

“You will not replace us! Jews will not replace us!” The chants rang out in Charlottesville and across the TV screens of a nation – white supremacists and (I shudder to say these words from this bimah) neo-Nazis rallying to spew their bigotry, hatred, and anger. The words, images, and actions of these angry young men (and a few women) – to say nothing of the twisted individual who drove his car into a crowd of counter-protestors, injuring nineteen and killing one– were appalling, shocking, an affront to the conscience of a nation that turned on its televisions to witness images that looked like they came straight from a bygone era – an era in which we hoped those sentiments had been locked away forever. Or, I should say: appalling, yes. An affront, absolutely. But shocking? Perhaps not to anyone who had been paying attention to the escalation in extremist rhetoric and the increasing confidence and boldness of the disaffected members of the self-styled alt-right.

For well over a year now, dating back to the early days of the presidential campaign, we have seen a deeply disturbing rise in the public sphere of divisive and bigoted attitudes and beliefs – attitudes and beliefs which we knew had never died away, but were at least relegated to private conversations and underground chat groups. It seemed there had been a widespread consensus that society would no longer tolerate or condone the expression of hateful, racist speech. But with the launching of Donald Trump’s campaign, white nationalist stances, fueled by working-class whites steeped in grievance and resentment, have become increasingly emboldened, targeting Muslims, Latinos, transgender people and, yes, Jews.

I say it this way because, despite the other vile forms of bias in circulation, anti-Semitism seems in so many ways like a throwback. A few weeks ago one of our congregants observed to me that the vast majority of people in our congregation have no first-hand experience of anti-Semitism – at least of the pervasive, institutionalized, and societally sanctioned anti-Semitism that was a mainstay of American Jewish life until the last fifty or sixty years. Certainly many of our older congregants retain vivid, indelible memories of being excluded, insulted, threatened, and made to feel ‘other’ because they were Jewish. My father and Aimée’s mother both attended Cornell, at least in part because Cornell did not set quotas for Jewish students, unlike many other Ivy League schools where their religion would officially be used as a factor against them. When Aimée and I applied to college, this sort of thing was absolutely not a consideration: *of course* there would be no formal mechanisms designed to keep us out because we were Jewish. I have never experienced anything of the sort and neither have my children: there are two generations of Jews now who have grown up in this country largely without any experience of anti-Semitism, other perhaps than the stray bigoted remark or insulting stereotype casually hurled their way. Two generations of American Jews who can be forgiven for thinking that anti-Semitism is done, that this country – or at least any part of this country that matters – has moved on. That anti-Semitism is no longer a *thing*.

But the truth is we have seen a steady rise in anti-Semitic rhetoric and attacks, around the country and in our own backyard. Whether it’s bomb threats called into Jewish community centers across the nation; or it’s hateful acts of vandalism against Jewish cemeteries in St. Louis or right here at Mt. Carmel in Philadelphia, where so many of us raced to help and bear witness to the dozens of grave markers that had been desecrated this past spring; whether it’s neo-Nazis launching terror campaigns against Jewish families in Whitefish, Montana; or it’s the KKK flyers and swastikas in Dresher and Maple Glen which prompted us to gather with area faith communities in a vigil of solidarity. According to the

ADL there has been a massive recent surge in anti-Semitic episodes – up 86% in the first quarter of 2017, and that on the heels of a year that had already shown a large spike in new anti-Semitic incidents.ⁱ

And then of course there was Charlottesville – the apotheosis in many ways of the organized and emboldened forces of white supremacy. The protestors who marched openly voiced their support for an all-white nation and made explicit that Jews not only had no part in that nation but were, in fact, its enemies. It's ironic, because at this exact time last year I stood on this bimah and spoke about white privilege – the insidious and unconscious biases so many of us hold against people of color, and the ways in which Jews hold a unique insider/outsider status as a group that was long clearly defined in this country as a distinct and suspect ethnic minority, but which over the past decades has increasingly been identified as 'white.' Eric Ward, a long-time civil rights strategist at the Southern Poverty Law Center who studies hate groups, has laid out a compelling explanation for why anti-Semitism is not just a part of white supremacist ideology but is, in fact, an essential, foundational underpinning of it, and that the increasing societal acceptance of Jews as 'white' plays a key part in it.ⁱⁱ Ward writes that whites in America have increasingly seen their economic and cultural dominance slipping away, which is incomprehensible because they are, after all, an inherently superior race: How could they be losing standing to blacks, Asians, Latinos, and other 'inferior' groups? The explanation is Jews: a diabolical and devious race that is committed to tearing down white nationhood and all that is good. Using our political and economic leverage – and, especially, our insidious ability to pass as white – we have been actively undermining the white cause, holding back the white man, to create a world where we can rise to domination. *This* is the reason that white supremacists place anti-Semitism at the heart of their ideology and *this* is the reason that neo-Nazi protestors in Charlottesville chanted "Jews will not replace us" – a slogan that was literally incomprehensible to me before I read Ward's piece. "Jews will not replace us"? As what??? As the master race, apparently.

