

## Rosh Hashanah 5782, Anti-Semitism.

Rabbi Dan Danson, Temple B'nai Israel, Laconia, NH

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I want to take you back to 1926. Already, two years earlier, the Johnson-Reed Act had been passed, severely restricting southern and eastern European immigration, and just outright banning Asian immigration. The bill would haunt the American Jewish community as it struggled to rescue German-Jews in the 1930's. 1926 was when Harvard effectively imposed quotas on the number of Jewish students it would take, setting a course for many elite universities that was not reversed until after WWII. Today, for a host of reasons, American Jews are again very worried about anti-Semitism, but it's important to remember how far we have come – how profoundly open America is for us.

And our cause for concern today? The ADL reported that in 2017 the number of anti-Semitic incidents spiked by 60% and those numbers have held fairly constant through 2020. Some examples of this rise? In July, a Chabad rabbi was stabbed in Boston. The calls for boycotts and sanctions against Israel shot up during the Israel – Gaza conflict in May. In December Laconia state representative and school board member Dawn Johnson posted an article from a neo-Nazi website, The Daily Stormer that included a virulently anti-Semitic cartoon. While the cartoon's posting may have been inadvertent, the neighborhood of the web it was drawn from is anti-Semitic by design.

Many of the national events are well known to us. In 2015 there was the UCLA student who was rejected for the student council because she was active in Hillel and regarded as biased against other minority students because of Hillel's involvement with Israel. There was the 2017 white supremacist march in Charlottesville VA and the tragic massacre in Pittsburgh at the Tree of Life synagogue in 2018.

But the news was not all bad. Many of these events prompted strong community support for us. At the Laconia School Board meeting following Representative Johnson's posting, 300 people attended on Zoom to register their outrage. Bari Weiss writes about Pittsburgh,

*The entire community – Muslim leaders, Christian leaders, politicians, government leaders, police department, corporations, even our sports teams – stood up and said no. We will not give this oxygen.*

And during the Israeli action against Gaza last spring, the U.S Congress expressed overwhelming support for Israel's self-defense. This is not the 1920's. Institutional anti-Semitism is not on the march.

At TBI, in Laconia, and at the state level, there have been notable accomplishments in providing for our synagogue's security and combating anti-Semitism. Our president Ira Keltz and our past president Marsha Ostroff have had strong working relationships with Laconia Police Chief Canfield and he has been very helpful to us in evaluating our building's security and connecting us to the regional office of the FBI. We have worked directly with Senator Hassan to secure a

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\$38,000 grant to harden our building. The State of New Hampshire passed a bill in 2020 mandating Holocaust education in all school districts. Only last month I participated in a statewide meeting of New Hampshire Jewish leaders, convened by the FBI, to hear about their Community Outreach Program, a meeting organized to keep us abreast of their response to hate crimes in New England. It is important to note the role the Jewish Federation of New Hampshire has played in these statewide efforts.

Which is by way of saying how critical Jewish organizations are in the fight against anti-Semitism. The Tree of Life attack may have felt like a national event, but you can be sure the strong community support that followed happened because of the many ways the Pittsburgh Jewish community is connected to the larger community, because of the many ways it has been there for Pittsburgh communities of every kind in their hour of need. Here too, TBI is involved with the Salvation Army, Isaiah 66, Hands Across the Table, and non-profits we support through the We Care concerts. This is about having significant and heartfelt relationships in the community – about being a community.

Whether it is a critique of Israel that challenges the Jewish state's very legitimacy or a description of threats to America that draws from the virulently anti-Semitic work, *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, anti-Semitism can be found on the fringes of the political left and right. Bari Weiss, a Jewish journalist, writes in her book, *How to Fight Anti-Semitism*, that a key to combating it is calling it out when we find it on our side of the political aisle. Here are examples of doing this from conservative and progressive perspectives.

When Representative Johnson made her posting, Governor Chris Sununu commented,

*Anybody who is in a position of leadership, reposting things from websites like that is completely reprehensible. I can't put a strong enough word or hyperbole on it. I don't work with anybody who lives in that realm.*

So too, when Congresswomen Ilhan Omar issued a Tweet about AIPAC that stated, "It's all about the Benjamins", Rabbi Marsha Zimmerman of Temple Israel in Minneapolis, who is on the progressive side of the street, responded,

*That the tweet implies that Jews use money to control things like the media or government. Such language erodes trust between the Jewish community and elected officials.*

Zimmerman said the tweet has sparked concern in her congregation, spurring a flurry of worried calls, e-mails and texts.

*"The community is upset, and these kinds of things make us feel vulnerable," she said. "We can have disagreements about a lot of sensitive issues. Discourse shouldn't descend into stereotyping."*

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The contours of holding someone to account are complex and some eyes may have rolled at my examples, but Sununu and Zimmerman are very specific in their criticism. They name the issue at hand and, effectively, point to the corrective. Don't do anything with virulently anti-Semitic websites. If you have issues with US policy towards Israel, be sure you don't build your case on anti-Semitic stereotypes.

Bari Weiss provides another way of thinking on how to deal with anti-Semitism. She urges us to ask,

*Does this political party, this movement, this organization, this activist group – whatever – want me to be my most whole self? Or to be accepted or safe, will I need to hide my true views or cut off parts of who I am? Look for the politicians and the parties and the organizations who want you to be most whole. And support them.*

Two final things. Deborah Lipstadt in her book *Anti-Semitism* reminds us to keep perspective. The swastika scrawled on a wall by a lone teen, disturbing and frightening as it is, is very different from that of an organized effort. She also urges us to keep more joy than oy in Jewish life. Fighting anti-Semitism is critical but so is making sure the Jewish space a child comes to is vibrant and embracing.

Fighting anti-Semitism can be maddening and there many more layers to it than we have time to explore today. Often it feels like the hydra myth; we cut off one strand just to see another two emerge. It is also crazy shape shifting. In 1905 it was about the fate of Jews in repressive countries. Then it was about fighting for our place at the American table. Now it is at least in part about the strange and disturbing staying power of anti-Semitic stereotypes. What we can say is that everyone here is part of the most effective vehicle for combating it, an organized Jewish community. Whether it is through TBI, the Jewish Federation of New Hampshire, the Anti-Defamation League, or the American Jewish Committee or Congress, our best efforts to combat anti-Semitism take place when we belong to and support Jewish organizations.

May this year, 5782 be one where the tide of hatred is reversed and where America's promise as a land of freedom and inclusion for all flourishes.