

Rosh Hashanah 5785 | October 3, 2024

Antisemitism.

Maybe it was a slow realization. Or maybe it felt like an overwhelming force, a wave that could not be stopped. Maybe it brought anger. Confusion. Fear. Sadness.

Antisemitism.

Maybe it was wrapped up in your feelings about Israel. Maybe you felt solidarity with other Jews – we were all in the same boat. Maybe you felt distanced from them. We might be in the same boat but we were not paddling in the same direction. Maybe it was a swastika painted on a building. A sign held by a protestor. Angry comments on social media. Increased security at Or Hadash. A friendship that has become harder. Or maybe it was more – much more.

However it felt for you, for each of us – it is undeniable that antisemitism has increased.

We can say that it increased but let's not say that it's on the rise. It can't rise on its own, it's not the water table whose levels rise and fall. It is not a wave or a tide that washes over us and can't be stopped. Frankly, it isn't like water at all – why do we say these things so much? It's disempowering. Because we're all looking to "Stand Strong" against antisemitism, to "Stand Up" against antisemitism. Standing strong against a tidal wave – what use is that?

Instead, let's be clear about what antisemitism is. It is anti-Jewish hatred - but it is more than that. Kenneth Stern, Director of the Bard College center for the study of hate, and former director of the division on antisemitism and extremism of the American Jewish Committee offers the following definition, "Antisemitism is at heart a conspiracy theory that sees Jews as conspiring to harm humanity. It's offered as an explanation for what goes on in the world. It appears on the right and on the left. It is also the philosophical backbone of much of white supremacy."

Let's unpack this conspiracy theory a bit. "Many oppressions rely on keeping a targeted group of people poor, uneducated, designated non-white, or otherwise *at the bottom*. Anti-Jewish oppression doesn't depend on that. Although at many times it *has* kept Jews in poverty or designated *non-white*, these have been "optional" features. Because the point of anti-Jewish oppression is to keep a Jewish face in the front, so that **Jews**, instead of ruling classes become the targets for people's rage. It works even more smoothly when Jews are allowed some success and can be *perceived* as the ones "in charge" by other oppressed groups."

In this way, one goal of antisemitism is used as a TOOL to separate the Jewish community from other marginalized and minoritized communities. In doing so, it wishes to both DIVIDE Jews from some of our most natural allies in the intersectional struggle for freedom and liberation

and ensure that those natural allies do not have access to our intellectual and historical resources of resilience either.

This is a manifestation of the same white supremacy and Christian hegemony that is unfortunately driving so much of our political landscape. It isn't connected to xenophobia, racism, islamophobia. It isn't connected to them, it IS them. It is the same thing. It is white supremacy.

Now, you might be saying to yourself, what about antisemitism on the left? It exists too. Antisemitism from the left sees Jews as colonizers in Israel, white people who have stolen land from brown people, and oppressed them. Antisemitism on the left hurts - it is what has strained relationships with communities that have been allies for years in social justice fights. It is what has made it uncomfortable for Jews in protest spaces, and it is the face of antisemitism that, horrified, we watched explode across college campuses over the past year.

In order for antisemitism to work, Jews must be kept in the *middle*. Jewish people get painted as both the undesirable element to weed out, the infiltrator, the enabler of elements that want to at least interrupt and at worst break down the status quo of defacto white power and privilege, AND instruments of colonialism. The face of a global power elite whose goal is to dispossess indigenous people of their land by using our outsized influence to pull the strings secretly, behind the scenes.

How does this operate? Let me tell you a story from this past year.

Several months ago, a member of our community sent me a petition to sign on to. This particular petition seemed, at least at first blush, like a no-brainer. "Confronting Hate" Sounds good! It's goal – to raise awareness of an antisemitic article in a local trade publication. Awesome. The problem? I couldn't sign. It will become clear in a moment as to why. Here are some excerpts from my response.

"Thank you for sending this petition. While I very much agree with the majority of this petition and its goals - including and especially calling out the Newsletter article's gross misrepresentation of the events in and around Al-Shifra hospital in Gaza, its inaccurate description and characterization of Hamas as a "combatant organization" rather than an internationally recognized terrorist group committed to the ongoing physical attack and political delegitimization of Israel - I cannot, in good faith, sign onto it myself. The two clauses #6 and #8 cross the line as being "a bridge too far."

What were these clauses? They were aimed at dismantling the cause of, and punishing the people within the workplace system who are working to further the cause of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in their workplace and its culture. Indeed, the trade newsletter in question was a Diversity and Racial Equity and Inclusion monthly newsletter.

The first called for the **firing of all individuals** involved in the production and dissemination of the DRE&I antisemitic newsletter. This demand extends to anyone within DRE&I, HR, and leadership who had any level of involvement or oversight in the decision to publish this hateful content. No one who contributed to this gross violation should remain in a position of influence within the organization.

The second? It called for **disassembling the DRE&I committee**: and asserted, “should there be a need to establish a similar committee in the future, it must be reconstituted with multiple stakeholders, including Jewish members of MLH and representatives from the community to ensure balanced and inclusive perspectives.”

