

The New Anti-Semitism: Same As it Ever Was
Yom Kippur Morning 5785
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A few weeks ago my wife and I were at the symphony. We were running a bit late and the downstairs lounge was empty where I was waiting. As I looked up from my phone, I saw a man I did not recognize approach me with intention, and I got a bit nervous. As he came close his hand reached out to shake mine and he pulled me in, in a conspiratorial manner. "Thank you," he said. "For what?" I inquired, surprised. "You know. . . for wearing a kippah. In public." Then he quickly left, leaving me a bit stunned.

I have never considered wearing a kippah an act of courage. At least not at home in America. And I certainly do not consider it strange to be conspicuously Jewish going to the symphony . . . at the Arlene Schnitzer concert hall! But if I understood that brief encounter correctly, perhaps it wasn't the reality of danger, but the perception my admirer was reacting to. Something has changed.

I have spoken before about my experiences being easily identified as a Jew. I have worn a kippah continuously in public for 35 years, since I first made the decision to become a rabbi. It was not, as I have said, an intention to declare a certain level of religious observance, but it is a statement: of wanting to be identified as a Jew in normal daily activities; to be a part of normalizing Jewish identity and visibility. "Oh, Jews go to the movies. Or ride bikes along the Tom McCall Waterfront Park, or kayak on Trillium Lake." I have talked before about the strange experiences I had wearing a kippah in Europe and being advised to remove it for my own safety. Which I didn't do. So yes, I understand that at times being publicly identified as a Jew can be seen an act of defiance. But I never thought to experience it here in Portland, by another Jew.

And, to be honest, I reject that idea of public Jewish identity requiring an act of defiance.

This past year has shaken up the Jewish community in many ways. In Israel the feeling of invulnerability was shattered by the terrorist brutality of October 7. Here in America, we have been shaken by the college protests which have verged on anti-Semitism and Jewish students who have felt targeted not because of their political beliefs, but simply because they are identified as Jewish. The truth is, this did not begin on October 7, but has been building for decades. The BDS movement, a Palestinian project founded in 2001 which seeks to de-legitimize Israel and turn it into a pariah state, laid the ground for last Spring's campus sit-ins.

We have grown accustomed to the reality of anti-Semitism on the far right, from Holocaust denialism to the delusional Jewish Replacement theory all the way to Jewish Space Lasers causing forest fires – and recently that we have given the government the ability to control the weather. Which makes me wonder why we would target Florida where our bubbies and zadie's live? The ancient hatred paints Jews as both sub-human and as supremely powerful,

manipulating world events from the shadows. It is that story of exceptionalism, of Jews as utterly wicked outsiders, which has been used to justify the murder and dislocation of Jews for centuries. Here in America we have correctly tended to locate that hatred in far Right White Supremacy and Christian Nationalism. But what has been building for years and what has been brought into the light this past year has been the growing anti-Semitism of the Left, often in the guise of anti-Zionism – which has painted both Israel and the Jewish people as uniquely evil – the only nation in the world for whom the accepted solution for its crimes is its total destruction and the genocide of its people.

For me, much of the pain of this year has been experiencing some Progressive colleagues with whom I have worked for years on issues of social justice, turning their backs on me and on the Jewish community following October 7, sometimes using terminology invented by genocidal terrorists as commonly accepted truth, accusing all Jews of enabling genocide. This Spring, a student group at the University of California, Berkeley, School of Law published an [anti-Semitic cartoon](#) of Jewish law school dean Erwin Chemerinsky, who has spoken on this bimah, holding a knife and fork dripping, supposedly, with the blood of Gazan children - echoing the anti-Semitic medieval blood libel.¹ What has been hurtful in the midst of this resurgence is the denial of Jewish pain or vulnerability; a refusal to recognize Jews as a persecuted minority. Even worse for me has been the treatment of some of our children, from middle school through college and even elementary school, who have felt ostracized and targeted simply for being Jewish – a reality unacceptable in Progressive spaces for any other ethnic or religious group.

But while this year has been painful for me and for so many of us, I do not believe this is our new reality or that we have to accept it as a given. I refuse to give up on America and I refuse to give up on Progressive values. I do not believe that being publicly identified as a Jew should be an act of defiance.

Just before Rosh Hashanah, we were privileged to be host for a lecture by Atlantic writer Franklin Foer. As the speaker at our annual Oseran Family Lecture, Foer spoke about his article which he is turning into a book: “The Golden Age of American Jews is Ending.” This was one of our best attended lectures in years, I suspect because, as I said that evening: Jews love bad news; especially news of our imminent demise.

