

From Germany to America, to No Longer;
Call Out the Antisemitism of Today!

Rabbi Amnon of Mainz, Germany, during the 11th century, was threatened repeatedly by the Archbishop to convert to Catholicism or die. Rabbi Amnon had no desire to convert; his faith was so strong. But, on one occasion, legend recounts, that he paused. He paused, and evasively asked for three days to think. He regretted this immediately. What had he done? How could he waver at **all** in his Jewish faith!

The story continues, that after three days when brought before the Archbishop, he pleaded, "Cut my tongue out for having paused, for taking time to reflect, for turning my back on my faith!" The Archbishop dismayed by this response was certainly not willing to heed the rabbi's request. Rather, he ordered the rabbi's limbs be cut off by sword one at a time. One by one, each leg, each arm. The story continues that as Rabbi Amnon slowly bled... his death was prolonged, just long enough giving him time to compose the beautiful piyyut, poem, or prayer we know so well. The *Unataneh Tokef*, imagine at the moment of your death to declare....*Mi b'cherev---* who by sword! Who, Rabbi Amnon, himself, by the sword of hate, by the sword of antisemitism.

In the *Unataneh Tokef* prayer, we declare who shall live and who shall die, who by water and who by fire, who by beast, who by earthquake, and then there is that one word interjected early on... who by sword. It stands out, as it is amongst elements of natural causes. This sword, this sword must be wielded by a human being, and is not natural at all. Tonight, we focus upon who by sword, who will suffer at the hand of another person.

Rabbi Amnon who paused for just a moment, was clear and proud of his Jewish roots. Being a part of our *am-* our peoplehood. Once he declared this to be his truth, his fate was sealed, by the deliberate slice of the sword. He is murdered at the hands of another. A classical instrument of war; a sword thrust in hate. It may not be the literal death like that of Rabbi Amnon, but the sword of antisemitism cuts deeply today wounding the souls of each of us.

Antisemitism, in Germany in the 11th century like that of Rabbi Amnon was not good, in the 19th century still not good, in the 20th – oy. Nor last year when during this high holy day season some 8,000 ordinary citizens joined an angry mob of neo-Nazis in their anti-immigrant and antisemitic rhetoric marching through the streets. Nor the antisemitism experienced this past Shabbat, as a man wielding a knife, a sword if you will, attempted to enter a synagogue in Berlin crying words of hatred as he pressed at its doors.

While many well-known rabbis have preached in that very synagogue in Berlin, called the New Synagogue, one in particular comes to my mind, Rabbi Joachim Prinz. You see in Berlin in the 1930's, the civil rights of Jews were being stripped away, and Rabbi Prinz refused to be silenced. He wanted Jews to be proud of their identity. So, he preached loudly in the attempt to restore Jews' self-esteem and later all minorities self-esteem throughout the days of his life. His documentary summarizes this well:

“Knowing the Nazis were monitoring his every word, and despite repeated arrests, Prinz continued to preach about the value of Judaism....expelled from Germany in 1937, Prinz arrived in the United States, the land where democracy had supposedly triumphed over bigotry and hatred. Here, he witnessed racism against African Americans and realized the American ideal was not a reality...he would eventually become a leader of the civil rights movement. Rabbi Prinz worked to organize the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, declaring, **‘bigotry and hatred are not the most urgent problem. The most urgent, the most disgraceful, the most shameful and the most tragic problem is silence.’** Moments after this statement, Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his "I Have A Dream" speech.”¹

One must wonder what would Rabbi Prinz be preaching to us today in the face of the antisemitism and bigotry, still so very present? Rabbi Prinz would probably tell us to lift up our heads. Be proud of our heritage, and to continue to fight. Fight for our right to exist, for Israel’s right to exist, for equal treatment of all who are marginalized, and reminding us that the worst enemy in all of this is to remain silent. So tonight, (pause) this year, we must not be silent.

We sit by the grace of freedom and by our choice in prayer. We sit with pride in our hearts as we observe Yom Kippur. Sadly, some of our brothers and sisters are no longer able to have this privilege. Friends, we are days shy of the one-year anniversary of the Pittsburgh massacre, of Jews like you and me, who sat praying in their seats at their beloved Tree of Life synagogue praying. And we are just five months distant from the shooting in a shul not so far from here in Poway. We cannot be silent.

