

Rabbi Spike Anderson | Yom Kippur, 5778 | Temple Emanu-El

Gud Yuntif,

Today, I am giving a sermon that I am hesitant to give, because the topic is so painful. I'm speaking about the alarming rise of Anti-Semitism.

This Yom Kippur, across the country, many of my rabbinic peers are speaking about Anti-Semitism for the first time in their lives. This tells you that something has acutely changed. I'm 45 years old, and I, like many of my generation, knew that Anti-Semitism in America was part of our history, but until recently, didn't think it was part of our present.

As a Jew, whenever I face challenges without clear answers, I turn to the Torah for wisdom and a long perspective on our people's journey. In Torah, the quintessential story of our people's struggle against senseless hatred is that of our initial encounter with the dark forces of Amalek. It is a narrative that rivals even the most action-filled Hollywood dramas.

Our people had just escaped Egyptian slavery, roaming the desert, tired and ragged. Without warning or reason, we are attacked by Amalek, a barbaric desert tribe out to destroy us. Scrambling, Joshua gathers the Jewish warriors to meet Amalek on the battlefield. Meanwhile Moses, as the leader of our people, climbs to the mountain top so that he can be visible to all. With him, ascend two other Jewish leaders, Aaron & Hehr. And so the battle rages.ⁱ

You can see why this is one of my favorite Torah stories when examining our people's predicament in modern times. Just like Joshua and the Jewish warriors, the Israeli Defense Forces are fighting the physical battles for Israel's security and the freedom of all Jews around the world. I would suggest that each one of us, American Jews, is like Moses standing on the mountain-top, fighting the battle for the airwaves.

What do we learn from Moses as he stands on the mountain-top? We know that when Moses gets fatigued, his arms drop and he disappears from view. When we get tired and numb, Amalek, the eternal Anti-Semite who hates us more than he loves himself, becomes emboldened and more vicious in his attack. But Moses is not alone, just like we are not alone. Aaron & Hehr prop him up, once again giving him strength and courage to become visible for the Israelites to see. As they hold up Moses' arms, the Jewish people not only become unified, but internalize their own strength. Together they fight Amalek, and the battle is won.

This is where I draw inspiration. For God tells the Jewish people: *Lo Tish-kach... Bah Amalek M'Dor Dor*ⁱⁱ- "don't forget... that in every generation there will be an Amalek."

What exactly are we talking about here?ⁱⁱⁱ Certainly, if we look at this past year, stories of Anti-Semitism seem closer to home than ever, and increasingly they are personal.

In this last year alone, The Anti-Defamation League shows an 86% increase in reported Anti-Semitic incidents of harassment, vandalism and assault across America, with roughly the same statistics in the Atlanta region.

Those statistics show a trend that we cannot ignore. But, what really hits home are the conversations and the stories that we share with one another. I am sorry to say it, but there are way too many. I'll share with you but a few.

This past April, one of our congregants called me weeping, to relay that her little girl, who is in 3rd grade, was told by a classmate that she couldn't play with them on the playground "because she was a Jew, and Jews are dirty." This was at a charter school known for its liberal education and lionized diversity. The next week, the same thing happened to her little sister, a 1st grader, the decree publically announced by yet a different child.

The Jewish kids felt deeply shamed – what did they do to deserve this? What was wrong with them that they would be shunned? And since there were only a few Jews at their school, they felt painfully alone. The parents of these little girls were horrified that their daughters, the sweetest kids you can imagine, had to live amid this ugliness. And I was incensed.

I did what I thought was right by making introductions to the ADL^{iv}, helping the parents craft language to present to the principal, and strongly encouraged them to reach out to other parents. I also sat with the girls in my study. I tried to explain to them about people who hate for no reason, that there was nothing wrong with them, and that this was no longer their problem. Now it was my problem too. Now this problem belonged to the entire Jewish community, and to good people of every color, religion & creed. I tried to take that burden off their little shoulders, and show them that they were part of a really amazing team. I have no doubt that they will learn to cope, but I cringe at the cost that this type of atmosphere brings.