Foer posits that the 20th century was a kind of “vacation from history” for American Jews. Anti-Semitism was pushed into the hidden fringes from the 1970’s through around 2000. But with the rise of conspiracy theories following 9/11 – which saw a mainstreaming of suspicion that somehow Israel’s Mossad was behind the felling of the twin towers; through the financial crisis of 2008, blamed on Jewish financiers, and continuing through the suspicion of a Jewish plot behind the migrant caravans of 2018; the displacement of the image of Jews from the center of culture and science back to the ancient canard of Jewish plotting and manipulation of world

¹ The Washington Free Beacon, “Berkeley Student Group Shares Blood Libel Cartoon Targeting Law School Dean”, April 2, 2024

events, indicates to Foer that the Golden age American Jewish era is coming to a close. Now October 7 and the war against Hamas in Gaza has brought the Progressive Left into the publicly anti-Jewish camp. As Foer [wrote](#):

America's ascendant political movements—MAGA on one side, the illiberal left on the other—would demolish the last pillars of the consensus that Jews helped establish. They regard concepts such as tolerance, fairness, meritocracy, and cosmopolitanism as pernicious shams. The Golden Age of American Jewry has given way to a golden age of conspiracy, reckless hyperbole, and political violence, all tendencies inimical to the democratic temperament. Extremist thought and mob behavior have never been good for Jews.²

It is hard to argue with Foer's position, reflected as it is by many writers, including Dara Horn's provocatively titled "People Love Dead Jews" - and by our own lived experience - especially since October 7. We cannot close our eyes when the FBI reports that the Jewish community remains the most targeted religious group in the country - with anti-Jewish hate crimes accounting for 67% of all religiously motivated hate crimes, despite our being 2.4% of the American population. And the FBI is reporting a 21% increase in anti-Jewish hate crimes since October 7, 2023. We cannot close our ears when classic anti-Semitic tropes are used against immigrants accused by a Presidential candidate and his running mate of eating cats and dogs - echoing the Blood Libel used against medieval Jews. We know that what is bad for immigrants in America tends to rebound to the Jew - the ultimate outsider. We cannot ignore that same candidate preparing the ground for an electoral loss by preemptively declaring that the Jewish community will be to blame. This elevation of the "other" narrative - both subhuman and super empowered - has moved from the fringes to the center of political discourse. And on the Left the intellectual attempt to put all of the world's history into the simple categories of "oppressor" and "oppressed" has turned the Progressive story of Zionism into the world's leading example of Colonialism and genocide marking Israel as uniquely evil and worthy of elimination while ignoring real examples of genocide and starvation around the world. As NYTimes columnist, and former Oseran Lecture series speaker, Bret Stevens [wrote](#) just last week:

After Oct. 7, it became personal. It was in the neighborhoods in which we lived, the professions and institutions in which we worked, the colleagues we worked alongside, the peers with whom we socialized, the group chats to which we belonged, the causes to which we donated, the high schools and universities our kids attended. The call was coming from inside the house.³

² "The Golden Age of American Jews is Ending", The Atlantic - April 2024 Issue, March 4, 2024

³ "The Year American Jews Woke Up", October 4, 2024

Using a horror movie reference to highlight the modern Jewish condition. How Jewish! And yet, although I acknowledge the reality and the experience of so many, a reality I have experienced as well, I am not yet ready to declare the end of an American Jewish era.

Having been a rabbi for 30 years now, I have seen many predictions of doom come and go. The founding of Reform Judaism over 200 years ago was, according to some, supposed to herald the end of the Jewish people. Yet here we still are. Assimilation into America was our fated demise. Inter-marriage was supposed to seal the deal. And yet, Judaism – and particularly Reform Judaism, thrives and innovates and grows – Reform remains the largest Jewish denomination in America with nearly half of today's Reform Jews coming from outside the Movement.⁴ They are joining us. The synagogue has been declared dead as an institution, and yet we continue to be the center of Jewish life teaching Jewish pride to the next generation and strengthening Jewish individuals and families for generations to come.

And if popular culture is any guide, we are still going strong.

In the Golden Age of the Broadway Musical, Jewish producers, composers and directors didn't think they could tell a Jewish story. Then in 1964 they opened a little musical depicting a romanticized version of the Jewish shtetel based on a series of short stories by Yiddish author Sholem Aleichem. "Fiddler on the Roof" became one of the most beloved and commercially successful productions of all time. When we visited New York last year, we saw a Broadway revival of the modern musical "Parade" which tells the real-life story of Leo Frank, the only Jewish person lynched in America. Our Jewish stories are being told more and more honestly.

