



LeoBaeckTemple

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"The Demands of Judah-ism"
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The fact that this is the final time I will greet the new year as your Senior Rabbi creates a kind of urgency I don't think I had really appreciated until I sat down to write my words for you this evening. It is the kind of urgency that leads rabbis into what is generally acknowledged to be the most common pitfall in sermon writing – namely, trying to cram two distinct topics, two separate sermons into one.

Of course, this pitfall is considerably more dangerous with some rabbis than it is with others. After all, the only thing better than one of my High Holydays sermons is two of my High Holydays sermons, delivered concurrently. If I try to cram two of my sermons into one, this will be both your Erev Rosh Hashanah and Rosh Hashanah Morning sermon all rolled into one.

Alas, rabbis all over the world struggled mightily with this problem as the new year 5787 beckoned. We wrestled with whether to speak about the menacing explosion of antisemitism threatening Jews all over the world, or to speak about Israel, imperiled so deeply from both within and without. Zionism or antisemitism. State or religion. Place or people. Not an easy choice to make. But the more I wrestled, the more I came to realize that, in fact, these aren't distinct topics, aren't separate sermons at all. And what's noteworthy is that it has somehow become controversial in the Jewish world to acknowledge that.

You see, there are countless influential Jewish voices out there rightly reminding us that there was plenty of antisemitism during the nearly 1900 years when the Jews as a people were homeless. Dispersed by the Romans in the year 70 CE from the only place where we'd ever possessed power over our own fate, our ancestors fell victim for nearly two millennia to the shape-shifting scourge known as antisemitism. No state of Israel was necessary for us to be hated. This makes it tempting to see opposition to the mere existence of Israel, no matter what it does, as just the newest shape of a very old hatred.

The problem with that argument, as is usually the case with arguments that simple, is that it fails to account for some very inconvenient but pleasant truths when it comes to Jewish life since 1948. The near-worldwide recognition of the modern Jewish state of Israel shortly after its birth, starting with the United States. The defense of Israel throughout and even beyond the Western world against Islamic

fundamentalism for more than half a century. The growing acceptance and standing of Jews in Diaspora communities during the state of Israel's life. Nobody would argue that the world was worse for Jews in the 1990s than it was in the 1930s – certainly not here in the U.S. So the suggestion that the burgeoning antisemitism that endangers you and me today has nothing to do with the recent news from Israel strains credulity.

It also strains our own lived reality. We know, both from our own memories and from hard data published by the likes of the ADL and the Global Forum for Combating Antisemitism, that hate speech and hate acts against us and our children and grandchildren have reliably increased whenever Israel has been perceived as abusing its power over the Palestinian people. Whenever there has been war in Gaza – not just after October 7th, but in 2009 and 2012 and 2014 and 2021 – we here in America, along with Jews everywhere, have faced greater danger. Some might call that correlation and not causation. I would call it far too much correlation to qualify as coincidence.

If you're objecting to how terribly unfair that is – how downright antisemitic that is – you will get no disagreement from me. An attacker drove his truck into the front entrance of Temple Israel in suburban Detroit, one of the largest Reform congregations on Earth, while its preschool was in session this past March. Incredibly, nobody was killed, thank God – but let's be real... this didn't happen just because people have always hated Jews. And if you don't believe me, you can ask the woman who defended the attack on a London TV news network by referring to Temple Israel as "an Israeli temple" – and when she was firmly corrected by the anchor, she doubled down: "They're called the Real Israeli Temple," she said, "and they do align with Israel and their beliefs." This was her explanation for the attack.

