

# Temple Emanu-El Yom Kippur 5784 Sermon<sup>i</sup>

## Standing Tall, Not Alone

Rabbi Spike Anderson

Gud Yuntif.

Every Jew who is with us this Yom Kippur is miraculously lucky. In our 6,000-year history there has rarely been a better time and place to be a Jew than right now in America. Far from being marginalized behind ghetto walls, we are living at a time and in a place where we are full citizens; we can stroll into synagogue for worship; and we have access to every level of education, politics, and commerce.

Students of Jewish history know that this, all of this, is an exceptional time.

So why then do I scan the headlines daily, expecting stories that are bad for the Jews? In the past few years, most of the news about our people involves antisemitism, conflict in Israel, or remembering the Holocaust. This is how the media projects us: victims, guilty simply because we are Jewish, and a people who are 'alone'.

We have carried this title, which in biblical Hebrew is עַם לְבַדָּד יִשְׁכֵּן

*Am L'vadad YishKon<sup>ii</sup>*, from a scene in the Torah. A non-Jewish prophet, Bilaam, was hired by our enemies to curse us. He stands on the mountain top, overlooking our encampment, our tents in neat order, neighbors helping neighbors, children playing safely, and he utters the words: עַם לְבַדָּד יִשְׁכֵּן / *Am L'vadad YishKon<sup>iii</sup>* -They are a nation that is alone.

He meant it as a curse, but before he could finish, God compelled him to bless us instead with the famous words:

מַה־טוֹב אֶהְיֶה לְיַעֲקֹב מִשְׁכְּנֹתַיִךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל /*Mah Tovv Ohalecha Yaakov, Mishkenotecha Yisrael*<sup>iv</sup>- how good are your tents O'Jacob, your sacred dwellings O' Israel.

For we were not like the other nations. We are a people who aspired to bring equal law and justice for all, and we are not satisfied that this broken world is just 'how it is.' We try to live by our ideals, and sometimes that is threatening to the status quo.

A people that dwells alone?

That is how it was during the pogroms in Europe, and during the Holocaust. That is how it sometimes is for Israel and her defenders today. That is how it feels when there is a synagogue shooting. We know the mortification of finding antisemitic garbage littering our driveways on a Sunday morning right here in Georgia.

Our collective experience has prepared us "to stand alone, if need be, living by a moral code, and having the courage to be different."<sup>v</sup> History has forged our resilience.

But Rabbi Jonathan Sacks (z'l), points out that the real danger to us, now, is that we might start to believe that we are somehow destined to always be alone, to believe the Antisemites, that this state of 'being alone' for Jews is somehow built into the universe, encoded in the human genome, and that it is our fate. If this becomes our attitude, says Rabbi Sacks, then this becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy and almost certainly will continue to happen. Why bother to make friends and allies if you know in advance that you will fail?<sup>vi</sup>

Antisemitism is not mysterious, unfathomable, or unexplainable. It is a complex malice that has mutated over time, and it has identifiable

roots- social, economic, political, cultural, and theological. It can be fought; it can be defeated... but not if we believe that we are cosmically meant to be isolated outcasts.<sup>vii</sup>

I, personally, know that we are strong, and we can stand up for ourselves; and in my experience I've seen that when we build bridges, there is hope for a different path forward. I have faith that when we extend our hand, despite our historical trauma, it is often met by others. I believe that there are good people, and they can be reached, and that we have to try.

Two years ago on Yom Kippur I talked about the normalization of antisemitism in America, and since then it has only become more pronounced. The truth is that what has also grown are the opportunities to educate, make friends, and create allies.

At Temple Emanu-El, we have made brave efforts to stand up against antisemitism, with guidance from the American Jewish Committee and the Anti-Defamation League.

By now you know that many of my High Holy Day sermons are not just about teaching, but are calls to action. Since the last time I spoke about antisemitism, we have called on you to brainstorm ideas of how we might have a local impact.

From your responses we collected 300 ideas, and then paired them down to just five. Five realistic, achievable efforts that would move the needle through intentional collaboration. Five groups of people who raised their hands and committed to follow through.

The first group were parents who came up with a plan to reach out to local schools, and county supervisors, to talk about their Jewish students, and to advocate so that our kids would not be penalized for missing class on our most sacred days. A 'reference guide' of the Jewish

holidays was created, and has now been widely shared two years running.