It seems to me, however, that after Charlottesville – and, really, all the rhetoric and events leading up to it – American Jews can no longer allow ourselves the comfort of believing that we are safe. Muslims, Latinos, immigrants, transgender Americans – all of them became easy targets of opportunity by those seeking to sow division in this country. Those who were trying to promulgate a particular version of who gets to qualify as a 'real American' – a deeply repugnant idea but one that has gained currency among those who feel they are losing the advantages and privileges that their parents and grandparents had previously enjoyed. As Jews, we have historically stood on the side of vulnerable groups in this country – both as a function of our core Jewish values and also our collective experience as a despised and marginalized people. We have stood for openness, for inclusion – for an expansive definition of who qualifies as a 'real American.' But, in recent times, we did so with the implicit understanding that, however people drew these lines of in-groups and out-groups, Jews in this country – with the professional standing and educational and economic advantages many of us have achieved – were on the safe side of the line.

Recent events – from the election, to the rise of the alt-right, to the legitimization of hateful views on the extreme left toward those who evince any support at all for Israel – have reinforced the idea that there are real lines around American-ness and we Jews are on the other side. In Charlottesville – a city known as a bastion of tolerance and progressive values – members of Congregation Beth Israel who came to services that Saturday morning saw three men dressed in fatigues, carrying semi-automatic

weapons standing outside the synagogue, waiting and watching. They heard crowds of jeering young men passing by, shouting Nazi slogans and pointing, “There’s the synagogue,” and learned that calls had been posted on neo-Nazi websites to set it ablaze. They were advised at the end of services that the police had instructed them to go out the back entrance of the synagogue, in groups, rather than to walk out the front entrance onto the street. To be sure they also saw brave non-Jewish Charlottesville residents who came to pray with them in solidarity and support. But later, they heard the president equating the actions of those who stood against hate, who came out to voice their opposition to what was happening in their city, with the actions of the white supremacists and neo-Nazis who came looking to spread their hateful message and incite hostility – saying there were “fine people” marching with the white supremacists and condemning the display of “hatred, bigotry, and violence – on many sides.”

Yes, this absurd and repugnant statement was denounced across the political spectrum. But that doesn’t change the fact that the narrative and rhetoric in this country have already shifted in some fundamental ways. Racist attitudes and bigoted grievances were obviously long being nursed in significant portions of the country – a fact that would come as no surprise to virtually any African-American, for instance. But they were far less blatant than they were two generations ago. It was no longer acceptable to use the terms and voice the attitudes that had previously been common ways of belittling and marginalizing people. Some would dismiss this as “political correctness” – a form of hypocrisy that places an emphasis on using the ‘right’ terminology and calls people out for naming unpopular truths. But while there is such a thing as “political correctness,” this isn’t it. This was an acknowledgment that certain ideas, attitudes, and epithets are incompatible with a society dedicated to openness and inclusion. This was a conscious and aspirational shift toward trying to cultivate respect for all people – where we begin by placing certain ideas and behaviors out of bounds and eventually try to raise society to those ideals. There’s nothing wrong with calling shame on racist behavior, and for years the racists responded accordingly – going underground to dark corners of the internet, lurking behind anonymous usernames and Twitter accounts.