Let's get one thing straight: even if *every* member of Temple Israel was a supporter of Israel, it wouldn't justify driving a truck into a synagogue hallway hoping to mow down toddlers. The fact that Temple Israel, like all temples – like this temple – runs the gamut from staunch Israel supporters to fierce Israel critics and everything in between only lays bare the depth of the problem. Antisemitism and Israel are not two separate sermons anymore. So let's do a little excavating, down into the phenomenon that holds you and me personally and sometimes even lethally accountable for the actions of Benjamin Netanyahu, Itamar Ben Gvir, and Bezalel Smotrich. Is this because the same billions of people all over the world who lived peaceably alongside us for decades have suddenly all transformed into irredeemable antisemites? Or, worse, that they were always antisemites just waiting for a permissibility structure to come along? That's what a lot of Jewish leaders want you to believe. It's not what I believe.

I believe one of the greatest giants of the Talmud, a 4th century Babylonian rabbi known simply as Rava, who saw this very thing happening in Persia at the time of Queen Esther. You remember Esther and Mordechai and King Ahasuerus from the Festival of Purim, which we mark every year in late winter. Rava taught the following about why Haman was so successful at getting the king and the Persian

people to go along with his hateful plot against us Jews – he wrote, “There was none who knew how to slander like Haman, as in his request to the king he included responses to all the reasons Ahasuerus might be reluctant to destroy the Jewish people.” You see, the King didn’t know all that much about the Jews. Haman seemed like he did. And so in Haman, Rava saw how antisemites convince the masses to do their bidding.

Since the founding of the Jewish state, there have been Hamans circulating among us, searching for ways to deploy the Jewish people’s return to its ancestral home as a weapon with which to destroy us. For decades, they repeated the same hateful tropes. That there was no Holocaust. That the Jews are the ones who seek to perpetrate a Holocaust by exterminating the Palestinians. That the Jews have no claim to indigeneity on the land where Jerusalem sits – that we have no history there. That the state of Israel is a white settler colonial project of Europe, not a yearning repeated thrice daily in Jewish worship for the past 2000 years. These lies are not new. It’s only their effectiveness in mobilizing millions upon millions of uninformed people that is new.

Does that sound too generous toward the massive numbers of people who wouldn’t know Palestine from Pakistan but have decided the Jews and their state have to go? I’ve been thinking lately about whether we, as Jews, are far too inside our own predicament to understand how so many non-Jews are experiencing this moment – and even how quite a few younger adult Jews are experiencing it. Most of us, even those of us who don’t see ourselves as being all that Jewish, are... pretty Jewish. Think how many Jews you know. Think about how akin you feel to Jewish personalities in secular culture. Think about the degree to which Jews and Judaism are anything but foreign to you. Then think about the billions of people around the world, including many millions in the United States, who don’t know even a single Jew, who have never had a thoughtful conversation with a single Jew.

Now think about some type of population in the world – ethnic, religious, gender identity – among whom *you* don’t know even a single person. Whatever you know about them is based on little more than stereotype or conjecture. And now picture that for three solid years, after knowing little and caring little about that group of people, you saw them literally everywhere, every day, because “their government” is leveling one of the most densely populated patches of land on the planet. You know nothing of the history, nothing of who has done what to who. You just don’t like what you see, and some very well-practiced and well-funded Hamans on social media or in your college dorm or on whatever for-profit platform you call “news” is there to tell you what it means.

Look, I’m not here to make excuses for antisemitism. I’m here to wrestle with how it grew so exponentially so quickly and how to lead us in doing whatever we can to stem or even reverse that growth. And if there’s one thing I’m sure of, it’s that

calling billions of people who never really thought all that much about Jews until the past three years antisemites is probably not a winning strategy for combating antisemitism or for convincing the vast, convincible middle – the massive numbers of people who just didn't pay much attention to Jews until now – that we are not all Ben Gvir and Smotrich and Netanyahu. Calling an ill-informed person who sees suffering and is outraged by it an antisemite for saying he's outraged is likelier to make him an antisemite than to convince him not to be. It's likelier to convince him we are, in fact, accurately represented as a people by the few Jews they see all the time – the ones running Israel and the Jewish people into the ground.