This past year, our community has heard many of these stories and some of us have gone from shocked to numb. We have read of Jewish cemeteries vandalized. We have seen naked vitriol disguised as public discourse, and blatant defamation close in on becoming an acceptable worldview. In my Confirmation class this year, almost every teen has seen swastikas in their school bathroom. For them, it has become part of the landscape.

This past year, we experienced the bomb threats of Jewish Community Centers across America. The fact that the culprit for some of those threats was a disturbed Israeli youth does not diminish that someone paid him to make the threats, nor that some of the threats were attributed to other criminals who were apprehended. Let's not forget how scary it was to live under threat.

And then, exactly six weeks ago, 1,000 Nazi White supremacists marched past the University of Virginia in Charlottesville.

They were armed, (for Virginia is an open carry state). They were prepared for violence with clubs and shields. And, they carried torches.

Officially, they were there to protest against the removal of a statue of Robert E Lee. But their real goal was to show that they were not just an internet presence, but rather a physical force that was ready to show strength and garner support.

The torches, of course, were meant to bring forth images of Ku Klux Klan marches, with the burning and lynching.

Their slogans, these young white men, well organized and full of hate began militaristically with harsh grunts... that morphed into "You will not replace us", into "Jews will not replace us", into "Whose Streets?-Our Streets", and into "Blood & Soil."

"Blood and soil", as a repeated marching chant, is the translation of Hitler's *Blut und Boden*, which means of course, "only Aryan blood belongs on this land."

This night they did not wear masks, but many an American flag with a Nazi swastika superimposed on it was waved, a rallying point for others like them, unabashed saber rattling.

The next morning, a White Supremacist rammed his car into a crowd of counter-protesters at 80 MPH, injuring dozens and murdering a woman named Heather Heyer.

Who were the counter protesters? Black-Americans. Jewish-Americans. Asian-Americans. White-Americans. They were Priests. Imams. Pastors. And Rabbis.

They were senior citizens and University of Virginia students. Who were the counter protesters? They were us.

I'm not here today to talk about the merits of leaving or destroying symbols of the Confederacy that, for many, have direct memories of enslavement, rape, and unspeakable pain. We Jews know the swastika. You don't need hateful symbols explained to you because you understand it in your kiskas.

I'm not here to talk about the legal permit that the Neo-Nazis had obtained to march, a permit that the counter-protesters did not have. Nor the debate if we need permission to protest those who would seek our annihilation.

I'm not even going to begin the conversation about President Trump's reaction to Charlottesville or his claims of equivalency.

These topics are worth talking about, but I'm choosing to not talk about them today.

What I do want to talk about, and raise in no uncertain terms, is that 1000 Nazis marched through a University Town, and they were pleased with how everything went down.

When asked if they were a non-violent movement looking to peacefully demonstrate, the speaker for Unite The Right responded, and I quote: "We are not non-violent. We will kill these people if we have to."

When asked about the intentional hit and run, resulting in the murder of Heather Heyer, the same spokesman showed no remorse. Zero. He said: "The death of Heather Heyer was justified...and I think that a lot more people are going to die before we are done here."

My people, this is an outrage.

Before our very eyes, what has been scoffed at, laughed at, and excused as "the margins" for the past 40 years has emerged in broad daylight, unmasked, to rally national attention with bullhorns, guns and vitriol dripping from their tongues. My friends, this threat is real.

I am not scared. And if I am honest with myself, I am not surprised. Yes, I am sad that we are once again fighting these battles.

I'm sad for our kids, and I'm sad that we have to deal with this.

But deal with it we will.

We have learned, we Jewish people, what happens when we stay silent in the face of Nazi ideology. Like the sound of the shofar, Charlottesville is our wake-up call.

And America knows that in Charlottesville the line has been crossed.

Right now in synagogues, churches, mosques and many places of gathering, this message is being preached loud and clear:

Hate has no place in our streets.