A second group decided that when churches, mosques and synagogues experienced acts of hate, the decent thing to do was to reach out. On behalf of Temple Emanu-El, they would quickly convey our solidarity. This gesture modeled the courage it takes to stand with those who are reeling from acts of violence.

A third group solidified a tangible plan for our congregants who might experience antisemitism. We came up with a system so that our synagogue community could quickly mobilize on short notice. This step-by-step guide is available on our website. I hope that you never have to use it. But if you need us, we are here. You are not alone.

The fourth TE team took on a more delicate, and long-term goal to build friendships with local interfaith and interracial groups. Could we make connections, and find commonalities, so that we were known to one another? Could we learn from each other as allies and friends? This piece of the initiative was slow to start, but now has real momentum with Muslims from the Istanbul Cultural Center, Asian & Pacific Islanders from AAPI, and Presbyterians from St. Lukes in Dunwoody. We have made overtures to local Mormons, B'hai, and the Catholic Church. All three have warmly responded. There are so many more connections that could be made. But relationships take time, and it is going to take all of us.

A few months ago, when the neo-Nazis stood outside Chabad in East Cobb with their heckles and their signs, it was the East Cobb Methodist Church who mobilized an interfaith rally for the Jewish community! Rabbi Dan Dorsch from Aitz Chayim remarked that that this was the first time in recent memory that the Jewish community did not have to host

our own rally.<sup>viii</sup> It was our Christian neighbors who raised the flag, standing tall with us.

A fifth group of congregants followed the philosophy that education is the best way to empower a people. Their challenge was to educate our own congregation, an entire generation of Jews who have had the gift of not worrying about antisemitism until recent years.

Raise your hand if you were one of the 700 people who heard Brandon Murphy speak at Temple Emanu-El this past year?

This is such a cool story, and it is happening before our eyes.

Brandon Murphy, who is a devout Catholic, is considered one of the best teachers at the Marist School in Brookhaven. When he graduated Norte Dame about 30 years ago, he became a teacher of World History. In his first year, his curriculum allocated a total of 12 minutes to teach about the Holocaust. He didn't know much about the Shoah, so he began to research. The more he dug, the more he discovered, painfully, that the Catholic church had a long history of Antisemitism; much of it based on polemic against Jews from more than 1,000 years ago that has been disproved and disavowed.

Disproved, because historians today have clearly proven that much of what the Catholic church accused the Jews of could not have possibly happened.

Disavowed, almost 50 years ago, by Pope Paul VI in a revolutionary document titled 'Nostra Aetate',<sup>ix</sup> which is Latin for 'in our time'. Nostra Aetate is considered a 'game changer,' for it is a doctrine that declared a new day between The Catholic Church and non-Christian religions. In it, the Vatican clearly stated that Jewish people were not to be blamed for the death of Christ, and that antisemitism had no support in church doctrine.<sup>x</sup> Both of these statements were in direct

contrast to 2,000 years of Catholic attitudes towards the Jews, and their beliefs about us.

Now...we Jews believe in Teshuva, the chance to admit wrongs and make amends. In doing so, relationships can be healed.

Catholics have their own version of this, Mia Culpa, meaning that one is obligated to admit mistakes, and then do your best to heal the hurt.

When Brandon saw the role that Catholics had played in two millennia of Jewish pain, it became part of his life's mission have the Catholic church do teshuvah, to admit fault, and to help heal Jewish-Catholic relations so that together we could move forward in a better way.

For decades now, Brandon has been teaching Marist students about the Holocaust, and he travels with them every year to Auschwitz. We heard about this excellent Catholic teacher, who was teaching Jewish history, so we were curious. We invited him to Temple Emanu-El to present his seminar, titled: Why The Jews. And boy, did we learn a lot...about how biblical verses had been corrupted, blood libels had been cast, and religious rites had been created to oppress our people. Not just the material, but the way that Brandon presented this incredibly difficult history was so impressive that we recommended him to other local synagogues. Brandon has since spoken to Jewish audiences throughout Atlanta.

