

The Enemy Within, the Enemy Without

Anti-Semitism in 2019

Rabbi David Kosak

I want to get real. There are people in our kahal today who are worried about being here. Wondering if it is safe to be here, they still came to be with their people, to welcome the New Year with its hopes, to do what Jews have always done. Kol HaKavod for being here. You ARE safe here. Simultaneously, I would be remiss not to dedicate one talk to the new antisemitism, acknowledge how we are feeling, and offer a few suggestions about what we can do to address it.

We all know the old joke about Jewish history: They tried to kill us...We survived... Let's eat. There is wisdom in that quip, truth I was reminded of in the weeks leading up to these Yamim Noraim. One of my food heroes, cookbook author Edda Servi Machlin, died. I learned from her about the food of the Italian Jews and also about the religious lives of her ancient community. Edda grew up in Pittigliano, a small village in Tuscany. So much of its architecture and cultural ways had resisted change and provided a window into antiquity.

Among the many lessons she taught me was about the connection between food and antisemitism. Let me quote her:

“Much of Jewish food lore is based on reproducing, in a sweet form, some symbolic item of the unhappy events of the past as a reminder of the constant and dreadful danger of their recurrence and also to ward off such a possibility. At Passover we have the Charoset, symbol of the mortar used by our forefathers who were slaves in Egypt; at Purim, Haman’s Ears; at Rosh Hashanah *strati*...

There is something primeval, mythical and Jungian in this simple observation. We ingest the thing that worries us, and there it lives inside of us, nourishing us in its own strange way.

The antisemitism inside of us. And of course the antisemitism outside of us.

For let’s not forget, Edda her ancestors ended up there two thousand years ago in the aftermath of the Roman conquest of Jerusalem and Israel. Now the Romans were

not mere conquerors or colonialists. They were also antisemites. It's one thing to take over some land, as Alexander of Macedonia did. But for the most part, he let the natives be and didn't intrude on their cultures.

Not so with the Romans. They hated Jewish culture and did what they could to eliminate it.

They outlawed our public reading of Torah. They even outlawed the public *teaching* of Torah.

Some of you may remember a fable told about Rabbi Akiva, who refused to relinquish his faith or his belief. Against that Roman edict, he continued to teach Torah publicly. When one of his students asked him if he was afraid, he answered with the following parable.

A hungry fox once trotted alongside a river teeming with fish. He watched as, suddenly, the fish anxiously dispersed at an alarming pace. "What's going on?" he called to the fish. "The fisherman is coming with his nets!" came a gargled reply. "I've got an idea!" the crafty fox hollered. "Leap out of the water and join me on the riverbank. There are no nets here." "You're not so bright, are you?" came

the scornful reply. “If we remain here, we may or may not get caught. But if we leave the water, we will certainly expire!”

“The Romans may or may not take my life,” Rabbi Akiva concluded. “But I cannot abandon Torah, like a fish cannot forsake the water.”

This year, that well-known fable isn’t as far removed as it once was. This year, that story is like a blinding light flashing in the mirror as we try to look at ourselves. What do I mean?

Much has happened since we gathered here last year. The Tree of Life Synagogue in Squirrel Hill, Pittsburgh happened. October 27th, 2018. Robert Gregory Bowers—y’mach sh’mo—may his name be erased from history, entered with a Colt Ar-15 semi-automatic rifle and three Glocks. By the time he was done, 11 precious souls were snuffed out, six wounded. By a rage-filled antisemite.

Can you imagine what the high holidays are like there this year? What are they feeling? How will they recite the Unateneh Tokef prayer, recalling who shall live....and who

did not. How will that community hold one another this year? Who will suffer from survivor's guilt, and who will suffer the agonies of grief.

Among the dead were Cecil Rosenthal, and David Rosenthal, two gentle fifty year olds of limited intellectual capacity. They lived in a group home that cared for their special needs. Every Shabbat, they went to the Tree of Life. They loved their Judaism and were loved and regarded at the Tree of Life.

It was the deadliest attack on a Jewish house of worship in American history. Exactly five months later, it was repeated when John Timothy Earnest entered the Poway Chabad synagogue with a semiautomatic rifle and dozens of rounds of ammunition. He claimed the life of one, and injured three before, thankfully, his gun jammed.

Those are the high profile cases. Yet those cases didn't come out of nowhere. Any one who follows the news in Europe understands that the long-lived bastion of Western civilization has become deeply inhospitable to Jews. As Human Rights Watch published back in June,

“On May 28, the United Kingdom’s national human rights institution [launched](#) a formal investigation into anti-Semitism within the Labour Party...” It’s not just politics.

