

When did you first realize that antisemitismⁱ might be about you?

Of course you remember. I do. It was around a board game, a Oiuji board, a mysterious game where everyone sat in a darkened room and lightly touched something called a message indicator, probably the original idea for the computer mouse. In the silence of the room the message indicator would move around to different letters to communicate to everyone sitting there.

I was in my teens and at a “friend’s” house in the suburb of Pittsburgh where I grew up. Everyone there was a born again Christian, except for me. That was the usual scenario where I grew up. The girl at whose house we were playing had to ask her mother’s permission to be part of the group to use “Elaine Zecher’s Ouiji Board.” Her mom would watch.

It feels like magic to use the Ouiji board because fingers move so lightly on it. It seemed impossible that anyone could dictate its movement. But as I soon discovered, it’s actually very possible. There we were and the message indicator started to move. First it spelled Y. O. U. Then A.R.E. and then T.H.E. Then it stopped maybe for dramatic effect. And then it spelled the last word. D E V I L. Everyone looked at me. I laughed because I thought it was so ridiculous. They didn’t. And then it happened. The mother stared at me and then at the girls and said, “This is what happens when you let a Jew allow you to engage in devil worship.” I didn’t even understand what she meant, but I knew it was time to leave.

I went home but I didn’t say a word to my parents. It had been too weird and besides I couldn’t articulate the feeling of discomfort. It was not until I sat in Confirmation class at Temple David in Monroeville, PA and heard our beloved Rabbi Edelstein explain antisemitism as the dislike of the unlike that I understood. And then my entire childhood growing up as one of the few Jews in the town came into full view.

Perhaps this deeply personal experience resonates with some of you for we now know there are many of us who have experienced anti-Semitism first hand.

Decades later I have a fuller understanding, certainly of the mother's behavior. Then, and likely now, in many churches, Biblical and religious references, particularly to the cause of the death of Jesus, have been seized upon as opportunities to denigrate the Jews.

But, it didn't start there. Pharaoh, the King of Moab, and Haman all "othered" us, likening our ancestors to swarms of insects with threatening power. And whether antisemitism found its basis in political, financial, or cultural arenas, a persistent theme continues to this day to emerge. In the eyes of antisemites, we, and all those in the Jewish orbit are "others," diluting and infesting society with our devil infused ways and therefore exist on the outside. We are not true and real citizens wherever we reside.

Antisemitism, and its cousins, Holocaust denial and de-legitimization of Israel have no rational justification. Antisemitism may be disguised in an academic voice, offered with regard to human rights, or presented as an explanation for some societal challenge but each of these is easily unmasked to reveal its evil and hateful intent.

Antisemites are dangerous bullies. They think they will look good if they make others look bad. And there's no sense in trying to engage with antisemites. It's like trying to reason with a toddler in the midst of a tantrum on the grocery store floor as to why he can't knock over the big display of macaroni boxes. Neither toddlers nor antisemites are capable of hearing rational thought or expectation of proper behavior.

Nevertheless, we should not relax our vigilance toward antisemitism. We must call it out and demand that our leaders do the same. In word and deed, they and we must convey unequivocally that such behavior is unacceptable and will engender a swift and bold response.

Even as we look to a future when antisemitism diminishes and, God willing, disappears, we cannot forget what the Holocaust has taught us. It remains a reminder in and of itself that certain behaviors, attitudes, and actions that initially may seem non-threatening can turn devastating very quickly. All the events and centuries leading up to World War II serve as a playbook for antisemitism. The false security following that era that antisemitism could no longer gain the traction it once had proved terribly incorrect. It only appeared to go underground and quietly await its moment. Incidents of antisemitic occurrences may rise more than they fall but they have not ever disappeared. The important data collected by the ADL has demonstrated that.

So, here we are again.

We are all frighteningly aware that antisemitism has taken a larger stage, rising in Europe, embedded in the ideologies of particular political parties in England and elsewhere, including America, on the left and the right, though with different methodologies; on social media, a frighteningly efficient vehicle to spew and promulgate derogatory themes and conspiracy theories: and, of course, use of Israel as perpetual villain. The impact of antisemitism affects each of us and causes psychic pain. And this is why we must be ever vigilant even if we have never experienced antisemitism ourselves.

It is not going away as much as we may hope it would and we can't ignore it. Yet, we also don't want to feed it or create the equivalent of the Greek mythological figure of the Hydra that keeps growing more heads the more it is attacked.