→ WHAT?! As I read the petition, I recognized the signs. We were being baited and used. Who’s goal is it to dismantle the work of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion? Not ours! Everything this work stands for is, A JEWISH VALUE. We were being used as the middle man again. The face of a movement that wishes to destroy efforts for racial justice and the decentering of white voices and power.

In this time of political polarization and deeply, deeply divisive rhetoric, we must be **strategic** as a Jewish community in our building of bridges between ourselves and other minoritized/marginalized communities in the United States, rather than distancing ourselves from them. We should seek to have our voices **included** and **represented** in DE & I work as a group that has **also** been historically marginalized, impacted, and targeted by White Supremacy.

The strategy to combat antisemitism cannot be one that targets and takes down other ethnic and racialized minorities in its wake. The problem that created the circumstances out of which the newsletter article in question was written is White Supremacy. The perversion of facts - chiefly the toxic tropes of "Jews as global power elites" and a "western Zionist conspiracy" fuel the turning of Jews and other minority groups against one another. This is a trope that is **not** born out of the marginalized communities themselves; rather it is one that is imported by the culture of White Supremacy and engrained and internalized so deeply that folks do not recognize its origins.

How were we bated, though? How did we get here? Kenneth Stern, reflects on the nature of hate:

“When people hate, whether they hate people of another race, religion, sexual orientation, or politics, they crave simplicity and certainty. They are seduced by binary “good-bad” thinking and drawn to symbols. This is a human characteristic rooted in how we divide the world into *us* and *them*. And people who want to combat hate, we’re human too, and not immune from the seductive illusion and comfort of simple answers to complicated questions.”

Stern’s assertion about the humanity of “people who want to combat hate” is equally true if we substitute “Jews.” Let’s try it, *And Jews, we’re human too, and not immune from the seductive illusion and comfort of simple answers to complicated questions.*

We must combat this trend, not fall prey to it. This is a time for bridge building and re-education. In other words, how can we, as Jews, EVER see the movement towards embracing DEI/ DRE&I as something threatening? Diversity, equity & justice, and inclusion have ever been, indeed, our goals as well as minorities in this country. Let's make THAT the big ask, not folks losing their jobs and their seats at the table.

I've spent months processing and trying to unpack this moment. What led to it, and why I had such a strong reaction?

Have you ever done that exercise where each person is given a photo? One photo is of a rough gray something – what is that, fabric? One photo is of an eye. One is of a thin snake – what is that? A rope? Everyone is told to try to figure out what they are holding. Turns out, they are all holding the same thing – different perspectives on the same elephant. Well, we've got an elephant – a huge elephant in our society – and it is called white supremacy. And it's so hard to take a step back and look at all of it at once, particularly when we are only being handed one card with one piece of it. When each person looks at that elephant, they are seeing the part that is closest to them. The police violence against black people, the shameful rhetoric about Haitian immigrants, the antisemitism.

Or Hadash is an incredible place, and one of the things that makes us most special is how many of us are driven to social action and social justice. It is very rewarding and important to donate goods and advocate, and it's particularly easy in those moments when the cause or the topic is not about us.

But what about when it's ALL about us?

Let's talk for a moment about what internalized antisemitism is, and how it is operative within this cycle. April Rosenbloom (*The Past Didn't Go Anywhere*) writes,

“Internalized oppression is something that affects all oppressed groups. The form it takes depends on each group's history. For instance, on an individual level, Jewish people - especially men - often perceive themselves as physically weak. We were legally banned from being allowed to carry weapons for substantial periods under Christian and Muslim rule. European society excluded us from mainstream professions (farming, etc.) that strengthened the body. We were literally unable to protect ourselves and our families from mass violence and rape. Jewish people - especially women - often feel disgust about ourselves and our bodies, because, as the main racial 'Other' in Europe, European society and popular culture created its images of what was ugly and disgusting based on our Jewish faces, and its fantasies of what our bodies looked like.”

She continues, “**Our political decisions are also affected.** Historical attitudes toward Jews taught us to believe our own struggle was not worthwhile. Non-Jewish European intellectuals, including thinkers who heavily influenced the Left, taught that Jews were a

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people 'outside' of history; prominent theories held that because Jews had no land of our own, we were a deformed group without a role to play in history and revolution. In addition, much developing revolutionary theory saw the groups that mattered in creating social change as the industrial laborers or peasants. But European Jews, having been excluded from many traditional trades, often didn't fit neatly into those categories.

From both directions, Jews learned we didn't matter; our only meaningful role in changing the world would be supporting other peoples' struggles; in making ourselves useful. All this has compounded the biggest piece of internalized antisemitism: After centuries of experiencing other people not coming to our defense when we were targeted by violence and persecution, Jews have internalized the idea that there's no hope of getting other people to stand with us. For Jews who struggle for social justice, that means we often stay quiet about anti-Jewish oppression: We learn to fight in support of other groups without requesting the solidarity we, ourselves, need.