"In a December 2018 [survey](#)...89% of Jews in twelve European countries feel anti-Semitism has increased over the past decade. Almost half worried about being insulted or harassed in public because they are Jewish, and more than a third feared being physically attacked.”

Europe isn’t alone anymore. According to the AntiDefamation League site, there were 1,879 incidents of anti-semitic hatred in 2018 in the United States. If you possess a dark sense of humor, you can take some consolation because that was a hundred fewer incidents than in 2017. But none of us should be laughing. For this number of 1879 only refers to direct incidents against people who reported them. Not included are the literally millions of anti-semitic tweets, podcasts, posts and videos. Anti-semitism is back.

And the difficult truth is that hate, terror and terrorists normally win. They win. At least initially.

As you entered today, I am sure you noticed the security guards. We've distributed materials on what to do in the event of an active shooter incident. Our professional staff has undergone a lot of training. Over this past year, we've interrupted Shabbat services to run an evacuation drill. Our security committee has been extremely dedicated, and they have all earned our appreciation and this public thank you.

We've also spent many dollars on hardening our facility and will continue to do so. If you have not yet heard, after multiple years of submissions, we finally received a Department of Home Land Security Grant in the amount of 86 thousand dollars. We will be investing considerably more than that and have already begun making numerous security upgrades. The Jewish Federation, meanwhile hired a security professional to interact with our many Portland Jewish institutions.

But when you multiply our efforts by the 3700 synagogues in our nation and the hundreds of Jewish communities, the only possible conclusion is that terror and hate wins. All those dollars that could have gone to programming, to kiddish lunches, to Jewish education, to raising our

children with the positive values of our tradition... Robert Bowers won.

We did what was necessary to be as safe as possible. We will continue to do so. We are obligated to by our religion and by basic human instinct. But Robert Bowers won the first round.

It makes me wonder what Rabbi Akiva would say if he could see where the American Jewish community is today. Are we in the water, or have we come up on shore next to the fox?

Yet there are ways that we can overcome the Bowers and Earnests and all the others who espouse hatred. Ways we can ensure, *sof-sof*, that the terrorists don't win. None of these ways are new, or innovative or will win attention from the press. Yet that doesn't make them any less valuable or important.

The first way we can respond is by supporting the efforts of those who stand on the front line against antisemitism. The ADL, for example, has been a tireless advocate on behalf of Jews and has fought discrimination of countless

other minority groups in America as have our local efforts in such groups as the Jewish Community Relations Counsel and the persistent interfaith efforts of Neveh Shalom.

The second way we can respond... is TO RESPOND. Just a week or so ago, a couple of swastikas were found carved into a tree at Wilson High School. My older son goes there. So it's getting personal...The school eliminated the swastikas, and responded by reiterating that it has zero tolerance for such hatred. On the Thursday before RH, a small delegation from the Jewish community went to hear ten students from Wilson High School speak about their experiences of racism and antisemitism at Wilson. It was a disturbing evening. Nonetheless, it was important to me that the school administration understands we take these incidents seriously, and to their credit, they will be using the ADL's curriculum on hate within the school.

The third way I want to suggest is to strengthen our commitment to *achdut* and *k'lal yisrael*, to Jewish unity. There are concrete ways we can do that, and there are mental attitudes that we can foster.

On the paths of action, it's important for us to nurture friendships with Jews who live differently than we do. If you don't have any friends from the Orthodox or Renewal communities, for example, seek them out. The same goes with our Interfaith families, who are as much a part of the today's Jewish world as anyone. Why is this important?

One of the historically mixed blessings of anti-semitism is that when it rises, Jewish unity increases, and when it falls, we tend to turn against one another. We all need to say, "Enough!" to that. We are all one people—let's show our fractured nation how a diverse Jewish people can still find ways to realize we are one. In today's climate, that would be a real example of us being an "Or La'Goyim," a light to the nations.

In connection to the above, we live in a peculiar time. My friends on the left want to focus on the antisemitism of the right. And my friends on the right want to downplay this while emphasizing the antisemitism on the left. Speaking scientifically, the physical acts of violence in this country have mainly come from the right—but that is not the case in Europe, nor is there any reason to imagine that hate is well-behaved and will stay in its current lane.

