

Our American Jewish Wakeup Call

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I am going to introduce you to a Jewish saying that no one uses anymore. In fact, our young people would find the phrase absolutely perplexing. They would not understand it. This phrase is the Nehru jacket, or the Pet Rock, of American Jewish culture.

Good for the Jews. Bad for the Jews.

Those twin phrases pretty much summarized my late parents' world view. Something was either good for the Jews, or bad for the Jews. Barbra Streisand – good for the Jews. Lenny Bruce – bad for the Jews. Sandy Koufax – good for the Jews. Bernie Madoff – bad for the Jews.

No one thinks this way anymore.

Except, for perhaps this past year.

There is no other way to say it.

This past year has not been good for the Jews.

In fact, this past year was the worst year in American Jewish history. It has been the most difficult, the most perplexing, and the most heartbreaking of any year in American Jewish history.

Why do I say that?

The attack on Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, on a Shabbat morning in October, which took eleven lives, on the bloodiest single day of American Jewish history. The man who used to blow shofar on Rosh ha Shanah in Tree of Life Synagogue was murdered that day. Today, his shofar is silent.

The attack on the synagogue in Poway, California, on the eighth day of Pesach. A 60-year-old woman, Lori Kaye, died shielding the rabbi, Yisroel Goldstein. He lost a finger. The attack left a 34-year-old man and a young girl with shrapnel wounds.

The shooting attack outside Young Israel in North Miami Beach.

The attacks that most American Jews do not even know about, the attacks that we barely acknowledge – attacks on Orthodox Jews – the most visible and identifiable Jews in New York City -- on an almost weekly basis, and in some cases, several times a week -- attackers hitting Jews on the head with bricks, throwing rocks, pulling belts off rabbis and using them to beat them.

Those are just the stories about violence. There are others, as well.

The neo-Nazis who went on the websites of Yeshiva University and Brandeis University, and took photographs of students and faculty members, and put those images on white supremacist websites.

The politicians in Rockland County, New York, who created an anti-Hasidic video, with images that could have come out of Der Sturmer.

The New Jersey politicians – not one, but two of them -- who, this summer, used the phrase “to Jew someone down” – and other politicians came to their defense – saying that the term “to Jew someone down” is not antisemitic!

Synagogues desecrated with swastikas.

On college campuses, there is a growing sense that the mood is turning not only against Israel, but against Jews, and against Judaism itself.

At Columbia University, just this past week. With two hundred world leaders in New York City for the climate summit, whom did the university invite to speak?

Mahatir Mohamad, the president of Malaysia – a vile and proud and self-declared anti-Semite – who has spoken of the hooked nose Jews and who has said that the Jews rule the world by proxy – and who in his talk took the opportunity to once again cast doubts about the historical veracity of the Holocaust.

At Hofstra University on Long Island. A Jewish student told her professor that she would need to miss class for these Days of Awe. He told her that she should re-evaluate her religious beliefs.

At Tufts University, a Jewish student came back to his dorm room, and he found a Nazi flag on the door.

And, I am just talking about America.

About what is happening to Jewish communities across Europe – don’t get me started.

Every so often, when I encounter a problem, I ask myself the same question that many of you ask yourselves: WWMD?

What would Maimonides do? Maimonides -- the great medieval sage, philosopher, codifier of Jewish law, writer of letters to beleaguered Jewish communities, and physician – a man who, even in the midst of a people that has produced its share of overachievers, was the greatest Jewish overachiever of them all.

This is what Maimonides said about the shofar.

The shofar's call is saying: Wake up, you sleepers, from your sleep and you who slumber, arise. Inspect your deeds, repent, remember your Creator. Those who forget the truth in the vanities of time -- look to your souls. Improve your ways and your deeds.

For Maimonides, the blast of the shofar is the alarm (the word teruah actually means alarm).

This morning, I would like to issue a wakeup call.

The first thing we need to understand is antisemitism is eternal.

One of my favorite books is Humboldt's Gift by Saul Bellow. It won a Pulitzer prize in 1976, and then Bellow won the Nobel Prize for literature.

Humboldt is a first-generation American Jew. He feels distant from the European Jewish experience.

For him (I quote): "history was a nightmare during which he was trying to get a good night's rest."

The pogroms of Europe are history, we said to ourselves. Or, if you are a Sephardi or Middle Eastern Jew – Baghdad is history; Cairo is history; Teheran is history.

