

# Yom Kippur Sermon

5780

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Sometimes when I see a panel of pundits who are commentators on cable news, I think that one of the requirements of the job must be to have been spectacularly wrong about something of major importance. And if that is true, I would certainly be a candidate for the job, for I need to admit to you how I was spectacularly wrong on a subject of major importance.

One day last fall, I had the pleasure of meeting an old school friend whom I hadn't seen in decades. She shared with me her memory of her late grandmother's fear that antisemitism could arise in the United States as a major factor, and that lately she too has been feeling that fear. I was reassuring. Yes, I think that our President's words have emboldened white nationalists, as we could see from Charlottesville and other incidences. And yes the antisemitism directed to Jewish journalists on social media since 2015 was very disturbing. But I still felt that the perpetrators were mostly fringe groups and that there were others more vulnerable to violence in our society—including immigrants, LGBTQ folks and people of color generally. I also felt that Jews had integrated so successfully within different parts of society that it would be hard to turn back the clock.

She didn't counter my arguments other than with a couple of skeptical words. "Look online..." And that stayed with me.

That conversation happened on Monday, October 22<sup>th</sup>. Five days later, a man with an AR-15 style assault weapon, burst into the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, shouting antisemitic slurs and massacring eleven people. The man had been posting online rants "calling immigrants 'invaders,' distributing racist memes and asserting that Jews were the "enemy of white people." Then, on Saturday, just before coming to the synagogue on a mission of murder, he typed: "I can't sit by and watch my people get slaughtered. . ."1

In addition to being the deadliest antisemitic event in American history, and a heartbreaking tragedy that touched all of us, it indeed seemed part of a pattern that defied any attempts at isolating this as the work of a fringe element. Using language that the mainstream right, including the President, has used of immigrants as "invaders," and linking racism, antisemitism, anti-immigration, and an aggrieved sense of white people as oppressed, pointed to a far more systemic use of antisemitism than I had previously understood.

Though this has actually been developing for decades, many of us were still caught unawares, for the United States has genuinely been one of the most welcoming places for Jews in the history of the Jewish diaspora. Since the 1970's especially, when I came of age, we

have had the freedom to thrive here as Jews. In polls conducted by the Pew Foundation on how warmly Americans feel toward different religious groups, Jews have consistently topped the list as the most liked, even as recently as the poll taken this past summer.<sup>2</sup> My own experience bears this out. In my life, I have occasionally encountered antisemitism, but I have more often encountered philo-semitism—a genuine curiosity and appreciation of Judaism.

We must acknowledge, however, that alongside this very real warmth and openness to Jews and Judaism on the part of most Americans is a growing antisemitism that, though was once considered belonging to fringe groups, has now gained access to political power in the United States. And if we want to both confront antisemitism *and* realize our vision of an America that values each of us and that is safe, welcoming and inclusive for all, then we need to look at and understand the systemic nature of that antisemitism as it exists today in our country.

And yet the subject of antisemitism itself is surprisingly challenging to talk about even among Jews. For today antisemitism is being successfully exploited as a wedge issue for partisan purposes. And because of that, there is often no agreement across partisan or political lines about what constitutes antisemitism. In addition, most of us have, at least at times, excused our allies and friends for things we would not tolerate in our political or ideological

opponents. I therefore want to say up front that antisemitism and other kinds of racism exist in varying degrees across the political, socioeconomic and demographic spectrum. It exists in blue states and red states, in liberal and conservative circles. All antisemitism needs to be confronted, but not all expressions of antisemitism are equal. Some expressions are rooted in an unconscious bias that, while needing to be called out and corrected, are not necessarily based on hate. These kinds of biases against others also exist of course in our communities and in each of us as well. Some people who are called out, take the opportunity for genuine learning, growth, and change. Others resist.

But what most concerns me are expressions of antisemitism that understand themselves to be a part of a greater movement-- such as white nationalism — that is organized to take power and exclude all minorities. So while antisemitism on the right is certainly not the only kind, I do believe it is our greatest threat at this time. The ADL wrote in its 2018 report on Murder and Extremism that “extremist-related murders in 2018 were overwhelmingly linked to right-wing extremists. . . White supremacists were responsible for the great majority of the killings, which is typically the case.”<sup>3</sup> For that reason, I will focus more, on white nationalism, what it is and why it should concern every one of us.