It is therefore an error to walk down this path of blame. The forces of polarization want nothing more than to divide people. If we Jews can't look antisemitism straight in the eye wherever it manifests, and feel secure in denouncing hatred, no matter how nicely it is packaged, something is wrong. History reminds us that hate has an unpredictable way of changing suddenly and quickly.

So yes, we need to react, but in the words of historian Deborah Liptstadt, the author of *Denying The Holocaust*, we also need to ensure that we don't overreact. Yes, we are witnessing a rise in antisemitism; we also have the good will of the larger society in a way that is historically unprecedented. America remains different in this regard.

And that leads us to some spiritual responses to antisemitism.

We Jews have mastered social and political activism. It is one of the gifts that Israel has given to American Jews. Our confidence in our political capacities tracked the miraculous success of Israel's rise, and much has been written about that linkage.

Simultaneously, it sometimes seems like we have forgotten that the most profound gifts we Jews have given the world are spiritual. Our values...Sacred Literature... The very idea of the church and the mosque came out of the radical invention of the synagogue as a spiritual institution... Religion as a participatory endeavor and not something reserved for a special class of priests...The prophets... and even prayer itself...these are the gifts we've brought into the world. Ultimately they make us all safer and grant us fuller lives.

Spirituality matters. It's not a cop-out or a retreat from reality. Rather, it is one of the most potent responses to reality, because it allows us to rise above the worst of the present. It states that there is more to the world than what is before us. In that way, it both points to a different future and implants within us the seeds of optimism and hope. Activism without a grounded spiritual component is the exertion of power for different aims. Activism well-grounded in informed spirituality is unstoppable and moral.

The best response to antisemitism, then, is to do what we have always done. To live Jewishly, with abundant zest. To learn about our rich tradition, and to embrace a positive Jewish identity. To practice our values, such as loving the stranger and seeking the divine spark that God put in all people. That will be our focus the rest of the High Holidays.

Because here's the thing. You can't legislate hate away.

I know that many of us don't *feel safe*. It breaks my heart. I HEAR you. I get it. *These are scary times*.

That's precisely when we need our faith. Our mahzor itself asks us to ponder these feelings of safety and vulnerability. When we recite the Un'taneh Tokeh and ask Who Shall Live and who shall die, we are being asked to ponder what it is to be a human...our vulnerability...our limited control...our existential dread.

We are confronted with questions about our security in this world. Our physical safety, yes, our health, yes....and also our psychological and spiritual feelings of security.

My colleague, Rabbi Irwin Kula, pondered these questions, and wondered whether feeling physically vulnerable might make us more spiritually open, or if instead it might shut down our ability to connect with these prayers. *Are you feeling more or less open?*

Those are spiritual questions. They are the deepest sorts of questions we can ask about who we are, and why we are here. They present us with danger and opportunity. *Danger and opportunity? Yes.*

Which returns us to Edda Servi Machlin's amazing insight about Jewish foods, like *charoset*, and *hamantashen*, and Chanukkah latkes and *sufganiyot*, donuts fried in that small container of oil that had not been defiled by those who hate us.

We ingest the thing that worries us, and there it lives inside of us, nourishing us in its own strange way.

There is an antisemitism inside of us. And of course there is the antisemitism outside of us.

It's back. We didn't ask for it. We don't want it. But there it is. Which means that we are presented with a spiritual opportunity. Do we ingest it in order to accept the message our haters want us to hear? So that we live in fear?

Or do we take it in to overcome the fear, the hatred? To conquer it?

You know the correct answer as well as I do. If there must be an enemy without, so be it. Just so long as there is no enemy within.

But getting to the place where you can feel the answer in your mind and psyche?

First, we react. We take action. We don't pretend it's not here. We take rational, measured steps. We support groups like the ADL. We commit to *achdut*, to Jewish unity by connecting with Jews who live and look and think differently than we do. We develop friendships with those of other backgrounds and religions.

We apply for Homeland Security Grants. We make it harder for bad guys by hardening our synagogue. In the end, the bad guys lose. They lose the war as they always have.

And while we do that, we strive to soften our hearts. *Sh'virat halev*. God loves the open-hearted, the broken-hearted, the ones who feel. The ones who keep growing spiritually, morally, emotionally. The ones who hold fast to their Torah...who, like Rabbi Akiva, stay in the river of life.

May you live in joy and not fear.

May you trust yourself to love and learn.

May this be a year of health and contentment for you...for us...for all God's children and all of creation itself.

Am Yisrael Chai.