We cannot remain silent. Antisemitism is on the rise. The city of Los Angeles alone has reports of 86 antisemitic incidents this past year, and 6 more in Sherman Oaks.² Gratefully, resident of Reseda, Mark Steven Domingo’s planned terrorist attack was thwarted last April as he tried to carry out a mass casualty attack with explosives. And with gratitude to Nicholas Wesley Rose’ parents of Orange County, who reported their son for purchasing a gun because he wanted to “kill some Jews.” While he too was caught he had spent a year researching local synagogues and preparing lists and ways to kill Jews. Not to mention all of the attacks upon our easily identified Orthodox brothers and sisters walking to and from their shuls: from wig tearing off, to cars slamming into families, to name calling and much much more. Graffiti of swastikas and phrases like “Jews should be gassed” are rampant, upon the walls of synagogues, on the sidewalks of our streets, and on school walls all within our community.

The violence, the hatred is bad, very bad. The majority of these acts are easily linked to white supremacist groups, whose presence is growing at an alarmingly fast rate over these last few years. It doesn’t appear to be slowing anytime soon. Predictions soaring through the next election.

¹ <http://www.prinzdocumentary.org/#prinz-story>

² www.adl.org Also check out their heat maps for specific incident information.

And yet, other antisemitic acts are far subtler like the deep anti-Israel narratives crying for her to be wiped from the earth, that are coming from the Left alongside Muslim extremist groups.

The Right is also not so innocent where several political candidates run for office on the backs of hate language. Examples: Russel Walker of North Carolina, a Republican House candidate who lost but won 37% of the vote last year after he proudly proclaimed repeatedly that “God is a white supremacist.”³ Or, more direct antisemitic language from the likes of Steve West a past Republican candidate for the House in Missouri who declared on his radio show, “Hitler was right.” And his son Andrew said about him following the Pittsburgh shooting, “But certainly the terrorist that engaged in that synagogue shooting and my father have the same objective...that objective is the removal of Jews from America. And certainly, if somebody who is already unstable gets the kind of message that he’s preaching, it’s all bad.”⁴ Andrew is right. Messages received subtle, and not so subtle, are resulting in horrific acts. Andrew was brave. Making the effort to call out his father, and tell people to not vote for him! Thank you, Andrew.

Antisemitism from both the right and the left in America has me losing sleep and wringing my hands. I hear Rabbi Prinz’ words pounding in my ears.... bigotry and hatred are not the most urgent problem. The most urgent, the most disgraceful, the most shameful and the most tragic problem is our silence. How do people make a run for office based upon hate? How are we not stopping it? How do our college kids lose safe spaces at school, neutral zones, and have student governments overrun with antisemitic and anti-Israel narratives making them feel unsafe? Not just from those on the right, but from the left, and the religious extremists of all faiths. How?

Alana Newhouse offers the theory that perhaps this has been due to the fact that for so long “American Jews have been conditioned both by the American mythos and by our own history to think of anti-Semitism as something that happens there, rather than here...”⁵ Like in Berlin – not here! Maybe this is why we are dumbed into silence, or into hanging our heads low and feeling ashamed of who we are, what we are!

What we know is that antisemitism is now coming from all directions, the right, the left -especially on our college campuses, and from radical Islamists. The ADL- the Anti-Defamation League identifies in 2017 a 60% increase of antisemitic acts with the steepest increase upon school and college campuses.⁶ And, now according to Professor Deborah Lipstadt we identify a fourth stream....all the other folks in everyday conversation who are repeating negative opinions of Jews and conspiracy power

³ <https://www.newsweek.com/north-carolina-republican-russell-walker-white-supremacist-racist-god-1205466>

⁴ <https://www.kansascity.com/news/politics-government/election/article220812270.html>

⁵ Alana Newhouse, *American Yahrzeit*, Tablet Magazine, October 29, 2018.

⁶ www.adl.org

theories. Exposure to anti-Jewish comments allows for the perpetuation of stereo-types that are being picked up and spread further.⁷

I also think what is different today, then from even a few years ago, is that we are allowing antisemitism to divide us as a people. No united voice. Where in the past it may have united us stronger as people, the schism down the political divide is deep. We Jews are using antisemitism to further our own political agendas. AND, antisemitism is being used by others for their political agendas. In a free America, we hear our entire faith as being called disloyal if we vote for one party over another. And, we put up blinders when someone from our “own” camp expels rhetoric, delegitimizes our peoplehood. Yet, when someone from the other camp acts in an antisemitic manner we have a zero-tolerance policy which cuts them out, splits them like the evil child. The conversation is silenced.

Rabbi Amnon of Mainz was silenced for his attachment to our peoplehood, and Rabbi Prinz was expelled from his country. Is this to be our fate too? I pray, no.