The terms white nationalism and white supremacy are sometimes used interchangeably, but it is important to see the difference. As Eric K. Ward, the leading civil rights strategist and student of these issues explains, “we’re defeating white supremacy, but we’re losing ground to white nationalism.”<sup>4</sup> Ward explains that “[w]hile white supremacy in the United States is a *system* [such as Jim Crow or mass incarceration] designed to maintain control over people of color . . . white nationalism is a *social movement* advancing a mass cultural narrative that is singularly focused on the creation of a white-ethno state.”

White nationalism began as a response of white supremacists to the success of the Civil Rights movement, and it has come into the mainstream as part of a backlash to the election of America’s first black president, Barak Obama. “Where is the antisemitism in white nationalism?” Ward asks. “Where isn’t the antisemitism,” he answers. It is central. For when defeated white supremacists, who believe that whites are superior to blacks, try to understand their defeat at the hands of the civil rights movement, they cannot believe that they were indeed defeated by black leadership, black organization and black courage. They are unable to concede that. So they look for another reason, which they find in classic European antisemitism-- and that is the canard of a secret Jewish conspiracy that is responsible for that defeat.

Derek Black, the godson of David Duke and former heir apparent in the white nationalist movement before he renounced it, confirms this. He told Terry Gross that in the “awful pyramid of beliefs [of white nationalist ideology], Jews are at the top as enemy No. 1 because . . . white nationalists believe the Jews have propagated a scheme of multiculturalism and are sort of the No. 1 enemy of what white nationalist would define as the white race.”<sup>5</sup>

The alarming thing about this ideology is not only its content, however, but also how it has gained political power. Derek Black explains that, “I knew from the time that I was a child that white nationalism, as long as it was not necessarily calling itself white nationalism, could win campaigns.”<sup>6</sup> And indeed he did win an election in a South Florida neighborhood at age 19. How?

Washington Post reporter Eli Saslow explains that “by feeding that sense of grievance and by playing to these ideas of: ‘your country is being taken away’... ‘things are changing’... ‘this is turning into a place that you don't recognize’... ‘we don't need this kind of immigration’... ‘we don't want these signs in Spanish’ ... that has a huge effect with a lot of voters. And it's what got Derek elected. And it's what has gotten other politicians elected in our country, as well.”<sup>7</sup>

The shooter who entered the Tree of Life Synagogue, the shooter who entered the Walmart in El Paso, and the marchers in Charlottesville have been exposed to this kind of white nationalist

ideology online. They act because they believe these ideas that the “white race” and “white culture” need to be “defended” from blacks, immigrants, Latinos and Jews. In the context of this *political movement* of white nationalism, we can now understand the link in the shooters’ minds between the so-called threat of immigrants as invaders, racism, the idea that Jews are the enemy of white people and the chant that “Jews shall not replace us.” And even more disturbing, we can see how, as Eric Ward says, the path “from margins to the mainstream are just a few steps.”

As an example of these few steps, Ward points out that white nationalist language which has referred to itself as a “white civil rights movement” since the ‘90’s, entered into language of the NRA, when its former president Oliver North described the NRA as a “civil rights movement.”<sup>8</sup> We can see how white nationalist anti-immigration rhetoric of “invasion” has played in the President’s language and platform. We can see that when the President tells four congresswomen of color to “go back” to the countries they came from, he is expressing a white nationalist idea that people of color do not belong in what they assert is a “white country.” And we can see that when the President tells Jewish democrats that they are being disloyal when they defend these women of color and their rights as congresswomen, he is implying that if we are not in line with the program, we may not belong here either. As Eric Ward says, “out of

the fringes of society, white nationalists have begun to change the narrative of who is an American and what will America look like.”<sup>9</sup>

