

Be strong and resolute, be not in fear or in dread of them (Deut. 31:6)

The Rise of AntiSemitism and Resisting the Culture of Fear

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Rabbi Michael Z. Cahana

Seems like the news is always bad these days, right? I know, “did you have to remind me?” But although we may all feel that way, it may not be an exact or accurate reflection of reality. Maybe we chose it. A few years ago, two researchers at McGill University in Montreal set up an experiment to try to understand how people relate to the news¹. They found that although subjects usually said they preferred to read “good news” and complained that the media was too focused on “negative stories” those same individuals chose to read and read more fully stories with a “negative tone,” stories of corruption, hypocrisy, etc. They chose them even when they were presented with more positive stories as options. In fact, the study found, those who identified themselves as interested in current affairs and politics were particularly likely to choose to read the bad news.

Don’t you feel better now? It’s all your fault!

The researchers found this to be confirmation of what is called “negativity bias,” psychologists’ term for our desire to hear and remember bad news. The theory goes that there is an evolutionary basis for this – that we evolved with the need to respond quickly to threats. “Bad news,” in this theory, could be a signal for us to change what we are doing to avoid danger.

See? Bad news is good for us!

The Jewish people, I think, have developed a very good ear for bad news. It is our cultural history – not evolution, but experience, that has taught us to be attuned. We are not unique in this, but our historic truth has taught us that even when we feel culturally safe, danger still lurks. And through the constant drumbeat in the news of lying and corruption, of frustration and disappointment – there has recently been a rising fear, a growing awareness of our people’s unique terror – the plague which has haunted Jews for millennia: antisemitism².

And yet, while we watch the news attuned to danger, our tradition also reminds us that fear is an emotion which cripples us from action. Fear is used to divide us, to make us feel helpless.

¹ <http://www.bbc.com/future/story/20140728-why-is-all-the-news-bad>

² Throughout I use the spelling of ‘antisemitism’ without capitals or hyphen as explained in Lipstadt, Deborah E. *Antisemitism Here and Now* (Schocken Books: NY) 2019.

Fear is used to manipulate us, to act in way we wouldn't otherwise. Fear can make us behave heartlessly when normally we would act with compassion. We are taught through our texts not to live in constant fear, but to look to a higher reality, to be secure in our proud identity. Last night as we began Rosh Hashanah, we entered into the new Hebrew month of *Tishrei*. During the preceding month, *Elul*, which is traditionally a time of spiritual preparation, we focus on hopefulness over fear. All through the Hebrew month of *Elul*, it is customary to read daily the words of Psalm 27, which begins:

לְדָוִד | יְהוָה | אֹרְרִי וַיִּשְׁעֵי מִמֶּנִּי אֵינֶנּוּ יְהוָה מְעוֹז־חַיִּי מִמֶּנִּי אֶפְחָד:

*[A psalm] of David. The L rd is my light and my help. Whom shall I fear?
The L rd is the strength of my life. Of whom shall I be afraid? (Ps. 27:1)*

G-d's presence, we are taught, keeps us from fear – enabling us to focus on the issues before us. But I know it can be hard to retain hopefulness and courage in a chaotic and dangerous world. I've seen it myself.

This year, since the last High Holidays, has been a remarkable one of travel for me. I have been in Asia, Africa and Europe; in Jerusalem and Washington, DC and El Paso, TX. When I travel, as I do here, I am rather identifiably Jewish because I choose to wear a kippah. Throughout all these travels, there came a time when I was advised not to wear my kippah in public.

Over 30 years ago, before I started Rabbinic school, I began to wear a kippah, not out of religious obligation, but as a statement of pride in my Judaism. I wanted people who had never seen a Jew to know what one looks like. I wanted people who knew Jews to know that a Reform Jew might look different than what they expect – that we can be religious without being Orthodox. Of course, wearing one also can make me a target of antisemitism. Hasidic Jews in Brooklyn, for example, are being targeted today, just as they were during the Crown Heights riots of 1991. Perhaps it is not always the wisest choice to be so publicly identifiable. Still, long ago I decided that the statement was more important than the risk. Only once in all these years have I removed my kippah out of a sense that wearing it would put myself and others in danger – that was in Ramallah, the seat of the Palestinian Authority. We, a bus full of liberal rabbis, were told that a knit kippah would be seen by Palestinian people as sign of being a settler – an image of the enemy. Putting myself in their place, I could understand that feeling. And I certainly am not a supporter of the settlements, for example. So, although we were surrounded by more security than I have ever seen, I removed my kippah that afternoon several years ago, not out of fear but out of respect for the feelings of my hosts.

