisemitism. An act of antisemitism, the campus community held, was an attack on the fabric of the university as a whole. The incident from the more distant past was the history of Emory's dental school that systematically failed and expelled Jewish students between 1948 and 1961 until the antisemitism of its dean was challenged. In 2012, an oral surgeon in Atlanta interviewed students from those years who were still alive to recount their stories and produced a documentary that was screened at Emory for a standing-room only crowd that included the former Jewish students, their children and grandchildren. The university president, according to Lipstadt's account, "stepped up to the podium, looked down at the former students and their families seated before him, and—departing from his prepared text—said, 'I'm sorry. We are sorry.' There were tears in the eyes of many of the men. Wagner [the Emory president], did not say, in the all-too-familiar manner of so many public figures who have been caught doing wrong, 'if anyone was hurt, I am sorry,' or 'it didn't happen on my watch but, nonetheless, I am sorry.' Rather, he acknowledged that such behavior diminished the university, and he bemoaned the fact that it took so long for this apology to come." That story comes at the end of a powerful book, and yet that was the one that got to me and made me tear as well.

That story reminded me of when I was with a group in Germany and our young non-Jewish German guide who was studying for a career as a teacher of the Holocaust in German schools was asked why she would want to study such a depressing theme. "Because it is a part of my history," she responded as a matter of fact. That one powerful, genuine sentence showed me that the Holocaust need not shadow over the way we learn about Jewish history, because it belongs more properly to German history, to European history, to world history. If Germans and other Europeans can understand that, then Judaism need not be weighed down as community of "oy" rather than "joy." I was reminded as well of the famous

image of West German chancellor Willy Brandt in 1970 kneeling in Warsaw at a monument to the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. When antisemitism is recognized as not a Jewish problem but a societal problem, then we start to approach a promising and hopeful future.

“America has changed,” Professor Lipstadt argues. “The terrible history of discrimination in America’s universities cannot be ignored. But when proper amends are made or sincere apologies are offered, we must include them as an essential part of the story. If we don’t do this, we run the risk of casting ourselves as perennial victims....We must allow ourselves to be reassured and encouraged by the fact that the same schools that openly maintained quotas against Jews in the past now have extensive campus Jewish studies programs and Jewish student life, and, in some cases, have or have had a Jewish president.”

It was very emotional for me to bring Laurence to Wesleyan a week ago today. I felt much older than I ever have before, as that is my alma mater and it seems like just yesterday when my parents brought me there for my freshman year. When I was at Wesleyan I knew an old man who belonged to the synagogue in town. (The synagogue which I hope Laurence is attending right now.) the old man I knew in my college days has doubtless passed on since then. He had lived in Middletown, Connecticut, his whole life, and was a Wesleyan alumnus himself. When he was a student there was a quota on Jews, he explained to me, but he made it in. We know about the systemic antisemitism in Ridgewood’s history as well, in the real estate code and practice. At Wesleyan, as here, things changed. On Wednesday afternoon I listened to Wesleyan’s president speak, President Roth, its Jewish president.

The most meaningful part of my recent trip to Israel was listening to the young Arab woman from East Jerusalem speak with our group and answer our questions. I asked her how she felt about the recent Nationalities Law that the Knesset passed under the Netanyahu government, the law that, among other things, devalued the place of Arabic as an official language of Israel and promoted Israel’s identity as a Jewish state, and what that meant to her. It had no meaning for her. What different did it make what

the Knesset said about the language that her family speaks. And it wasn't that language was not important to her. She was the only one from her neighborhood who was fluent in Hebrew, and so she was the go-to-woman whenever bills came in the mail, whenever government forms had to be filled out, because the Arabic translations, she explained to us, were never complete. But the law was unimportant to her because the state was unimportant to her. It meant nothing. It was a universe away.

Is there a way to bridge that gap, I wanted to know. Is there a way to bring Jews and non-Jews together in a way that we will not only see each other as Others, so that Jews will be seen as part of society rather than just Jews?

Our conversation with the young woman was so powerful that Federation organized a Zoom meeting about a month ago for our group to continue the discussion with her. Because Hiba, that is her name, works for the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. The Joint, or JDC, supported by American Jewish philanthropic dollars, including from our Federation, runs an office on Mt. Zion in the Old City of Jerusalem, steps away from King David's tomb, that works to support education, employment, and social mobility among the Arab population of East Jerusalem. So you understand, she is a Palestinian woman employed by an American Jewish organization that is investing in the betterment of the Arab population from which she comes. The very fact of her employment speaks volumes about the bridges that can be built over the floodwaters of prejudice.

When we had our meeting in Jerusalem at the JDC's "Leading Change Program," we were joined by Hiba, the older Palestinian man who was excited about the Arab party taking a seat in the government, and two young Jewish women, all JDC colleagues employed, in part, by our Federation dollars. I asked my question about Arabic and the Nationalities Law after watching Hiba interact with her Jewish colleagues. The conversation was in English and she struggled with articulating her ideas into what is for her a third language. Whenever she was at a loss for word, she would say the word in Hebrew and the Jewish women who worked with her would give her the English word. It occurred to me that across the room from her

(we sat our chairs in a circle) was the older Palestinian man, the only other native Arabic speaker in the room. He looked the part: dress shirt, thick black mustache, heavy frames for his glasses, and spoke English with a clearly Arabic accent. Why, I wondered, did she not ask him in Arabic for the English words she was grasping for? So I asked her what I already suspected, that she was thinking in Hebrew, not in Arabic, as she translated in her head into English. She also, I saw, seemed much more at ease with her Jewish women colleagues. Maybe because they were of her generation, and maybe because they were women. Politics were not the only division that separated her from the older man across the room. I found that so telling because historians understand language to be the most important element of national identity. While Hiba did not seem to identify herself as Israeli, she did not fall into the black and white box that we might have expected.

People can transcend politics, prejudice and hatred. I was overwhelmed to see that developing on the ground on the streets of the Old City of Jerusalem. There is much in the world that distresses us, especially as Jews. Antisemitism from the left and the right. A toxic hatred of Israel, especially on the university campus but also and even in the halls of Congress, that goes far beyond the acceptable boundaries of dialogue and debate. Ongoing conflict between Israel and the Palestinians that seems helplessly unresolvable. A growing sense of insecurity and anxiety among Jews throughout the world. But there are also developments and trends that we need to celebrate. Judaism and Jewish identity continue to redefine themselves so that we are not merely a religion of victims and sufferers. Relationships are built between Jews and non-Jews that are no longer defined by prejudice and fear. Despite the distances of ignorance, fear and a pandemic on top of that, we are learning with others to build new bridges in respect for differences and in embrace of common humanity. We are teaching ourselves that optimism is not about how things won't get worse, but about imagining how much better things will be.

Our tradition teaches us to see the world that way. The prayer book teaches us that. Each and every morning the statutory liturgy following the call to prayer contains a line declaring: ובטובו בכל יום, תמיד מעשה בראשית, "In Your goodness you create the world anew every day." Each day is a new day. We are not burdened by the mistakes of yesterday but empowered by the possibilities of tomorrow. And especially today on Rosh Hashanah, considered the birthday of the world. היום הרת עולם, today the world was born, we declare three times in the next hour as we blow the shofar through the repetition of the Musaf. A new year means a new world, a clean slate, a fresh start, a restart. Rosh Hashanah reminds us that we are still alive and have much to accomplish. God has brought us a new year. What will we make of it? Let it be a shanah tovah, a good year, beginning now.