Hate has no place in these walls.

And hate has no place in America.

We are not alone. Look around the room.

We are as one, and this connection has awoken sleeping people all across our great country, awoken us like a sleeping giant.

הִנֵּנִי Heneni: We will be ready... to act as our history, and as our ethics demand that we must.

לֹא יִחָשֵׁוּ (Is 62:6) : We will not be silent... in the face of Anti-Semitism, racism, and evil.

לֹא תַעֲמִיד עַל-דַּם רֵעֶךָ (Lev 19:16) We will not stand idly by the blood of our neighbor, nor will we stand for our own blood to be shed.

Torah empowers us for times like these with the words *Chazak Chazak V'NitChazak*. Be strong. Be strong. And through one another, be strengthened.

In the days following Charlottesville, the White Nationalists hoped to capitalize on their momentum. So they scheduled additional marches across the country. But this time, we responded with changed tactics. You see, Charlottesville was seen by the neo-Nazis as a success because they received so much attention. Deprive them of attention, and their efforts choke.

So in places like Boston and Nashville, when they attempted to march, counter-demonstrations were staged close enough to be a response, but far enough away so that there was no direct confrontation with the Nazis.

No confrontation, no media coverage.

The result was that our counter-demonstrations became the media story, for they championed love, tolerance and unity-against-hate.

You should know that there is a quiet conversation happening among the Atlanta Jewish leadership. Hypothetically, if there is a Charlottesville type march in Atlanta, likely we will respond with a similar approach as Boston and Nashville.

Be ready, because we are going into the streets. We will address it, expose it, and counter it without giving them the attention that they need to flourish. We would do this in conjunction with interfaith allies of every race.

This is Moses standing up high on the mountain-top, meant to be seen, supported by Aaron & Hehr, battling for the attention of the airwaves and for the moral consciousness of people everywhere.

But what about those quiet moments before bedtime, when my 11 year old son looked me in the eye, trusting that I will have the answer, and asks me, “Why do they hate us, Papa? Why do they hate the Jews?” Behind these question lay unspoken others: ‘Can we correct some inherent flaw, or taint, so that they will not hate us? Is there something wrong with us?’

My heart breaks that he is even asking this question, when we thought that we had progressed beyond Anti-Semitism. But we were wrong... and with this realization, my generation has lost its innocence.

What does this anachronistic, new reality mean for us and for our children?

Academic answers aside, my Jewish peers do not know how to answer the question of ‘why they hate us’ in any way that would be of practical help in speaking to our children.

But there are other groups of contemporaries who do know how to answer this question, because they have never had the luxury of a ‘break’, in particular, the African American community.

I struggled with how to respond to my son’s question in a way that would help him, and in a way that would help me.

So I went back to my trusted friend, Rob Hardy, who came to speak at Temple Emanu-El last year about his experience with racism. Rob’s message is worth repeating because there are enough similarities between the Black and Jewish condition, historically and today, that we can learn something about how to deal with people who lead with their prejudice.

Here are some of the things that he said about being Black, and what I, as a Jew, know to be our common truth:

First of all, hearing from some people that you are inferior, and that you are the cause of every problem under the sun, you might be tempted to internalize that message; to believe that message. Don't fall for that. These are lies for someone else's agenda.

Hate is irrational and unreasonable, so don't try to reason with it. Haters are obsessive about their hate. Don't let it drag you down. The people who hate you do so for reasons that are based on their own short-comings, and there is nothing you can give them that will fill that void.

Teach your kids how to educate others when given the opportunity. Each interaction and conversation might be a bridge. Build bridges.

We make our kids aware that racism and Anti-Semitism exist, but that there are all types of good people as well. We need to look around and appreciate our friends and supporters. As we hope they stand up for us, we also need to stand up for them. This way, we stand together, not alone.

And we teach our kids that life is not always fair. Some people won't like you for any reason that you can help, so it is their problem, not yours.