Franklin Foer declared the "height" of Jewish acceptance to be the 1978 Network broadcast "The Stars Salute Israel at 30" with the climactic moment being Barbra Streisand singing the Israeli national anthem and interviewing then Prime Minister Golda Meir – the two most famous Jewish women in the world - on live network TV celebrating the Jewish State. And while I wouldn't expect to see something like that today – unless Josh Shapiro wants to sing a duet with Bibi Netanyahu – I do see one barometer – Jewish characters on TV in more realistic, less stereotypical circumstances. My wife knows how much I love to complain about how rabbis are depicted inaccurately in movies and TV – from "Six Feet Under" to last year's "You Are So Not Invited to My Bat Mitzvah." I make an exception for Adam Brody portraying the "Hot Rabbi" in Netflix's "Nobody Wants This." I'm fine with that. But the fact is there are more Jewish themed TV shows and movies than I've ever seen – and unlike the "Seinfeld" crowd, those Jews are often portrayed as Jewishly engaged and living complex, authentic Jewish lives.

⁴ Pew Research Center, June 22, 2021 - <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/06/22/denominational-switching-among-u-s-jews-reform-judaism-has-gained-conservative-judaism-has-lost/> "Nearly half (46%) of today's Reform Jews have come from outside the Reform movement. A quarter of today's Reform Jews were raised as either Conservative (22%) or Orthodox (3%)."

As Bret Stephens suggested, I think the true answer to American anti-Semitism is not to hide our heads in the sand or to declare that all hope is lost – we Jews are good at both of those extreme impulses – or to live in fear - but instead to live proudly as Jews; to deepen our own Jewish knowledge, experiences and connection to Jewish community. As Stephens wrote:

To have been born a Jew is the single most fortunate thing that ever happened to me. It is a priceless moral, spiritual, intellectual and emotional inheritance from my ancestors, some of whom were slaughtered for it. It's a precious bequest to my children, who will find different ways to make it their own. It is therefore worth the time it takes to explore and worth the cost — including, tragically, the cost in bigotry and violence — it so often extracts.⁵

This is the Jewish impulse and image I believe we are adopting: a pride in our peoplehood and a desire to reconnect. Synagogues and Federations around the country are reporting what is being called “The Surge”⁶ a return of Jews to Judaism. Many stories are being told of Jewish people who have reconnected since October 7. Cantor Cahana had a lovely encounter with a person we had not seen at services before. “I have been away from the synagogue for 20 years,” she said. “But now I feel the need to be with my people.” To which Cantor replied “Welcome home.”

This year we started a new young adult program, started by our own Chelsea Micali, called “Omek” – which means “Depth.” Some 30 young people in their 20’s and 30’s are finding depth in their adult exploration of Judaism and its meaning in their lives. Welcome home. And we are seeing a rise in the number of older adults in our community connecting and exploring Judaism through art and culture. Welcome home. Many of you here are part of our new Circles program championed by our immediate Past President Libby Schwartz. Welcome home. Some of you here today or watching online may be a part of the surge and coming back or are here for the first time. Welcome home. Judaism and Jewish life here are thriving.

I think the encounter I had at the symphony was symbolic of the fear we have internalized from the rise of anti-Semitism on the Right and the Left. I understand that fear. But I believe it should not restrict us but encourage us to find more depth and connection to our Judaism. I continue to wear a kippah in public, not as an act of defiance that needs to be congratulated, but as a statement of Jewish identity and pride which I celebrate. We should not be afraid to wear a kippah, or a Magen David or a mezuzah on our door, or any other outward sign of Jewish identity. While we are aware and wary, I believe that the Jewish story in America is still being written and that we continue to have so much to contribute to America’s own story as a thriving, vibrant proudly identified Jewish community. Anti-Semitism may remain – waxing and waning just as it always has. But we will continue to be proud.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Jonathan D. Sarna, “The Surge,” The Jerusalem Post: <https://www.jpost.com/opinion/article-814207>

There is a short phrase from the prayer book, recited several times a day – and especially before going to bed and upon awakening and upon entering the synagogue: **יְהוָה לִי וְלֹא אֶיֶרָא** – “God is with me, I shall not fear.” Our Jewish identity and our Jewish people are with us. We shall not fear.

As we embrace those turning or returning or surging to Judaism, let us be that resurgence of Jewish pride.