But what’s striking – and deeply alarming – in this most recent period is that what had become taboo no longer is. Now racists are proudly and publically proclaiming their hate in much larger numbers than ever before. A new, emboldened generation of white supremacists are taking off their hoods and marching openly in the streets, sitting for interviews, providing their names for reporters rather than hiding behind a white sheet. These young men are proud to be publically identified with the attitudes they espouse, and their brazenness sends a powerful message that they are eroding our public consensus on what was considered acceptable and what was beyond the pale. And tragically it’s working, as extremist positions have increasingly become a part of the mainstream discourse on the political right. A poll taken last month indicated that nearly 10% of Americans believe that white supremacist and neo-Nazi views are acceptable.ⁱⁱⁱ What’s more, and is also deeply concerning, is that many among this current generation of white supremacists did not grow up in households that espoused this sort of hate. Young men like Dylann Roof, who murdered nine African-Americans at Emanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston two years ago, encountered organized white supremacy not at home but online – through chat groups and websites. He became “self-radicalized” online – a phrase we are all familiar with, but usually in the context of disenfranchised, young Muslims living in Western countries. In both cases, the radical online web sites, chat groups, and social media accounts channel

these men's grievance, anger, and a desire to feel like they can belong to something larger than themselves – there's very little difference between the motivations that draw people to white nationalist groups and ISIS.

All of which raises an extremely important question for us as we begin this New Year: what is it that we as American Jews can do in the face of these frightening developments? Ironically, one thing I think is important is for us to be a little cautious in how we label anti-Semitism. For many decades, American Jews have faced only occasional outbursts of genuine anti-Semitism. Much of what we experienced came in the form of slights, crass jokes, and off-hand remarks that, while certainly tasteless and offensive, didn't necessarily rise to the level of full-blown, systemic anti-Semitism. For a while the term was used so often – especially by some on the right who characterized any criticism of Israel's policies as anti-Semitism – that the term became overused: a reflex more than a reasoned response. I am not one who runs to label things that I find personally offensive 'anti-Semitic.' I believe overusing the term engenders a dangerous desensitization to its importance. That being said, we can't back down from calling out the scourge of anti-Semitism where it truly exists, or bury our heads in the sand and wait for it to pass, imagining that it can't possibly touch *us*. It's scary for many American Jews to acknowledge that anti-Semitism is a reality in this country – that generations after we came here, worked hard, rose through the ranks, and loved this country – there are still many who want to see us gone. Who believe that we manipulate "real Americans" through our control of banking and the media, who see us as suspect and other. Because this all sounds so fantastical – to say nothing of untrue – we tend to dismiss anybody who believes this as an irrelevant crackpot. But as we've seen, the forces of bigotry have powerful new outlets and voices to amplify their hate, and we ignore this fact at our peril.

We must call out anti-Semitism where it truly exists, and decry it. But we must also stand firm against expressions of hate directed against any other marginalized groups in this country. We make a grave error – both ethically and tactically – if we focus on hate against Jews but ignore or even condone it when directed against others. Bigotry toward Jews is one manifestation of white grievance and resentment, but so are expressions of hate and delegitimization directed against Muslims, Latinos, blacks, LGBT Americans, and more. We stand on solid ground when we stand with others who are the objects of bigotry because unchecked prejudice against any one group gives license to bigotry against others. American Jews have classically made common cause with those who faced oppression – such as in the civil rights struggles of the 1960's. But even as we rightfully hold up those important accomplishments and moral victories, we have to acknowledge that many of those connections have become strained or lapsed in more recent decades. Tragically, a growing proportion of American Jews are buying into some of the rhetoric of those who sow division, and anti-Muslim sentiment in particular is on the rise in certain segments of the Jewish community. We have to do better than that and we have to *be* better than that. Buying into the facile and dangerous characterizations that play minority groups off against each other betrays not only our core values as Jews but also our own self-interest. We – as a synagogue and all of us individually – need to do a better job of reaching out to build connections, relationships, and coalitions so we can stand together against those who seek to marginalize us all. And we need to call out bigoted attitudes and rhetoric within the Jewish community, not roll our eyes and let comments stand that we know are wrong but excuse as ignorant or harmless. That sort of tacit

acceptance has allowed bigotry to persist in the larger society and we must root it out in our own community.

