

Judaism is our Raison D'être

Did you hear about the recent incident in New York City? Rudy Rochman, a student at Columbia and veteran of the Israeli Defense Forces posted about it on his Instagram, a social media app where you share photos. In the photo, a man is holding a sign that says, "Google it! Jews Financed Black Slavery." on the right and a person, Rudy Rochman, is holding a slightly, more hastily made sign that says, "This is what anti-semitism looks like," with an arrow pointing at the man and the other sign.

As reported on a blog:

The man [holding the sign about the Jews] experienced no opposition for about an hour after Rochman arrived and when two officers from the New York Police Department came, [they] saw the situation, and did nothing about it. A short while later, another pair of cops came and told [the man with the anti-semitic sign] to leave. He refused for a while and finally relented.

The campus police did absolutely nothing. Like everyone else who witnessed the display, they pretended nothing happened.¹

My friends, the challenge is that in 2016 there are too many possible examples of anti-semitism; in our workplaces, on college campuses, on the internet, in our own interactions. This day, Yom Kippur, Shabbat Shabbaton, this Day of Atonement, is a day of public confession. I must share with you that it is shocking to me that we are living in a time when a rabbi is compelled to address her congregation about anti-semitism. Nevertheless, categorizing people, naming, blaming and fearing the 'other' is commonplace in public discourse, especially in this election season. Instead of treating people and recognizing the fulness of their humanity we are living in a time of fear, doubt, and accusation.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, the former chief rabbi of Great Britain, writes:

Anti-Semitism has always been, historically, the inability to make space for differences among people, which is the essential foundation of a free society. That is why the politics of hate now assaults Christians, Bahai, Yazidis and many others, including Muslims on the wrong side of the Sunni/Shia divide, as well as Jews. To fight it, we must stand together, people of all faiths and of none. The future of freedom is at stake, and it will be the defining battle of the 21st century.²

¹<http://www.israellycool.com/2016/10/06/the-mask-has-fallen-antisemitism-clear-as-day-at-columbia-university/>

² *ibid.*

And since this prescient piece was written on the eve of Yom Kippur two years ago, the future is now.

A recent Anti-Defamation League survey reports there are two areas where anti-semitic incidents are on the rise and sadly, it is in the face of our young people: the internet and college campuses. "A total of 90 incidents were reported on 60 college campuses in 2015, compared with 47 incidents on 43 campuses in 2014. Campus anti-Semitic incidents accounted for 10 percent of the total incidents reported in the U.S. in 2015."³ In January 2015, vandals spray-painted swastikas on the exterior wall of a Jewish fraternity (AEPi) at UC Davis on the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz from the Nazis.⁴ In March at Berkeley, The phrase "Zionists should be sent to the gas chamber" was found in a campus restroom, not long after a swastika was found on a university owned building.⁵ And most troubling, for every incident that is recorded there is at least one other incident that goes unreported.

In California reported anti-semitic incidents are on the decline. But Los Angeles and California aren't most of the country. We have chosen and been able to live in this large metropolitan, liberal, Jewish enclaves. Sadly, this shtetl for the 21st century cannot follow us and our children everywhere we go. In other parts of our great nation, public schools do not close for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur like they do here. In much of this country, you can't find matzo ball soup on the menu at your local diner, finding kosher for Passover matzo during Pesach is difficult, and seemingly innocent anti-semitic slurs are far too common to hear.

Take this example from a midwestern suburb.

A shy, sixteen year old Jewish girl attends the public high school in a small suburb of St. Paul, Minnesota. She is on the tennis team, sings in the chamber choir, leads student groups and is a good student, already thinking about where to go to college and mildly fixating on college entrance exams and scores. She and her family are active in their synagogue, she works as a madricha on Sunday mornings and she is on the board of her temple youth group. One December day, she walks to her locker in the packed hallway between 4th and 5th periods to drop her English books and retrieve her Spanish books and stops short. Drawn in blue ink on her locker, in the middle of a seemingly endless bank of several hundred lockers is a swastika.

Panicking she does what any over-protective sister would do and goes to check her younger sister's locker just down the hall. It's clear. She makes it to her to Spanish class

³http://www.adl.org/press-center/press-releases/anti-semitism-usa/2015-audit-anti-semitic-incidents.html#.V_uzXuArLIU

⁴ ibid.