But here is the great thing, with the energy that you put out there, you can attract really great people to you.

Then we talk to them about decision-making. We teach them that there is a time for conflict resolution.

We teach them martial arts to have the confidence to physically defend themselves if need be.

We teach them how to defend themselves verbally, and shield themselves from the terrible things people might say to them or about them. If threatened, we teach them that there are times to walk away, and times to take a stand.

But mostly, we teach them to be aware and proud of who they are.

Whenever Rob and I talk about this, and it is an ongoing conversation. We recognized that unlike racism, extreme Anti-Semitism calls for the annihilation of the entire Jewish people, which has been attempted in our recent history.

We also acknowledge that white Jews, who make up the majority of Jews in America, have the option to blend into white society anonymously ... something our black friends can not do, even if they wanted to.

Ben Zoma said, in Perkei Avot (4:1^v), ***Ezehu Chaham? Ha-lomed Mikol adam***. Who is wise? He who learns from everyone."

But know this: We are no longer the ragged, lost people of the desert. We are no slaves. We are no victims.

We are strong, we are educated, we are motivated, we are organized, and we have assumed leadership roles in every place that matters throughout America.

The truth is that this country predominantly respects Jews and Judaism and considers us an important part of the collective.

It's up to us to make sure that Anti-Semitism in America is forever considered a taboo.

It is up to us to make sure that hate towards any group remains disgraceful.

Who are the Moses, Aaron, and Hehr of our time?

They are the members of our community who are involved in the hard work of standing up to Amelek, while building bridges on a daily basis.

They are the kids who represent us well every day in school.

They are you who speak out, and who stand up, when it would be easier to stay quiet.

They are Temple Emanu-El congregants like Lisa Freedman & Lauren Menis, two Jewish mothers who decided that what is happening is absolutely unacceptable.

They made a decision, with others like them, that they would not stay silent in the face of Anti-Semitism.

They would not allow our children to be intimidated, cowered, or made to feel like we do not belong here.

These two women decided that no one in Atlanta who was experiencing Anti-Semitism would be left to feel alone.

So in a flurry of urgency, they started a true grassroots organization called Atlanta Initiative Against Anti-Semitism (AIAAS), which today has 4,000 members. Tirelessly they continue to organize, find allies, and educate against hate. Like Moses, these women stand tall and strong.

I am very proud of them, and all who are with them. Their work is essential to face whatever comes our way... together.

The only thing that I would add is that, for me, the best way to stand in defiance of Amelek is to live a vibrant and joyous Jewish life.

This means bringing in moments of holiness and dancing with joy.

It means mourning, singing, and embracing sacred connections on our terms. The Jewish way.

Not seeking approval, or asking for permission, from anyone.

A Rabbi from the Talmud asks his students the question, 'When do we know that the darkness of night has ended and the day has dawned?'

One student says, 'when we can see where my property line ends and another begins.'

Another pipes in, 'when we can see those things which are my possession and which belong to another.'

To this, the Rabbi cries out “no no, have you learned nothing from our Torah and our sages?

The night ends and the day begins when we can look into the face of another, and they into ours, and see that he is my brother, that she is my sister.”^{vi}

Keyn Yehi Ratzon, May it be God’s will.

Shabbat Shalom, Gud Yuntif & Shanah Tova!

ⁱ Exodus 17:9-14

ⁱⁱ Exodus 17:16

ⁱⁱⁱ There are blatant expressions of genocidal aspirations publically touted by Muslim student groups on college campuses,ⁱⁱⁱ most of which the various universities turn a ‘blind eye’ for fear of drawing attention to themselves. Jewish students fearing to speak out, or even be Jewish on their campus, is a sacrifice that they are willing to make.

^{iv} Anti Defamation League (ADL)

^v בְּן זִמְנָא אָמַר, אֵיזְהוּ חָכָם, הַלּוֹמֵד מִכָּל אָדָם

^{vi} Talmud Bavli, brachot, Rashi