Of, of course, we said to ourselves: yes, in this Golden Land, there had been attacks on individual Jews. Though how many of them? Leo Frank, lynched in Georgia in 1915 – that's history – how many others? Five or six? A few synagogue bombings? Jews couldn't get into Princeton or Yale? Hotels on Miami Beach where we could not stay? Gentile kids throwing pennies at our kids?

Yes. Those things happened.

But, by and large: we believed that all our achievements, all of the famous and accomplished Jews in politics and the arts and sports and science, all of our beloved Nobel Prize winners, Ruth Bader Ginsberg, Bob Dylan, Jerry Seinfeld, Jonas Salk, Joe Lieberman, Jared and Ivanka...

We believed that we were the exception. We believed that America was different. We believed that we were the luckiest Jews in history.

Did you see our security man, George, when you came in? Did you thank him for keeping us safe?

Did you ever dream that we would need a George?

Friday afternoon, we had a training for an active shooter situation. God forbid.

I took that training. Most of the time, my continuing rabbinical education is going to the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem and studying sacred texts. I never dreamed...

We never dreamed....

We were wrong.

I have a friend who has chronic fatigue syndrome. He gets sick. He gets better. He gets sick again. It is in his system. It will always be in his system.

Do you know what antisemitism is?

It is the chronic fatigue system of history – an infection that is there, that remains dormant within the body – and given the proper conditions and given the failure of a society's immune system – it always re-appears.

Antisemitism is the oldest hatred. The oldest ism. A virus that mutates into a parade of libels. The oldest obsession.

My best definition of antisemitism? Irrational thinking about the Jews.

You know the story about the guy who gets into the Uber and the driver starts wailing on the Jews – they even sank the Titanic! Wait, the man says: that was an iceberg. “Sure – Greenberg, Goldberg, Silverberg, Iceberg...”

Antisemitism is eternal. Wherever and whenever, it shows up. It is the Forrest Gump of ideologies.

The second thing you need to know is that antisemitism is an equal opportunity hatred.

I want you to steel yourselves.

I am about to speak about politics.

This is what I need to say to you.

If you are a conservative Republican, this is your spiritual home. Please understand – if you go further to your right, you will find antisemites.

Over the past ten years, if you look at the fatalities that have come from domestic terrorism – 75 percent of them have come from the far right – and most of them, from white men with military style weapons. (Don't get me started).

White supremacists have one goal, and one goal only: They want to rid this country of all those who go against their definition of white America.

That includes the Jews.

You remember the far-right rally two summers ago in Charlottesville, Virginia, from two summers ago?

Since that dark day, white supremacists have committed at least 73 murders.

I know that some of you are fans of Star Wars – so let me put it this way.

In order to fully mature, Luke Skywalker needed to understand the dark side of the Force.

**In order to fully mature, America needs to understand the dark side of the American force.
That dark side has always been white supremacy and the hatred of the Other.**

Now, let me go, quickly, to the other side – so I can beat you to the punch of “whataboutism?”

If you are a liberal Democrat, this is your spiritual home. Please understand: if you go further to your left, you will find antisemites – or, let me be clear: you will find people who deny to the Jewish people the right that they would freely give other people – the right to a state.

I am talking about the congresswomen, Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib.

I am talking about activists for BDS – boycotting Israel, divesting from Israel, calling for sanctions against Israel. It has had zero effect on Israel; it has had a great effect on American Jews – because what wants to do is it to demoralize us – especially our young people on college campuses.

BDS is functionally antisemitic, because the only country worthy of such actions just happens to be the only Jewish state in the world. It is antisemitic because it seeks to isolate and strangle the Jewish state.

I am talking about how, at this past year’s Dyke March, the organizers told proud Jewish lesbians that they could not march with the Star of David.

I am talking about the fact that, as Bari Weiss has written: far left activists increasingly say to Jews: you need to make a choice.

You can be a progressive, or you can be for Israel.

Here, I learn from Deborah Lipstadt of Emory University: if you only see the manifestations of antisemitism on the other side, then you are not seeing clearly. We need to condemn antisemitism on all sides. Every manifestation of Jew-hatred is dangerous.

Oy. Rabbi, any words of comfort?

As a matter of fact...

You know the definition of a Jewish text message?

“Start worrying. Bad news to follow.”

No.

Good news to follow. We need to hear the good news.

First: the good news is in what we Jews have given America.

My kids and grandson live in Jersey City. Not far from their apartment, they can see the same thing that their great-grandfather, Max Salkin, saw 120 years ago as his boat sailed into New York Harbor.