⁵ ibid.

before the bell. Good students are never late for class. The panic and fear subside and this new, anti-semitic reality sets in. “She’s being singled out. This was not a random doodle on a locker. She’s a target because she is Jewish.” The student receives permission to leave class and makes a report to the school administration. Before the end of the school day, a witness steps forward and says she saw a student writing on the locker, the police are notified and appropriate statements filed. In the weeks and months to come, charges would be filed by the county and, in the end, the perpetrator brokered a deal by serving as a witness for a case with a more serious charge and the misdemeanor charges against him were dropped.

And the girl? The after effects of this incident took some time to heal. With thanks to a supportive family, mental health professionals, and her deep relationship with her community she came through okay. And today you all know her because that girl’s story is my story. It was my locker.

I tell you what happened to me because, unfortunately, incidents like it happen to too many of us and these are not the stories we share with another. Whether it is the ignorant comment made by someone at the gym that we overhear, or something that happened in high school or college, or comments on social media platforms, prejudice and hatred towards Jews, towards us, is everywhere and it hurts.

But what are we teaching our children? Are we telling them about these incidents in our own lives in age-appropriate ways or are we washing them under the rug. Perhaps it is time to tell these stories to our families and our friends. If we start to break the cycles of ignorance and hate that fuel anti-semitism, perhaps the next generation can know something different.

Our parents, grandparents and maybe even great-grandparents, knew the fear of anti-semitism all too well. It was this fear led many of them to change their surnames at Ellis Island to sound “less Jewish.” And we, inheritors of those new names, instead of wearing and owning our Jewish identity with pride like our relatives hoped, are hiding and adapting to minimize threats of anti-semitism. It is time to break our silence.

We need to stop being fear-filled and confront the realities in front of us and we need to ask, what are we doing for our children and for ourselves to take pride in our Judaism and to live according to our Jewish values? Judaism isn’t meant to be an item on the weekly to-do list, Judaism is the *raison d’être*.

Rabbi Elliot Dorff explains,

The ‘lig’ in the word ‘religion’ comes from the same Latin root as the word ‘ligament’ which is connective tissue. The Latin root *ligare* means to tie, connect,

or link. Religions, among other things, provide us with a broad picture of how we are and ought to be linked to our family, the members of our community, other human beings, the rest of the animate and inanimate world, and to the transcendent element of our experience, imagined in Western religions as God. That is, religions give us a perspective of who we are, both as individuals and as members of a family and community, and who we should strive to be.⁶

Our religion, our Judaism helps us to make sense of our world and to live meaning-filled lives.

We Jews want to be people who see the humanity in others. Jews do the right thing even when it is inconvenient. Jews pursue knowledge and seek deeper understanding. Jews have the capacity to appreciate the awesome and beautiful moments of life. Jews crave a community that will care for them in times of sorrow. And when we join together in sacred Jewish community, we teach our children that, like the generations before them, belonging to a synagogue matters. Being Jewish matters.

For 70 years now, TBH has been an antidote to anti-semitism. Under the visionary leadership of all of its rabbis, TBH as an institution has stood for and stands for doing what is right and not what it is easy. As an institution, TBH provides opportunities for Jews to learn about their faith and about themselves at every age and stage. We work with our families to create young Jews who know how to ask hard questions and to treat others with compassion. TBH provides countless opportunities to work in interfaith partnerships with our neighbors in social action and we create beautiful music together. Our doors are open for you to come home, as Rabbi Hronsky spoke about so beautifully on Rosh Hashanah, you just have to take the first step and we will meet you.

The Torah portion we will read in a few minutes describes the communal covenant and reminds us, “b’charta b’chayim, choose life.” In this year, how will you embrace Judaism to drown out the voices of those who want to wipe us out? How will you make Judaism your *raison d’être*? We can’t know how anti-semitism may present itself next. We can only choose to tell our stories, to seek justice, and not to let fear quell our pride in our Jewish identities.

Adonai oz l’amo yitein, Adonai yivarech et amo bashalom. God, may you continue to imbue us, your people, with strength to stand strong against those who hate us. Adonai continue to bless this people and this sacred congregation so that we can strengthen one another in times of need. Amen.

⁶ Dorff, Elliot N., “A Jewish Perspective on the Ethics of Care.” *Intercultural and Interreligious Pastoral Caregiving*, p. 235.