The trouble is that verbal resistance has already proven futile. Do you remember that horrifying scene this summer when California State Senator Scott Wiener, one of the best friends the trans movement has ever had, was forced to flee the Trans March to escape activists frothing at their mouths over what they felt was his insufficient condemnation of Israel's actions in Gaza? This is a Jewish legislator who has characterized the war as a genocide – and it still wasn't enough to keep him from being run out by the very community he has fought to protect. Apparently, he deliberated too long before declaring Israel genocidal. It was impossible not to think of those black-and-white pictures of Jews getting publicly humiliated in Germany while watching Senator Wiener rush to safety.

Sarah Tuttle-Singer described the predicament perfectly in the Times of Israel this past May. "When someone is targeting you in an airport or on a street corner because they know you're a Jew," she writes, "what exactly are you supposed to say? Apparently, the expectation now is that Jews respond to harassment with a fully nuanced graduate seminar on the Middle East." She then drafts the kind of response I myself can admit to having summoned frequently in interfaith spaces: "Yes, hiiii, I'm Jewish – but before you scream 'baby killer' at me in the airport, please allow me to clarify: I oppose many actions of the Israeli government! I think Ben Gvir and his allies are monstrous and a stain on Israel!... I support coexistence initiatives! I believe Palestinians deserve dignity, freedom, safety, and equality! I ALSO believe Jews deserve dignity, freedom, safety, and equality! I recognize both peoples have deep ties to the land! Zionism has been co-opted by Jew-haters to be something nefarious when all it truly means is that Jews should have a country in our historic homeland – Israel – and you can be a Zionist and *also* support the rights of Palestinians to have self-determination, too! I condemn extremism in all forms! I hate pumpkin spice hummus!!! Please stop threatening me now! Thanks!"

Of course, Tuttle-Singer points out correctly that "by the time you got halfway through the first word of the first sentence, it would already be over... Either they'd be filming their next livestream. Or the crowd would already be chanting over you. Or you'd be shoved. Or cornered. Or terrified. Or trying to calculate whether this situation is merely humiliating or genuinely dangerous."

No, the people going to these extremes are not just innocent lemmings being taken in by Haman. They are also products and promoters of a contemporary culture of rage, vitriol, and violence that transcends just our crisis as Jews. Ask any trans person or brown-skinned immigrant or woman seeking an abortion, and they'll have similar stories to tell. So we are not likely to escape this cycle of hatred just by explaining ourselves better. What, then, can we do?

This summer, one of my most cherished teachers and the former lead negotiator for Israel in its peace negotiations with the Palestinians, Dr. Tal Becker, taught me a new way to look at our biblical ancestor Judah – he of Judah-ism. Judah is most famous for how we see him grow throughout his life. As a young man, he's the one son of Jacob's who convinces the others to sell their brother Joseph into slavery instead of killing him. Not too morally impressive, but better than his brothers at least. Later, he is publicly exposed as a liar by his own daughter-in-law Tamar, and his response is "*tzad'kah mimeni*" – "she is more right than I am." Again, not a paragon of contrition, but it's another step in the right direction. But years later, when Joseph has risen to be second only to Pharaoh in Egypt, and he has power over his brothers, who don't recognize him in their desperation, he demands that they leave little brother Benjamin behind – and this is where Judah's transformation reaches its peak. He finally takes full responsibility for navigating a crisis in his life and offers himself in his little brother's place. This giant risk with his own life is what reunites the family and saves our people's story. And Judah's line will someday produce King David, from whose descendants we are taught the Messiah will one day come.

So what is Judah-ism? Says Tal Becker, it is the readiness to act upon our responsibility, even and perhaps especially when matters seem to be beyond our control. We descendants of Judah are the ones who will take whatever action is within our power, despite the pull of circumstance, instead of just succumbing to the claim of helplessness.