But this year, it was different.

My travels took me to Vietnam, where I was invited to perform a Jewish wedding – some thought it was Hanoi’s first! All through that Communist country, I had no fear of wearing a kippah in public. People might have thought me strange, but I never felt in any way threatened.

Along with other members of the Temple, I also traveled through the Muslim country of Morocco this year and never once felt that my kippah put me or others at risk. Perhaps that is not surprising as Morocco is the only Muslim country with a Jewish Museum and mandatory Holocaust education, instated by the king. We were all proud to be Jews in that remarkable country.

I had no fear of being identified as a Jew as I walked the streets of London or New York this year, although antisemitic violence is on the rise in both places. In the UK credible accusations of antisemitism have dogged the Labour Party and its leader, Jeremy Corbyn³, and many Jews are leaving.⁴ In New York, as I noted, antisemitic violence is on the rise.

It wasn’t in Germany that I felt nervous. I went there the previous year with another group of Rabbis. Through Belin and Munich and even in the former concentration camps, I wore my kippah proudly.

No, the place where I was lovingly and with great concern warned not to be publicly Jewish was in Paris; the enlightened French capital, the City of Light. Perhaps that was good advice – for antisemitic attacks are also on the rise in France and specifically in Paris.⁵ The French interior ministry reported a 74% rise in 2018 – 541 incidents vs 311 in the year before. Since 2003 there have been 13 antisemitic murders in France⁶. “Anti-Semitism is spreading like a poison,” the French Interior Minister recently said.⁷

Of course, as my family knows, telling me not to do something is a pretty good indication that I am going to do it anyway; particularly being told not to be demonstrative in my Judaism. I am happy to report that, despite the statistics, I encountered no difficulties wearing my kippah on the streets of Paris. But it strikes me that I even considered taking it off; that I contemplated hiding my Jewish identity. Of course, as friends pointed out to me, I was mostly in the tourist spots. I probably stood out more as an American than as a Jew. My friends who live in Paris and other parts of France echo the real concern of being Jewishly identifiable. I hear them tell me that it is getting worse. Recent surveys show that 90% of French Jewish students report being

³ Detailed extensively in Lipstadt, Deborah E. *op. cit.*

⁴ <https://www.cnn.com/2018/08/17/uk/uk-anti-semitism-intl/index.html>

⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/12/world/europe/paris-anti-semitic-attacks.html>

⁶ AJC Global Voice, 7/23/2019 <https://www.ajc.org/news/anti-semitism-frances-experience-must-serve-as-a-warning-for-germany>

⁷ *Op. cit.* NY Times

subjected to antisemitism during their studies⁸. “In certain neighborhoods I would not walk around with my kippa⁹,” reports Rabbi Tom Cohen, who was born and raised near Portland and has been serving a Progressive French-American congregation in Paris for the past 26 years.

France, it should be pointed out, is the home of the largest Jewish population outside Israel and the United States, the largest in all of Europe. Yet even there, in relatively large numbers, Jews do not feel safe. Many are reportedly fleeing to the safety of Israel.

And the cancer of antisemitism is not confined to that one country. Germany, the United Kingdom and others report marked and deadly rises in antisemitic incidents. Recently, a minister of the German government warned his Jewish constituents not to wear a kippah in public in that country. He suggested that “a rise in ‘social disinhibition and coarseness’ was to blame for the worsening situation. “The internet and social media have also strongly contributed to this,” he added, “but also the continuous attacks on our culture of remembrance.¹⁰” I was very impressed by that culture of remembrance in Germany when I visited. But Right-wing Nationalism is staging a pushback there these days. And, of course, we sadly know that the United States is not immune. The horrific murders in Pittsburgh and Poway are just the most visible and news-worthy of these acts of hate against Jews in the US. But there is more. New York City police recently reported that over half the hate crimes committed in the city this year were antisemitic in nature – a 63% rise since this time last year.¹¹ Many of these acts were vandalism, such as swastikas being written on synagogues. Others were personal assaults, according to the New York City Chief of Detectives.