It is the doorpost of America — the Statue of Liberty.

But, a doorpost needs a mezuzah.

The Jews gave America its mezuzah — its sacred words that would adorn its doorpost.

They come from the soul and hand of a young Jewish woman who died before her time — a Sephardic Jewish woman named Emma Lazarus.

You know those words.

"Give me your tired, your poor, your huddle masses yearning to breathe free...the wretched refuse of your steaming shore."

It was a Jew who crafted and gave voice to America's vision of itself — as an open society. That is only one reason among a hundred -- why we Jews speak up against all kinds of bigotry — especially against immigrants.

Because, Emma Lazarus was talking about our great-grandparents.

Second, the good news is that we are not alone.

Tell me if you've heard this one.

Two Jews are walking, late at night, in a bad neighborhood. Suddenly, they hear footsteps behind them. One Jew turns to the other and says: "We had better be careful. There are two of them, and we are alone."

This year proved something to us. If we were paying attention, we would have realized that **we are not alone**.

Someone asked me: "Rabbi, you and your son went to Berlin this summer. You saw where there had been synagogues that were burned."

"This past year, Rabbi....are we not in the middle of an American Kristallnacht?"

My friend and colleague, Rabbi Danny Schiff, divides his time between Jerusalem and Pittsburgh. If you ask him: Is this Kristallnacht? -- this is what he would say.

What happened on Kristallnacht in 1938? Ordinary Germans joined in, or they stood by and they watched.

What happened after Pittsburgh in 2018? Exactly the opposite.

The entire community—Muslim leaders, Christian leaders, politicians, government leaders, the police department, corporations, stood up and said no. We will not give oxygen to this hatred. The Pittsburgh Steelers attended the funerals of the murdered Jews. I was in Squirrel Hill two weeks ago. In the store windows, you will see the list of the Jews who were murdered.

Let me tell you something about the headline that appeared in the Pittsburgh Gazette after the murders.

The headline consisted of the first words of Kaddish in Aramaic: yitgadal v'yitkdash sh'mei Rabbah....

It was the only time in the history of American journalism that Hebrew, or any other foreign alphabet, appeared in a newspaper headline.

What was that newspaper headline saying?

We, the editors, are taking a language that most of us cannot read -- and we are putting it on the front page.

You are us. We are you. We mourn together.

That headline in the Pittsburgh Gazette won the Pulitzer Prize.

The newspaper donated the prize money – to Tree of Life Synagogue.

Yes, America is different.

Third: the good news is that Judaism is not about how they hate us. It is about how God loves us. This is crucial.

You want to respond to Jew hatred?

How about some Jew love?

Forget the oy.

Embrace the joy.

God told Abraham: lift your eyes and look at the stars. Lift your heads – all of you, all of us – and look at eternity.

Find the joy in Judaism.

You want to fight Jew hatred?

How about some Jew love?

Love Shabbat. Love the festivals. Love Jewish culture – Jewish books, Jewish movies, Jewish music. Love your Jewish kids and grandchildren and teach them how to love Judaism as well.

No one with a gun can take that away from us.

Stand up, stand for, stand out.

Stand up for Judaism and its teachings. Every single adult and young person who studies with us can do that.

Stand for Judaism and its values: justice, compassion, sanctity, celebration. God did not put us on this planet because God needed a people with an appetite for salty foods. God did not need Jewish comedians. God did not even need Jewish Nobel Prize winners. God needed and need us to transform the world.

Stand out. Yes. Be different. Relish that difference.

Let me go back to **stand for**.

Today, there is one thing, in particular, I am asking you to stand for.

In the wake of Pittsburgh and Poway – in the wake of two lethal attacks on American synagogues in one year – let us be honest.

Why did the killers choose synagogues on sacred days?

Because they know something that you and I both know.

Judaism lives in and through and because of the synagogue.

Double down. Lean in.

Stand for: stand for Temple Solel; for who we are, for what we stand for – worship and learning and world repair. To do so is nothing less than an act of faith in the Jewish people and in the Jewish future.

Reb Nachman of Bratslav taught: The entire world is a very narrow bridge.

V'ha-ikkar lo l'fached clal. The essence of the matter is: Don't be afraid.

But, in reality, while that is what we sing – it is not what he actually said.

Lo l'hipached clal – do not make yourselves afraid.

Do not surrender to fear.

God is so not done with us yet.