I see you here this evening, attached to your faith, to your Jewish values, to your brothers and sisters sitting next to you. We are an *am* a peoplehood, joined in community and in celebration of our faith. The first time the word “*am*” was used in our Torah comes in Exodus chapter one when a new Pharaoh arose and he was worried about this *am*. We will call this the first big act of antisemitism. This people, this *am*, was growing big. He worried would they be loyal if they lived among us? He then referred to as insects. Classic signs of antisemitism: objectified like an animal, viewed as a demographic threat, considered disloyal and as something to be scared of.

And yet, it is this exact narrative we use to draw us together as a people. We recount this narrative every year, and depend upon our shared fate to unite us. Rabbi Soloveitchik in his classic work *Kol Dodi Dofek* would call this “our covenant of fate.”⁸ We have a “consciousness of shared circumstances....the answer to the question of the unity of the Jewish people is that as long as there is shared suffering, there is unity.”⁹

Think about it, every year at Passover we tell our story. It’s the most performed ritual, no matter denomination, affiliation, religious or secular, the Passover seder unites us across all lines. We recount the suffering of our people, and identify (SLOWLY) as if we were there ourselves.

Also, we tell the story of the four children. Remember what the wicked child says? “What is this service to you?” He says, to “you” and does not include himself. This is where he fails, for having divided himself from the community. Turning his back on our shared covenant of suffering. For this he is labeled a heretic, a wicked child. You have to be with your *am*, with your people. Identified and with them. We are stronger together.

⁷ From a discussion with Deborah Lipstadt in July 2019 at the Shalom Hartman Institute. In addition, many great resources were gained from a teaching by **Rabbi Lauren Burken also of Shalom Hartman Institute on Antisemitism and the Jewish Collective from a Pesach Seminar.**

⁸ Joseph Soloveitchik, *Kol Dodi Dofek*

⁹ *ibid*

This wicked child reminds me, of an excerpt from the article, “America’s White Saviors” by Zach Goldberg where he identifies the shift over the last five years of white liberals expressing preference for other racial minorities above their own. This includes many (not all) liberal Jews. White liberals have moved so far to the left on questions of race and racism that they are now, on these issues, to the left of even the typical black voter. This change amounts to a great awakening - moving past the white powerful hegemony, to now a suspicion of the white American Jew.” This is tied to a decrease in support for Israel and a surprising increase in the number of white liberals expressing negative attitudes towards Jews. Include, Jewish college aged children who feel torn between being an ally to another minority or being glued to their faith. They express feelings like, “Hey, I don’t wear a *kippah* why am I being lumped in with those Jews.”¹⁰ I am not with them. Are these liberal Jews then a part of our *am* or a different people? Are they simply to be set aside and labeled as wicked?¹¹

As an *am*, a people, our narrative constantly returns us to that space of vulnerability. We learn in the Talmud, if a person wishes to convert they must be prodded, “Do you not know that Israel is persecuted and oppressed, despised, harassed, and overcome by afflictions?’ If the convert replies, ‘I know.’ He or she is accepted immediately.”¹²

Yep, you belong to this *am*, because we have shared suffering. This brings us closer together. But, you might say, in a place where we are free and not oppressed should we still be tied together by our peoplehood status? Like we are today in America. Jews move freely about, blend in easily, and are spread across communities with multiple identify factors.

For this let’s look at the story of Esther, our Purim narrative. The word *am*, peoplehood, is also used here. “Haman then said to King Ahasuerus, ‘There is a certain people-an *am*- scattered and dispersed among the other peoples in all the provinces of your realm whose laws are different from those of any other people and who do not obey the king’s laws....’”¹³ In this land, of King Ahasuerus we had blended in. Remember according to our narrative this edict had to be sent out in 127 languages, this means we were spread out and fully encompassed. In the land of Persia, we had become a part of the people, and yet we still managed to be othered. The minority, the

¹⁰ “America’s White Saviors” [Tablet Magazine](#), June 5, 2019 really powerful material drawn from Rabbi Yonah Hain of Columbia University. He spoke on the experiences of today’s college students who live in a place of Jewish power and Jewish vulnerability.

¹¹ What if my shared suffering narrative no longer works for me, as I see the power that Jews have especially when put side by side with other minorities. Somehow our college students have to place this side by side and make a bridge with the vulnerability they are also witnessing. Jews are being attacked and separated from movements simply because of their identification with the *am*. I am in awe of these students who find a way to bridge this fragile reality. They understand that they are among the elite, the power of Jewish money and coursework on campuses etc. Yet, they are stuck balancing this with the feeling of being vulnerable not liked due to their Jewish identity. What a space to be in.

¹² BT Yevamot 47a

¹³ Esther 3:8

people who were landless and subject to the laws of the land, are threatening to the powerful. The minority, the few, were perceived as too powerful.