While the most violent forms of antisemitism are coming from the far Right, especially from those espousing white nationalist ideas, those who study antisemitism note that, as often happens with hatred towards Jews, the vitriol comes from all sides – the far Right and the far Left. Late last year Tablet Magazine reported on accusations of antisemitism among the organizers of the Women’s March¹², a left-leaning organization which was organized in opposition to the election of Donald Trump. Some members of that board were recently replaced – but the negative feelings some have towards liberal friends’ engaging in antisemitism remains¹³. In March, the House of Representatives passed a resolution condemning “hateful expressions of intolerance” following some tweets of Rep. Ilhan Omar

⁸ <https://eurojewcong.org/news/ejc-in-the-media/jewish-news-90-percent-of-french-jewish-students-subject-to-antisemitism-during-studies/https://eurojewcong.org/news/ejc-in-the-media/jewish-news-90-percent-of-french-jewish-students-subject-to-antisemitism-during-studies/>

⁹ <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/rise-of-anti-semitism-elevates-fears-in-france>

¹⁰ <https://www.cnn.com/2019/05/26/europe/germany-antisemitism-kippah-intl-scli-ger/index.html>

¹¹ https://www.thedailybeast.com/police-over-half-of-new-york-citys-hate-crimes-are-anti-semitic?via=ios&fbclid=IwAR0fdVH0ITlByF7KC-o5G3BOodGuZNVzVRiiFJeOs_miCQLMah03nMXqA-Y

¹² <https://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/276694/is-the-womens-march-melting-down>

¹³ <https://jewishjournal.com/online/304469/the-process-to-replace-leadership-of-womens-march-was-a-sham/>

which revived a classic antisemitic trope of dual loyalty among Jews¹⁴ – a trope amplified more recently by a tweet from the President of the United States. Representative Omar is herself a recipient of Islamophobic attacks, including from some Jews. One form of class hatred should not be met with another. Yet still, there are some extremists in the Muslim community, far to the Right of Representative Omar, who perpetuate antisemitism. Those who study antisemitism report that a third source of Jewish hatred, especially in Europe is coming from Islamist extremists.

When we condemn antisemitism, we rightly point the finger at one side – often one we are already opposed to. But it is on us to call out antisemitism even when it comes from a side we might normally support – even when it comes from some we might have considered allies.

So in the face of this bad news, the increase of visible and destructive antisemitism, what are we to do? Is there a positive to our paying attention to this “bad news?” Is there something we can do to decrease the danger?

The first, I think, is not to panic – not to give in to fear. Not to, metaphorically at least, take off our kippahs.

יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי אֲרֻרֵי וַיִּשְׁעֵי מִמֶּנִּי אֵיךָ יְהוָה מְעוֹז־חַיִּי מִמֶּנִּי אֶפְקֹד:

. . . *The Lord is my light and my help. Whom shall I fear?*
The Lord is the strength of my life. Of whom shall I be afraid? (Ps. 27:1)

We Jews have long known this disease of antisemitism, this never-dying conspiracy theory of Jewish greed and Jewish power. Of disloyalty. We have long known what it is to be judged as a group, by a supposed common set of character traits disconnected from reality and individuality.

Of whom shall I be afraid? The Psalmist asks.

If “Negativity Bias” focuses our mind on a danger in front of us, Fear clouds that focus. Fear shuts us down and makes us unable to respond.

Whom shall I fear? the Psalmist asks, rhetorically.