For Jewish communities, it means we lose sight of building a strategy for our liberation by finding allies in other grassroots communities. Instead, we depend on those in power, hoping that if we are useful to them, they will protect us. At times that leads us to cooperate in the oppression of others."

In other words, we are scared of directing attention of non-Jewish potential allies towards *us*. A) we've been burned by false potential-allies before, and B) what about the times when directing attention towards standing up for Jews feels like a reinforcement of the antisemitic claims themselves? i.e.: Just another instance of white fragility/ discomfort does not equal danger. OR see the power and influence they are leveraging in order to make a big deal about XYZ?! They *are actually* running the show behind the scenes if they have that much organizing power and influence!]

Combating antisemitism is all about us. But not because we're the topic. Because we are at a crossroads.

Our community can make a decision now about how we address antisemitism – either as an isolated form of hatred directed toward only Jews? Or as part of the elephant of white supremacy – one feature on a bigger whole that can only be understood if it is understood with all of the other features.

Instead of thinking of it as a wave, let's think of it as a tool. A piece of machinery that is being used to stir up hatred on the right wing, to gain political power. Watch how the tool is used - how Jews are held up as having more power and influence than others, then blamed for the problems of the world because of that. How a synagogue in Pittsburgh is blamed for facilitating an invasion across the border. How George Soros is blamed for social movements that threaten the power of the right wing. It is Donald Trump telling a room full of Jewish donors last month

that Jews will be to blame if he loses the election. It is the impeachment of the Alejandro Mayorkas, Secretary of Homeland Security - who is Jewish and a former leader at HIAS - for a tightly constructed conspiracy theory to let in large numbers of central Americans in order for them to immediately register to vote for Democrats, to replace the political power of white people. It's preposterous and it's all a lie, but it is working and it is gaining traction on larger and larger political stages. It endangers the Jewish community and it endangers other communities alongside.

A piece of machinery. And there are a few people who are using it and controlling it. Many others just caught up in its cogs.

A wave can't be dismantled, but machinery certainly can.

One more story from the past year:

There we were, two moms in a coffee shop. "Oh, Alanna," a woman beckoned from a table in the back, taking out her earbuds, "Oh my goodness, I have something I need to tell you." It was the mother of one of Bina's 2nd grade classmates and friends at our local public elementary school. I walked over and sat down, and she started to tell me a story. A few days before, a friend of hers had returned from an overseas trip to the West Bank and Gaza and brought home a bracelet with a Palestinian flag for her 2nd grade daughter. "Our family," she explained, "has always been involved with left-wing activism, and we've been talking a lot in our house about the things that are going on in Israel and Gaza, and my daughter was so excited to wear her new bracelet. She turned to me and said, 'But mom, I don't think I should wear it to school. I don't want to hurt Bina's feelings.'" With her hand on her heart, the other mom looked me straight in the eyes and said, "Isn't that the most compassionate and sweet thing you've ever heard?"

I was stunned into silence. Hurt Bina's feelings? My mind raced. On one hand, yes. Sure. It was sweet, thoughtful. I mean, maybe... But, on the other hand, what does this story mean? What assumptions is the other mom holding about me? About how Rebecca and I are raising our daughter? About who we're teaching her to love, to hate, to fear?

Every fiber of my being wanted to call her out. To yell at her - but somehow, I didn't. "Wow," I said, instead. "That sounds like our kids are thinking some pretty big and sophisticated thoughts. It's so crazy that they're growing up in such messy and challenging times." Our conversation continued. I got curious. I asked her more about her activism.

She told me about being raised by radical feminist, lesbian parents in the 1980s and growing up as a child of the "New Left." She told me about arrests, mostly before having kids, that she and her husband had experienced during protests and anti-White Nationalist actions - including her husband's arrest in Charlottesville after punching a neo-Nazi member of the Proud Boys during the Unite the Right rally in 2017. She shared that since then, her family has been trolled both

online and in real life, including an incident last year when swastikas were painted on the door of their house.

Again, I was stunned into silence, but for a completely different reason. Swastikas? On *their* house? But, I thought those were the things that *we* were targeted with - not the white, non-Jews. “Wow, that’s insane,” I responded. And then, thinking about the hundreds who gathered for a vigil outside of Beth Hillel-Beth El after their “Stand with Israel” sign was defaced with similar graffiti, “I can’t believe I didn’t hear about it.” In that moment, I realized - more strongly than ever - THAT WE ARE IN THE SAME STRUGGLE!

Why are we even talking about this? And why on Rosh Hashanah?

How we act next – the next steps we take – are truly why this is all about us. We are not just the victims, we are also good faith actors in making sure that a very complicated topic is handled with care in the spaces that we inhabit. It is on us to build solidarity with other marginalized communities. To name the ways that antisemitism is being used as a tool to attack other populations, to attack democracy itself. To ask others to act for us, and to act for them at the same time.

Ken yehi ratzon - may it be Your will. And, may it be ours, as well. L’Shana Tovah.