You see, Becker argues that there's comfort to be found in a good conspiracy theory. Believing in a conspiracy that can't be upended actually makes us feel righteous about our disempowerment. We get to seek refuge in saying someone else is responsible for my crisis, not me. So if you don't like the sudden explosion of Jew hatred all around us, well, the whole world is just a bunch of antisemites... not much we can do about that. Judah-ism demands more of us. There is plenty of blame I can justifiably assign to others, but what will that get me? I'm a Jew, and it's Rosh Hashanah. I'm not looking anywhere else but me.

We have waited four long years for the current Israeli government to face the voters. You see, most of us Jews know what an aberration this Israeli government is. Many of us have been to Israel before and have family or friends there who aren't anything like Netanyahu or Ben Gvir or Smotrich. We know about previous Israeli governments that took genuine chances for peace and self-determination for Israelis and Palestinians alike. We know that not all Jews even feel tethered to the state of Israel, including some who do feel tethered to the land and people but not the state.

We know a lot about Jews and Judaism. For those who knew little or nothing about Jews before these past three years, the results, for you and me, have been devastating.

I'd love to see a poll of how many Americans can even name an Israeli leader, past or present, other than Benjamin Netanyahu. I think most of us would blanch from the results. Mark my word, there are many millions of Americans, including some of our own adult children, who have never heard of Yitzhak Rabin or Shimon Peres or David Ben Gurion and know absolutely nothing of what they stood for. If you know no Jews, and the only thing you know about Jews is that they have a country, and it does what Israel has done over the past three years – and here I'm not even talking about the parts that you or I might defend, like killing large numbers of civilians in an urban war against a sadistic enemy that spent billions on tunnels precisely so the IDF would kill large numbers of civilians. I'm talking about the government calling Palestinians human animals. Are you ready to defend that? I'm talking about the government seeking to annex Palestinian land in direct violation of international law. I'm talking about the pillaging of Palestinians in the West Bank – a savagery that even conservative columnist Bret Stephens refers to as "Israeli terrorism." Anybody want to defend Israeli terrorism?

Just two months ago, I joined an Israeli protective presence mission with Rabbis for Human Rights in the small Bedouin community of Nakhila in the West Bank, just a short distance east of Jerusalem. We were there to protect the residents from the Jewish hilltop settlers, who have stolen their animals, destroyed their property, and regularly threaten to expel them from their land – all with the Israeli government either turning a blind eye or even offering support. There was nothing surprising about my experience. It was exactly as reporters and witnesses have documented. When we left, other Israeli Jewish volunteers came to spend the night, and then another crew the following morning. This continues day after day after day, because if it didn't, the Palestinians there would lose everything.

If you are a person who knows no Jews, and the only thing you know about Jews is that they have a country, and it does all of this in plain view, relentlessly, for the only three years that you've kind of been paying attention, what conclusion about Jews would you likely reach?

For all of this, Benjamin Netanyahu, I believe, will go down as the most dangerous and destructive leader in all of Jewish history. I know that's a sweeping statement, given how long Jewish history blessedly has been. But it's not a hyperbolic statement. I have studied a fair amount of Jewish history, and I truly cannot come up with a Jewish leader who has done more damage to the Jewish people than Israel's current leader. It is not fair – it is, in fact, baldly antisemitic – that you and I face serious danger because of Benjamin Netanyahu – that we are praying here tonight inside an armed fortress because none of you would be here if we weren't – but we won't escape that danger simply by decrying it as antisemitic. Judah-ism demands more of us. We must take whatever action is within our power,

despite the mighty pull of circumstance, instead of just succumbing to the claim of helplessness.

46 days from now, the Israeli people are going to elect their new government, and while that ordinarily feels like a matter to be resolved chiefly between Israel's citizens and its leaders, this time your and my safety is also on the ballot. Not because antisemitism will magically disappear if the cruelest, most lawless regime in Israeli history is removed from power, no – but because their removal will create conditions in which all those Hamans circling around us will no longer be fed new daily atrocities with which incite the entire world against us. We all remember lengthy eras in which those Hamans have failed to mobilize the masses against us, despite their fiercest efforts, using the very same arguments that are working now. This election is the best chance we've had in years to try to catalyze another such era.