In the Torah, as Moses is approaching his final days he gives advice and a blessing to his chosen successor, the young Joshua:

¹⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/07/us/politics/ilhan-omar-anti-semitism-vote.html>

חֲזָקוּ וְאַמְצוּ אֶל־תִּירְאוֹ וְאֶל־תַּעֲרָצוֹ מִפְּנֵיהֶם כִּי יִהְיֶה אֱלֹהֵיךָ הוֹאֵה הַהֲלֵךְ עִמָּךְ

*Be strong and resolute, be not in fear or in dread of them;
for the LORD your God marches with you. . . (Deut. 31:6)*

“Be strong and be resolute, be not in fear.” Over and over in the Torah and elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible we are admonished not to give in to fear.¹⁵ Not to surrender to dismay. Negative news should call us to action, to change our complacency. It should not pull us inward or separate ourselves out of fear. It should not make us hide. No, we cannot blind ourselves to danger or ignore the signs. In fact, we should call them out when we see them and hold others to account – including those we might consider allies or friends. We should take the proper safety precautions, as we are doing here at Temple, of the advice of security professionals and maintaining our excellent relationship with local and federal law enforcement. But we should not let our fears contract us, make us hide or challenge our Jewish pride.

If I have learned anything from my 30 years of wearing a kippah in public, if I have learned anything from living for a year in Israel during the first intifada, or in New York during the Crown Heights riots, it is that we cannot allow fear to make us hide ourselves. We have learned the hard way, generation after generation: they won’t love us more if we try to blend in. But they will respect us if we are authentically ourselves. The best way to combat antisemitism is to be proudly and publicly Jewish.

I often give tours of the Temple to outside groups, students and others. Many of them have never set foot in a synagogue before and know little about who we are and what we believe in. Before we enter this magnificent sanctuary, I have them stand at the far end of the walkway outside where they can see the entire front of the building in one view. I have them face away from the Temple and I tell them the story of the previous sanctuary which burned down in the late 1920s at a time of growing white supremacy in our region, far more overt and sanctioned than it is today. Although no one knows for sure if the fire was set intentionally, I explain, still I ask them to imagine themselves as a community in fear. “Do they all hate us?” “What kind of new building should we create in this age of fear?” Often the students will respond that they would build something small and hidden – don’t stand out too much. Then I have them turn around and see the proud presence this building represents. I point out the Hebrew phrases written all around the exterior. I show them the stained glass menorah, a far more ancient symbol of the Jewish people than a Star of David. I indicate the prominent Lions of Judah standing guard over our entrance. No one could mistake this building as anything but a Jewish sanctuary; exactly as the designers intended. I remind them of the pride, the confidence, the dignity the builders of this sanctuary who were, 91 years ago, living in an age of more overt and

¹⁵ See, for example, Deut. 31:7, 8; 20:1, Job 5:21; Ps 27:1 and 14

politically acceptable antisemitism than ours; how they chose to construct this soaring tribute to G-d's presence and our Jewish heritage; this space we are so fortunate to have inherited. For 91 years this has been our Jewish sanctuary – our place of safety and pride in our identity. It will continue to be just that. And, finally, I invariably point out the small stained glass window in the center of our Southern wall, two hands shaking in welcome – a gift from the two largest churches in our neighborhood: Trinity Episcopal Cathedral and St. Mary's Catholic Cathedral – as a welcome to this newly arrived Jewish community. They are still our friends, these churches. From rejection by a few violent haters, to embrace by the overwhelming religious majority. That is our story.

And that is still the reality today.

Last October, America witnessed a horrific domestic terror attack at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh by a white supremacist alleged to have shouted antisemitic and anti-immigrant slurs as he committed mass murder with a military-style weapon of mass destruction. It was an act intended to evoke fear in the Jewish community – and it largely succeeded. We were all in shock that such a thing could happen in our country. But shortly after, many people recalled a saying by Fred Rogers who had lived a few blocks away from that synagogue in Squirrel Hill. Mr. Rogers' actual neighborhood was a Jewish neighborhood. Something he once said to children in his audience became a meme following the shooting:

When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, "Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping," she'd say. And I found that's true. In fact, its one of the best things about our wonderful world.¹⁶

And Mr. Rogers was right. The helpers are far more significant and numerous than the haters. A few days after the attack, there was a gathering here on this bimah. Far from Pittsburgh, local religious leaders, political leaders, public safety officers – the mayor, the police chief, the governor – all sat on this pulpit and spoke to a packed audience about the need to come together in love and support for the Jewish community. As we were in shock and mourning for the 11 worshipers killed in Pittsburgh, the leaders of our Portland community let us know with their words and with their presence that we are not alone. They are our helpers. Look to the helpers.