It is also critical that we not respond by simply dropping into a defensive posture. A key component of showing our strength and resilience as a community is to affirmatively demonstrate our pride in our Jewish identity and taking part in Jewish life, to lift up and celebrate the cultural, ethical, religious, and historical gifts that are an intrinsic part of being connected to Jewish community. The congregants at Beth Israel in Charlottesville were scared when neo-Nazis marched past their synagogue – but they showed up. They refused to allow anti-Semites to dictate how and when they should pray, celebrate, or come together as a community. It's interesting, because when we gather for Yom Kippur services next Saturday, there will be a big rally taking place in Washington D.C., the March for Racial Justice, which is supposed to bring together people from across all backgrounds to stand against white supremacy. The lead organizers, a number of African-American congregations, selected this date because of its historical resonance with the Elaine Massacre, during which more than 200 Black men and women were killed in Arkansas in 1919 by a mob of white citizens. The organizers didn't realize that the date coincided with Yom Kippur – which unfortunately speaks to the way Jewish organizations aren't working in coalition with other groups the way they have been in the past; had any Jewish groups been at the table when the march was being planned the conflict obviously would have been flagged early on. When the organizers realized the conflict, they released a very sincere apology, acknowledging that many Jews would be unable to participate in the march – although others doubtless will! – and thanking the Jewish community for being with them in spirit, as indeed we are. The statement reads, "We are marching in solidarity with our Jewish brothers and sisters who are observing the holiest of days on the Jewish calendar. We recognize and lift up the intersection of anti-Semitism and racism perpetrated by white supremacists, whether they wave Confederate flags, don swastikas, beat and kill people on the streets in Charlottesville, deface Holocaust memorials, or threaten and harass members of our communities and our religious and community spaces. Holding fast to Jewish tradition is also an act of resistance, in the face of growing anti-Semitism."^{iv}

These words are not only moving, but wise. When our values and way of life are being challenged it is vital that we stand firm, that we embrace our Jewish identity. Not in an aggressive way that seeks to belittle or demean others, not in an inward-looking way that leads to isolation and turning our backs on the world, not in a grim way that stresses carrying on at any and all costs, but rather with openness, and acceptance, and joy – lifting up the richness, wisdom, and sweetness of our tradition, one that is rooted in the goodness of the world and in affirming God's image in all people. One that teaches us how to orient our lives to sacred rhythms as we do today, to open ourselves to touch mystery and wonder, to find the resources and resilience to fight for what we believe in rather than giving into cynicism, defeatism, or despair.

Writing after Charlottesville, Rabbi Rick Jacobs commented, "[In the]... Talmud [B. Berachot 34b], we are taught that "one may only pray in a house with windows." Why? One answer is that even when we need to huddle together for spiritual strength, we must never shut out the sights and sounds of the world beyond our doors.... But windows also make sure that the deepest yearnings of our hearts radiate outward from our prayer place, helping to heal the brokenness throughout the world."^v At this New Year, we need to acknowledge the brokenness in our society, from which we can never insulate

ourselves – the divisions that turn people in this country against one another in mistrust and fear, and the prejudice and bigotry that lead some to chase after empty promises of greatness, to march in the streets with their chants of “Blood and soil,” and “Jews will not replace us.” Jews have no desire to replace these angry, misguided men; but we *do* want to replace their toxic value system that casts suspicion upon others, and sees this world only as a competition for status and power. For we *do* have the power to help heal the brokenness throughout the world – not by trying to wall ourselves off from this brokenness but by realizing that, right here, in this sanctuary, in this community, we have the insight, and understanding and capacity wrestle with these issues in all of their complexity, and we have the strength and resolve, born of thousands of years, to take on these challenges and work for real solutions. Nobody needs to replace anybody else. But we do need to harness the love, values, and wisdom that are our birthright and let them shine forth brightly for a country and a world that so badly needs them: tolerance, respect, compassion, faith in the underlying goodness of humanity. This is our heritage, this is our task: to be an Or Hadash, a renewed light of resilience, hope, and healing that can carry us all forward into this New Year.

ⁱ <https://www.adl.org/news/press-releases/us-anti-semitic-incidents-spike-86-percent-so-far-in-2017>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.politicalresearch.org/2017/06/29/skin-in-the-game-how-antisemitism-animates-white-nationalism/#sthash.GEZGMCWg.6Z61t3QN.dpbs>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/28-approve-trumps-response-charlottesville-poll/story?id=49334079>

^{iv} <https://www.m4rj.com/updates/2017/8/16/yom-kippur-statement>

^v http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/seeing-through-the-darkness-inside-charlottesvilles_us_599a45eee4b02eb2fda3214b