But Brandon knows that where his message really needs to be heard is in Christian congregations. He shared with me that if he, who had a lifetime of Catholic education, had never heard a hint of Catholic responsibility for Jewish pain; and he had not known that, theologically, Nostra Aetate had absolved the Jews,<sup>xi</sup> then it was extremely likely that others were missing this knowledge as well. There are a billion Catholics in the world, and if they were not taught their church's

mistakes in history, or their Pope's decree, then their antisemitic attitudes might continue unchecked.

What's more, this problem goes deeper than addressing the average Catholic because many priests, including ones who lead congregations, are also unaware.

Bolstered by his success at Emanu-El, Brendan Murphy sent a letter of introduction requesting to teach a version of 'Why The Jews' to 50 parishes around Atlanta. Out of the 50, only one responded, and the answer was... 'no'. You can imagine how disheartening this was to him, ...and to us.

Brandon knew that the only way to get into the churches was through Archbishop Gregory John Hartmayer, The Archbishop of Atlanta, who is the head of some 200 Catholic parishes from Macon to Chattanooga. This was no small thing. This was not like getting an appointment with Rabbi Spike at TE... that's easy. You call, we say 'sure', and you are in. It's not at all the same thing with a Catholic Archbishop, who is several levels up from the parish priest in the Catholic hierarchy. There are introductions needed, and stiff protocols, without any guarantees of getting an audience.

Through his connections at Marist, Brandon was able to get an appointment. He asked a few of us to go with him. He wanted Jewish leaders to give testimony about his presentation. That it was an important historical lesson, and impactful for Catholic-Jewish relations. We hoped that the Archbishop would be receptive to the mission...and the message. You can imagine the tension that we all felt, this past December, as we were seated in the chancery of the archdiocese. It seemed like we had one shot. And the stakes were high.

When the archbishop entered, we all rose, and he waved to us to be seated. Brendon took a breath, that to me felt like a prayer, and with lowered eyes, he began speaking softly. He articulated his sincere gratitude to be granted an audience with “his holiness”, the title used to address someone of the archbishop’s station. Brandon spoke of his Catholic education and his deep love for The Church. Then, with a subtle change in voice, he shared how he had learned of the Church’s role in Jewish tragedy, and the declaration by the Pope of Nostra Aetate. Brandon spoke of his Marist students, and how he travels with them to Auschwitz every year. He shared his disappointment at the lack of reception from the Catholic parishes. And finally, Brandon Murphy asked for the archbishop’s help, vital help, to correct the great wrongs of the past with education, mutual respect, and a shared, hopeful, future.

When he was done, everyone was silent. I too, took a prayerful breath, and then spoke from the heart. I conveyed to the Archbishop how inspired we were by Brandon’s courage, and his tenacity.

One by one, we went around the room, each of the Jewish leaders<sup>xii</sup> speaking with the utmost respect.

When we finished, again, there was silence. A moment. Then Archbishop Hartmayer spoke. Quietly at first, and it was clear from his demeanor that he was deeply touched. He shared what it was like, growing up outside of Buffalo, NY. About his neighborhood and his community. He spoke about playing ball with Jewish kids his age, and of some of his close Jewish friendships. He then told us that he wholeheartedly embraced Nostra Aetate, and its mission to face the past. He acknowledged that these conversations would be hard for everyone. But that they needed to happen. Then he thanked us for



bringing this to his attention, and the Archbishop of Atlanta promised to help.

Since then, Brandon Murphy has begun to teach his seminar at Catholic churches throughout Georgia. He is well received, and more invitations arrive every day. I asked him ‘what do you think goes through the minds of the Catholic men and women who hear you?’ He replied that most of them are surprised at what they did not know, and sad that the church that they so very much love did what they did. *Mia Culpa*, like *teshuvah*, brings a sense of vulnerability, but with it, Brandon reports, there is a strong sense of resolve. A chance to think differently, to act differently, to build bridges and extend hands of forgiveness, and of friendship. Brandon has shared that “the Catholic church is slow to change” but this past year we have been a part of something powerful, and it is still unfolding.

This is a beautiful story. I wish that we could duplicate it with every community who has a history of antisemitism.

Part of the privilege that we have living as American Jews today is that we are not a ‘nation that dwells alone.’ But, at the same time, we have a responsibility to protect ourselves.