Be strong and be resolute, be not in fear or in dread (of those who want to terrorize).

The day following the rally, a package arrived on my desk. It made some people in the office nervous. When I opened it, small colorful empty boxes made out of folded paper spilled out of

¹⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cyOLq6tslnU>

a white paper bag. Eleven boxes. A note from a local church told me that parishioners there had made these boxes for us, “Soul Boxes” they are called, each to represent a soul lost to gun violence. This simple gift touched me so deeply. A recognition of our common humanity. A paper box cannot contain a soul, but its mass encompasses a space – a space like that which had been emptied by a senseless act of hatred and cruelty. It was an attempt to take back some of that space – to give the soul a physical presence which had been robbed from it. I keep them in my office as a daily reminder. A church did that for a synagogue. Christians supporting their Jewish neighbors. Our Jewish ancestors even a few generations back would never have believed it, could not have conceived of such a gesture of unity.

This past Spring, I was graciously invited to speak at Trinity Cathedral, as our choirs joined to sing Leonard Bernstein’s magnificent Chichester Psalms in their sanctuary; just as they had done a few days earlier in ours. The message I chose that Sunday was one of unity. I told the story of those soul boxes and pointed out so many other souls lost in acts of religious hatred; at mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand; in churches in Sri Lanka and another synagogue in Poway, California. But being heartened by the words of Torah; I shared the words of encouragement Moses gave to Joshua:

חֲזָקוּ וְאַמְצוּ אֶל־תִּירְצוּ וְאֶל־תַּעֲרָצוּ מִפְּנֵיהֶם כִּי יִהְיֶה אֱלֹהֵיךָ הוֹאֵה הַהֲלֹךְ עִמָּךְ

*Be strong and resolute, be not in fear or in dread of them;
for the LORD your God marches with you. . . (Deut. 31:6)*

I concluded my address to our Christian friends at Trinity cathedral this way:

But the victims; the murdered, the injured, the families who are devastated, do not stand alone. And that is our answer to the terror. Those who want to divide us, who want to terrorize us, who want hateful ideologies or intense personal grievances to stand as if they had meaning, find their hopes frustrated. Because we come together, we are unified. We mourn together, we support each other, we search for solutions together. We are together in unity. It is easy to lose faith, to stay home in fear, to surrender to terror and give in to the politics of division, the urge to blame the other. But the Shepherd (of the Psalm) wants us to be brave, to stand with each other, to not allow ourselves to be divided. Like a chorus of voices, each distinctive, we are joined in melody and harmony creating, with our lives, a work of incomparable beauty.¹⁷

¹⁷ “Dwelling in Unity,” sermon by Rabbi Michael Z. Cahana, Guest Preacher, Trinity Episcopal Cathedral, May 12, 2019

And so I leave us on this New Year's day with the same message: *be strong and be resolute and be not afraid*. "Look to the helpers." Search out the meaningful. Be proud of our Jewish identity and never give into the fear or seek to hide who we are. Live your Judaism proudly and authentically. You don't need to wear a kippah, or a Star of David necklace, but you can wear your identity with grace and meaning. Be reminded today of our tradition, thousands of years old, which has given much good to the world. Some may want us to live in fear. G-d asks us to live in confidence. We can respond to bad news with a renewed sense of commitment and hopefulness.

As New York Times Op-Ed writer Bari Weiss, herself a Pittsburgh native who grew up at the Tree of Life Synagogue, wrote:

In these trying times, our best strategy is to build, without shame, a Judaism and a Jewish people and a Jewish state that are not only safe and resilient but also generative, humane, joyful and life-affirming. A Judaism capable of lighting a fire in every Jewish soul — and in the souls of everyone who throws in his or her lot with ours.¹⁸

Or as Moses said:

הַזְקֵנוּ וְאַמְצֵנוּ אֶל־תִּירְאוּ - *Be strong and resolute, be not in fear*

As we gather in this sacred space, built with pride by our community ancestors - those who faced and overcame their own fears with pride; may we be inspired and encouraged to live as our biblical ancestors did, not in fear or in dread, but proudly and authentically - with strength and resolve.

Amen.

¹⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/06/opinion/sunday/anti-semitism.html?searchResultPosition=1>