Be not afraid the prophet, Jeremiah urged the Jews exiled in Babylonia. They were the ultimate "other" in the land of their conquerors.

Fear like pain can come upon us in unpredictable ways.

So, let us work to deepen our understanding of the detrimental effect of hate, which can cause fear. Antisemites may live with the belief that it is ok to hate. We do not. We cannot become like them: rage filled, with hate eating away, like a hot coal burning our hands not theirs. They certainly ignore the holiness code, which we will read on Yom Kippur, that clearly states: *do not hate another in your heart and love your neighbor as yourself*ⁱ, but we know these ideas have much to teach us. This is not about befriending or even forgiving antisemites. We have no obligation in that realm. But, we must take care of our communities and ourselves. And that is why we must understand the vicious nature of hate to help us respond and to live our lives despite and because of it.

First, we condemn hate. The Talmudⁱⁱⁱ teaches that baseless hate is equal to idolatry, illicit relations, and murder combined. The rabbis understood how perilous irrational hate can be whether hidden under the surface or explicitly expressed. They thought of hate as the root of all interpersonal transgressions because it leads people to behave in ways that promote violence and misrepresentation toward others. Pittsburgh, Poway, Charlottesville and so many more places experienced hate manifest in antisemitism on display.

In the end, people who act with baseless hate destroy themselves. Leviticus teaches, “*Do not hate another in your heart.*” Once it is in there it eats away at dignity, compassion, and truth leaving a vacuous inner core. Therefore, we cannot let hate destroy us as well. Our energy and attentiveness is an antidote to their hate.

Yet, how do we live with the pain of their hatred toward us, an infliction we cannot always predict though we know how insidious it is and how it can lie dormant or hidden?

Many of us grew up in a world when our parents or grandparents shared stories of their youth of how they confronted antisemitism in the US or in other nations. Some among us escaped its death grip in Europe and Arab lands. We held onto and were taught about the dark cloud that could take hold at any moment. They told us to hide our Jewish star necklaces and not to talk about being Jewish. It sounds eerily familiar in our day. And yet, we can, we have to be different by not being afraid.

Second, what antisemites say is false about Jews and Judaism. They cannot determine who and what we are. Only we have the power to do that. Only we can transform these darker moments with the light and hope our tradition offers us. We can demonstrate and celebrate a beautiful and treasure filled tradition that inspires and inculcates meaning deep into our lives. When we share our love of who and what we are, we model for others how precious Judaism and being Jewish truly is. The way we celebrate and rejoice, bring to life the passion of the prophetic voice, allow our curiosity and love of learning to sustain us, and recognize the power of a people and community still thriving after many centuries nurtures us all. Hatred will not define us, but love, courage, perseverance, and taking care of one another certainly can.

Third, we learned through the terrible sadness and horror this past year, especially as we gathered after Pittsburgh that our relationships with the greater community matter. Our Christian and Muslim brothers and sisters as well as people of other faiths held us up and surrounded us with their supportive tenderness. Their presence and their voices both on the personal and communal level make for a different and better world to inhabit together. When others are willing to stand by our side, nurtured by relationship, our place has a firm foundation, just as we have stood with them in their time of need. When those in our midst reject the notion that any of us is truly “othered” then those who hate lose power.

And finally, our commitment to combat antisemitism and baseless hate while we cherish our Judaism and foster relationships insists upon our own self-examination of how we support others beyond the Jewish community who are vulnerable. Are we doing the best we can to ensure that others aren't "othered"? As we look forward to the day when the topic of antisemitism sits in the history department not in Judaic studies as if it is ours to solve,^{iv} it leads us to examine our own sources of bias that we may unintentionally and unconsciously assert in our own lives on others. For this is a bridge between us and the world we aspire to live in.

We live in challenging times and yet also in a world with great possibility to overcome antisemitism. We can act together and stand strong. All of us in the Jewish orbit, supported and surrounded by friends and neighbors, can persevere and celebrate with pride and with courage the beautiful tradition, ancient and ever evolving that is ours to hold, to live, and to cherish.

Come back on Yom Kippur for Part II.

So may it be.

i See antisemitism: Here and Now pgs 22-25. Spelling and lack of capitalization is intentional based on Deborah Lipstadt's understanding of the meaning and significance of the word, antisemitism.

ii Leviticus 19:18

iii Yoma 9b

iv Deborah Lipstadt spoke of the placement of antisemitism in Jewish studies department at a lecture held at the Hartman Institute, summer 2019

**a word of appreciation

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