And so what seemed to be tone-deaf individual tweets and missteps of the Trump campaign and presidency turn out to logically fit into the narrative of white nationalist movement going mainstream. The comment that there are “some very fine people on both sides,” after Charlottesville, according to Derek Black “was the most important moment in the history of the modern white nationalist movement.”<sup>10</sup>

In this context we can see that it was not a hapless mistake that then candidate Trump tweeted a photo-shopped picture of Hilary Clinton against a background image of \$100 bills next to a big Jewish star, an image taken from a white nationalist website.<sup>11</sup> It was not an accident that candidate Trump’s final campaign ad<sup>12</sup> featured three Jewish financiers: Lloyd Blankfein, Janet Yellen and George Soros, whose photos together suggested the white nationalist antisemitic narrative that Jews are in control of global financial institutions and fund this multicultural assault on white culture. It’s not a gaffe that the president referred to the Prime Minister of Israel as “your” prime minister to a group of Jewish supporters. And it is not an error that a recent Trump 2020 official campaign video ended with a lion symbol that is the symbol of a white nationalist group.<sup>13</sup> The message to Jews

is clear—you are accepted on condition. Your acceptance can be revoked.

So we can see that if, according to Eric Ward, “we treat [antisemitism] as a series of individual acts of discrimination” we will miss how it is “a systemic . . . bias that is being used to drive a political movement.” We will miss the way antisemitism is inseparably tied to racism, to the anti-immigration movement and other expressions of hate. We will miss the way antisemitism is used to divide groups that can only secure freedom by working together.

We therefore need to pay attention to the way antisemitism is used as a wedge issue, because division has always been used as a way to maintain oppression. As Martin Luther King, Jr. said: “whenever Pharaoh wanted to prolong the period of slavery in Egypt, he had a favorite, favorite formula for doing it. What was that? He kept the slaves fighting among themselves. But whenever the slaves get together, something happens in Pharaoh’s court, and he cannot hold the slaves in slavery. When the slaves get together, that’s the beginning of getting out of slavery.”<sup>14</sup>

Since the time of Pharaoh, antisemitism has been used both to divide Jews from each other and from other oppressed groups. The Pharaoh of Genesis used Joseph the Hebrew to offer grain to the starving Egyptians in exchange for their land, making Egyptians serfs to Pharaoh but making Joseph the Hebrew the face of the oppression.

The next Pharaoh of the book of Exodus managed to make Israelite slaves think Moses was making their lives miserable rather than Pharaoh. And Pharaoh was able to divert the attention of Egyptians away from his own absolute power and wealth and onto what he described as the threat of the Hebrews.

In this context, it makes sense that President Trump pressured Prime Minister Netanyahu and the Israeli government to deny the only two Muslim women in Congress entry to Israel, when Israel itself had previously expressed no problem with doing so. In this Pharaonic strategy, why should Trump be the face of this kind de-legitimation of Muslim congresswomen when he could have the Jewish state do it for him? And as a bonus, Jews can argue with each other over BDS rather than focus on the way we are being used.

And we are being used. This is not new. We were used in Boston in the 40's, 50's and into the 60's, when Jewish neighborhoods such as Roxbury and Mattapan were redlined. It caused tensions and divisions between African Americans and Jews, while making big profits for white, non-Jewish owned banks and real estate companies, all the while keeping Boston segregated.

And the truth is, many whites who believe in the tenants of white nationalism are being used too. Martin Luther King tells a story of talking to white prison guards when he was in jail. He asked them what they earned in their job. "You know what?" he said when

he heard, “you ought to be marching with us. You are just as poor as Negroes... you fail to see that the same forces that oppress Negroes in American society oppress poor white people.”<sup>15</sup> So this isn’t a struggle against a particular people of whatever background. It is a struggle against injustice, and it calls for a movement of people who care about a greater vision for this country.