So perhaps this is the warning of the book of Esther. No matter how well blended we are we must always remember that we are part of the Jewish *am*. We can be vulnerable again and again.

Historically this has united us, our suffering. Whether it is Egypt, Persia, all the way through to Hitler, we have been united. But not so in America, at this time. We are witnessing the real fact that slowly white people are losing their majority status and the reactions of segregating, name calling, scapegoating, is moving us towards authoritarianism.¹⁴ Antisemitism will continue to increase, and we cannot afford to be divided.¹⁵

There is a disturbing commentary in our Talmud that no one dares teach, especially to a large crowd.... I know you must be curious. For real, no one shares it as well the rabbis go to extremes to determine the outcome. The Talmud offers a farfetched example of an infant child who was born with two heads, they ask should the child be entitled to one or two shares of his/her father's inheritance? Is this infant one person or two people? It goes on to give the example of when King Solomon ruled and a similar case was brought before him and he ruled. 'Let them pour boiling water on the head of one child and see if the other one screams. If he does, then it means that the children are not regarded as twins, but as one. However, if the second child does not feel the suffering of the first, then they are to be regarded as separate individuals.'¹⁶

A horrible hypothetical story for sure interpreted by Rabbi Soloveitchik, remember he was the one who said as long as there is shared suffering there is unity. Soloveitchik wrote, "If boiling water is poured on the head of a Moroccan Jew, the prim and proper Jew in Paris and London must scream. And by feeling the pain, he is loyal to nation."¹⁷ I am most certain he was saying he is loyal to the Jewish nation, the *am*.

Tonight, I am asking us to feel the pain of all Jews no matter if they are Orthodox, Reform, Republican, Democrat, Independent or if they are LGBTQ and banned from a march for carrying a rainbow flag with a star. And for us to feel the pain of fellow Jews whether they live in Germany, Persia, Paris or America. Whether they are Haredi Brooklynites, Jews from Pittsburgh, or Poway. Jews who wear *kippot* or Jews who wouldn't dream of stepping into a shul ever.

And then, we must go even one step further. Remember, that we aren't just reminded at Pesach of our suffering as a people, but what it means to be the stranger,

¹⁴ Inspired by Rabbi Rachel Timoner's Rosh Hashanah sermon 2019.

¹⁵ This is not good for us as an American people or as a Jewish *am*. The Pew Research Center shares, "that for the first time since 1992, majorities in both parties express not just unfavorable views of the other party but real feelings of fear and anger. More than half the Democrats 55% say the Republican party makes them 'afraid' and 49% of Republicans share this fear of Democrats." With the numbers being much higher for those highly engaged in politics.¹⁵

¹⁶ Menachot 37a

¹⁷ Joseph Soloveitchik, Kol Dodi Dofek

having ourselves been oppressed. That it is our job to stand up against all bigotry, all hate, all oppression of the vulnerable, of people of color, of immigrants, of individuals of different religious backgrounds. Of all those who suffer for being different. Feel the pain for our brothers and sisters who are a part of our *am* stand up and say no more. No more sword wielding and hurling of harmful words. And, to stand up and say no more; no more cruel treatment of the minority who suffers at the hands of the powerful. No more objectification of the other, no more scapegoating. No more.

Our voices are our power. This means we must be doing a lot of calling out this year. Calling out of folks who use antisemitic tropes, or racial slurs, whether they are in our camp or in the camp of others. Whether they are our professors, friends, coworkers, students, or our parents. And, we must listen-- no matter how hard. We must engage and talk with the other. Only then can we share our pain, point out inaccuracies, and let someone know that what they are saying is harmful to a people.

We owe it to ourselves as a people, and to our children for their future, to rage a war against antisemitism, to unite rather than divide, and to fill our hearts with love for our people. Lift our heads with pride.

As the sword of hate is slicing fiercely at all marginalized souls across America; and being thrust with antisemitic venom at the hearts of **our** very souls, even as we bleed in pain, we must hold fast to our identity like Rabbi Amnon of Mainz. Hold fast to our peoplehood, hold fast to our *am*.

The Hebrew word *am* shares the same root word as *im*, meaning “with”. In the year ahead, let us be **with** one another, united across political and age divides, and be **with** one another...unabashedly, unafraid, standing tall, calling out against vitriol and antisemitic acts. As Rabbi Prinz cautioned, “the most urgent, the most disgraceful, the most shameful and the most tragic problem is our **silence**.” Let this not be so for us. Let us raise our voices, loudly, proudly, and together.

Cein yehi ratzon