So if you have family members who live in Israel... if you have friends who live in Israel... if you have business associates who live in Israel... you need to get on Zoom with them and explain what has happened to you as an American Jew under this Israeli regime. You need to ask them to bear you in mind as they cast their vote.

One thing you need to know, though – there is no absentee voting allowed in Israel for ordinary citizens. You either vote in person or you're not counted. That means half a million Jews who are eligible to vote but live elsewhere will have to get themselves to Israel on October 27th. Not surprisingly, Benjamin Netanyahu is doing everything he can to hamper efforts to get them there, even manipulating the legal system, as he habitually does, to disenfranchise them. Those half a million voters are the ones who know what you know. They're the ones who have watched their personal safety plummet over the past three years – who are futilely asking themselves and their loved ones, as so many of us do, where they could flee to, in a world where Jews are no longer welcome. Their priorities with their votes are our priorities. We must do what we can to enfranchise them.

So if you have family members in America or elsewhere who are eligible to vote in Israel... if you have friends who are expat Israelis who get to vote... if you have business associates who live here but can vote there... you need to look them in the eye and tell them you're willing to help them get to Israel on October 27th, since their vote is your only vote.

It so happens there is a very easy way to help them, and it's something each one of us can do, even if you don't know a single expat Israeli eligible to vote. The America-Israel Democracy Coalition – the AID Coalition – is an American, nonpartisan, nonaffiliated, nonprofit organization that exists to strengthen and preserve democracy in Israel. You donate to it, you get a tax deduction in America. And they use the money for their Fly&Vote Campaign, which is devoted to enabling every Israeli, wherever they live, to vote in the upcoming Israeli election. Thousands upon thousands of Israelis left the country after October 7th; they now need to book flights if they want to express their displeasure at the ballot box. So the AID Coalition is chartering flights – as many as will be needed. We need to help them

provide the seats that will carry our votes to Israel. You can find a link for doing so right on our temple website, and we will be sending it to you as well.

I want to be clear that we should harbor no illusions about what will be possible with the next Israeli government. Our fellow Jews who live in our people's ancient home are traumatized in a way it's hard for us even to understand. For days after their government completely failed them on October 7th, they were left to make plans for what they would do if Hamas came to their front door today... or tomorrow... or the next tomorrow. Sitting around waiting and wondering... can you imagine? Tal Becker – the longtime peace negotiator, who, no joke, used to have a game he played with his young children called, “Moral Dilemmas at Bathtime” – that Tal Becker told a couple hundred rabbis this summer that on October 8th, he had already formulated a plan to painlessly kill his own children if Hamas came to his door. This is not a people rushing to create a Palestinian state. Frankly, the Palestinians aren't in any hurry to make peace with Israel either.

So this election isn't about restarting negotiations for two states. This election is about stopping the constant stream of depravity being broadcast daily and weaponized against us Jews, wherever we may be. I want a better Israel, yes. But I also want a better life, a safer life, for me, for you, for this congregation. It is time for us to be counted.

The Israeli flag, with its blue and white stripes and its Star of David in the center, does not look exactly like a tallit, a prayer shawl, by accident. The intent of the state's founders couldn't have possibly been clearer; this country was to represent the Jewish people on the world stage. That sounded great to us when the country was born, great to us when it survived the Six-Day War, great to us when it rescued captives in Entebbe, great to us when it heroically liberated Jews from Ethiopia and the Soviet Union, great to us when it led to technologies that have improved and even saved lives across the planet, great to us when peace was reached with Egypt and then Jordan, great to us as, with dreams in our souls, we watched that handshake on the White House lawn. It sounds a lot less great when it's getting us targeted wherever we may live.

No, fair or unfair, antisemitism and Israel are not two separate topics. The cry of Judah-ism is blaring in our ears. Let us wrap that tallit all around us. Let us not turn away from the cry.