We are all flawed. We are all vulnerable to the prejudices we grew up with and the fears and vulnerabilities deep inside us. We Jews are not immune to these kinds of prejudices and have our own work to do. But we are all also capable of imagining, as our Torah does, that everyone is created in the image of God, and that it is our responsibility to create a society where that value is carried out in every sphere. We are capable of learning and changing. We are capable of countering a movement of white nationalism with a movement of freedom and justice for all. But we must wake up to this moment in history. We cannot, like Jonah, about whom we will read this afternoon, afford to be asleep. As King preached: “Somewhere we must come to see that human progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and the persistent work of dedicated individuals who are willing to be coworkers with God.”<sup>16</sup>

Eric Ward suggested three ways we can step up and create such a movement.<sup>17</sup> First, we need to demand that elected officials and

leaders take a side against ideas of white nationalism. Second, we need to talk to our neighbors. And third, we need to organize and build power rather than unwittingly give in to the white nationalist strategy of keeping us divided, isolated and alone.

I would like to add some ways that we as Jews can specifically step up. First, as others have said, we need to recognize antisemitism when it occurs<sup>18</sup> including in our own circles and movements. We should not cut off from them but speak up when we see it, and insist on voicing our own stories and experiences.<sup>19</sup>

Second, we should try to see through and resist complicity in the exploitation of antisemitism for partisan goals or for the purpose of division or diversion.

Third, we must help to build movements and alliances for liberation for all. That will require the courage to voice our own truths while at the same time listening to others --including those we may disagree with or feel challenged by.

And lastly, acknowledging antisemitism is not a replacement for an engaged and meaningful Jewish life. There needs to be more to Jewish literacy than the literacy of knowing how we have been persecuted. If antisemitism disturbs you, invest yourself in Jewish life, Jewish learning and Jewish community as an affirmative act, as everyone here today is indeed doing. Our tradition offers the strength, wisdom and the faith to work toward this vision of freedom

and justice. We will need its spiritual resources, for this will be a long and difficult struggle. But it is a struggle we can win.

I began this sermon bringing to mind the horror of one man entering the Tree of Life Synagogue and taking lives. I want to end by reminding all of us of the over four hundred people who stood with us in our synagogue just days after, grieving with us. This happened in synagogues all over the country. This is the America we love—an America of our highest values and of compassion. This is an America we will build together for all. “And that day the morning stars will sing together and the [children] of God will shout for joy. God bless you.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/27/us/robert-bowers-pittsburgh-synagogue-shooter.html?action=click&module=RelatedCoverage&pgtype=Article&region=Footer>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/07/23/feelings-toward-religious-groups/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.adl.org/murder-and-extremism-2018>

<sup>4</sup> <https://popcollab.org/white-supremacy-falls-white-nationalism-stands/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=651052970>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2018/09/24/651052970/how-a-rising-star-of-white-nationalism-broke-free-from-the-movement>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=651052970>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HvOQQMSatN8>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HvOQQMSatN8>

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- <sup>10</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/22/podcasts/the-daily-transcript-derek-black.html>
- <sup>11</sup> <https://www.timesofisrael.com/trumps-star-of-david-tweet-traced-to-white-supremacists/>
- <sup>12</sup> <https://www.timesofisrael.com/trump-closing-campaign-ad-seen-as-striking-anti-semitic-tones/>  
<https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2016/11/is-donald-trumps-closing-campaign-ad-anti-semitic.html>
- <sup>13</sup> <https://www.newsweek.com/donald-trump-shares-campaign-video-featuring-image-used-white-supremacist-group-1456785>
- <sup>14</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., “I See the Promised Land,” in *A Testament of Hope*, pp. 280-281.
- <sup>15</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., “The Drum Major Instinct,” in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches*, ed. by James Melvin Washington, (New York: Harper Collins, 1986), p. 264.
- <sup>16</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., “Remaining Awake through a Great Revolution,” in *A Testament of Hope*, p. 270.
- <sup>17</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LODRhNDUEG8>
- <sup>18</sup> Jews for Racial and Economic Justice has offered a helpful resource on antisemitism <https://jfrej.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/JFREJ-Understanding-Antisemitism-November-2017-v1-3.pdf>
- <sup>19</sup> Cherie Brown <https://theshalomcenter.org/content/responding-grass-roots-racism-anti-semitism>
- <sup>20</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., “Remaining Awake through a Great Revolution,” in *A Testament of Hope*, p. 278.