Right now, as crazy as it sounds, it is impossible for law enforcement to prosecute someone for antisemitic hate crimes because there is no working definition of Antisemitism in the state of Georgia. This means that “antisemites can commit blatant acts of discrimination against Jewish people, and then hide behind the lack of definition to avoid accountability.”<sup>xiii</sup>

Mainstream Jewish organizations, including Temple Emanu-El, are rallying around the widely accepted definition of Antisemitism written by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA).<sup>xiv</sup>

We need Georgia to adopt it too. This would protect Jewish kids from being terrorized in schools. It would protect us from anti-Jewish harassment, vandalism against our businesses and institutions, and violence against our people.

And, in the same way that it is wrong to hold Chinese Americans accountable for the actions of the Chinese government, or Mexican Americans for the actions of the Mexican government, the IHRA definition of Antisemitism would protect Jews from being retaliated against for actions (real or perceived) by the state of Israel.

The fact that we do not have this type of legal recourse is something that we can, and that we must, do something about.

That is why there is legislation pending in Georgia. HB30 is co-sponsored by Republican John Carson and Democrat Esther Panitch. Esther is the only Jewish member of the Georgia General Assembly, and both she and John Carson will be in our Sanctuary this afternoon, at 2p, as our Yom Kippur speakers. They will help us understand HB30, why it is vital to push this through now, and how we can help. We hope that you will join us.

Representative Panitch let me know that some of the elected officials who oppose HB30 do so because, they claim, Jews have not suffered enough, and are doing too well, to be a protected class.

She disagrees. So do I. How about you?

Tomorrow, I'm going to send you an email reminding you about this sermon with instructions on how you can help.

Additionally, sometime between January and April, likely on short notice, we are going to ask you to physically show up at the State Capital building. You may be asked to show up more than once. When

there is deliberation about HB30, or expectations of a vote, having people on the ground can sway decisions.

I am going to ask this of you because I am sure that passing HB30 is the most impactful thing that we can do to combat Antisemitism this year.

My friends, we are American Jews, living in an exceptional time.

How will we see ourselves...

Condemned to forever dwell alone; or do we have the courage to turn curse into blessing?

We are a vibrant community of wonderful tents; dedicated not only to ourselves, but to all of humanity.

We are a people with purpose, whose children can know, and be proud, of our Jewish identity.

This is a place where we invite the Shabbat angels to bless us, as we gather together, every Friday night.

Where Torah study nourishes every age, where we gladly share our Judaism with one another, and with joy transmit our amazing culture, wisdom, and traditions (M'dor l'dor) from generation to generation.

We, here today, are miraculously lucky, for we can change our narrative.

To make a future that our ancestors could only dare to dream.

Their hard work and sacrifice are our inspiration.

Our children are our motivation.

For we are in the right time, and we are in the right place.

Now it is up to us to stand tall, not alone, and to try.

Gud Yuntif.

---

<sup>i</sup> Thanks to my writing partner, and wife, Marita Anderson for everything.

<sup>ii</sup> Numbers 23:9

<sup>iii</sup> IBID

<sup>iv</sup> Numbers 24:5

<sup>v</sup> Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Covenant & Conversation, Balak, 5782, The Curse of Loneliness

<sup>vi</sup> IBID

<sup>vii</sup> IBID

<sup>viii</sup> . [https://www.mdjonline.com/news/local/a-call-to-action-residents-turn-out-in-support-of-cobbs-jewish-community/article\\_3885f5fa-16be-11ee-9e41-07dac9c0daf9.html](https://www.mdjonline.com/news/local/a-call-to-action-residents-turn-out-in-support-of-cobbs-jewish-community/article_3885f5fa-16be-11ee-9e41-07dac9c0daf9.html)

<sup>ix</sup> Nostra Aetate is an official declaration of the Second Vatican council, and ratified by more than 2,000 of the assembled Bishops.

<sup>x</sup> <https://www.atlantajewishtimes.com/the-narrow-bridge-to-interfaith-understanding>

<sup>xi</sup> of the ‘crimes’ that historians have shown were never actually committed

<sup>xii</sup> Art Katz, Eric Seidel, Eytan Davidson (ADL), Rabbi Laurence Rosenthal, and Rabbi Spike Anderson

<sup>xiii</sup> Mark Goldfeder, Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Feb 10<sup>th</sup>, 2023, Opinion: Recent events show need for Ga.legislature to pass antisemitism bill

<sup>xiv</sup> This is the definition of antisemitism currently accepted by 42 countries, and more than half of the states in America