

Step Boldly in the Future: Overcoming Anti-Semitism in the 21st Century

Written for Speaking by Rabbi Michael Schwab (RH 5775)

When I was thirteen there was a period of time when I had trouble going to sleep at night. It was not because of nightmares, or worry about a test. My anxiety came from a crisis of faith in the human spirit. That year at Kellman Academy, the Solomon Schechter Day School of Southern New Jersey, we had been studying the Holocaust. The graphic pictures and the detailed descriptions of the horrible realities through which those brave souls lived and died – those were difficult enough for my adolescent mind. Yet, I vividly remember that what actually kept me awake at night, what gnawed at my young soul, was the question, of why? Why did so many people in the world **hate** the Jews so much? My young brain could not comprehend why people would have been so cruel to us, fellow human beings, in such a systematic and sustained way. And for those who did not truly hate, how could they have allowed such barbarity to exist in their midst? While those questions were not new and theories abound, I found no answer that satisfied my soul. I remained troubled but I resolved then

that at the very least I would never, ever underestimate the power of this unfathomable form of hatred.

I share this sobering personal anecdote with you now, because frankly I am having trouble sleeping again. I am deeply worried that hatred of Jews in the world, and sadly hatred in general, is growing. I have tried in my life to be a positive person and have carefully avoided ringing the alarmist's bell, but the evidence points clearly to a sharp rise in anti-Semitism in a sustained and measurable way. And I am worried that if we do not confront it, there may be a hefty price to pay. I hear my thirteen year old self speaking in my ear and reminding me of my resolution, not to underestimate the potential destructive power of hatred directed against my people or against *any* specific group, for simply being who they are.

I know that there were many challenges presented to us this year: individual stressors: about health, job situations and strained relationships that have caused great personal difficulty. Plus, there have been very distressful challenges presented to our people: the Pew study of American Jewry, which worried about the connection of young Jews to our traditions and institutions. And Operation Protective Edge and the conflict in Gaza:

kidnapped and murdered teens, thousands of rockets fired by Hamas at civilian populations in Israel causing death and destruction, terrorists coming through tunnels from Gaza and the loss of so many fine young soldiers who were protecting their fellow citizens. And of course the tragic deaths of so many powerless Palestinian civilians, caught in the conflict and put at risk by the Hamas operatives who used their homes, hospitals and schools as launching sites and even used their bodies as human shields.

Yet, what worries me the most right now, even though in many ways these are all tied together, is this dramatic world-wide rise in Anti-Semitism. OK, I get that there are people who don't share *my* perspective about how responsibly Israel conducted itself in Operation Protective Edge. And while I often disagree with them, I do understand that people have criticisms about certain choices Israel's government has made in this long conflict – *Israelis* themselves debate these issues daily. But, the anti-Semitism, the rising hatred of **Jews** around the world, that I cannot even begin to understand and that I cannot even remotely tolerate. And while I know there are a lot of important theories as to why Anti-Semitism exists and perpetuates, let us be clear: the *internal* arguments for Jew-hatred

defies rationality and in the short term it seems that there is little one can do, to logically convince the perpetrators that their understanding of Jews is wrong. The *only* choice we have is to confront it and to rally the many who will stand against such irrational hatred to fight it, and to educate others who might be susceptible to it, so that Anti-Semitism doesn't spread and have harmful effects on our societies and on the Jews who reside in them.

If we care about our fellow Jews in Europe and around the world and the great gifts our heritage has to offer both to us and to humanity in general, and if we understand that the expression of such hatred harms everyone living in the society that harbors such hate, not just Jews, then we need to spring into action. This is not a time for raising alarms for the sake of raising alarms; but as the shofar blasts remind us, now *is* a time to make a difference through action, both personally and by supporting organizations that are working on this grave problem.

To start I want to share with you what is happening on our college campuses where anti-Semitism, often expressed in protests against Israel, is most visible in the United States. To illustrate, at Temple University in

Philadelphia, my home town, on August 20th a Jewish student in the business school named Daniel Vessal, engaged in a verbal exchange with anti-Israel activists at the table of the Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) during an official college event. The exchange quickly went from politics to personal, as Vessal was called a “kike,” “a Zionist pig,” and “a baby killer.” And then he was physically assaulted by one of the students at the SJP table and was taken to the hospital. What this incident signifies, amongst other things, is that for *many* groups Anti-Israel activity is *no longer* simply a political movement but part of a campaign of hate against the Jewish people in general. And that the environment on campuses is moving from intellectual debate to personal confrontation and even physical violence. As Scholars for Peace in the Middle East executive director Asaf Romirowsky commented, “The latest at Temple is indicative of a larger trend growing on campuses — something we are seeing at both the *faculty* and student levels ...” This trend of criticism of Israel *expressed* in anti-Semitic language is not only found within the *student* body but many *professors* are playing a role, creating a tangibly hostile

environment for Jews on certain campuses and anyone else who supports Israel.

Here in Illinois we are in the midst of our own controversy on campus. As some of you are aware, The U of I Board of Trustees recently voted 8 to 1 not to confirm the contract of Professor Steven Salaita who was originally offered a professorship of American Indian studies. The Board discovered a series of caustic, vulgar, public, anti-Israel (slash) anti-Semitic tweets over the summer that crossed the line between provocative and hateful. For example, Salaita wrote: "*You* may be too refined to say it, but *I* am not: I wish all the (expletive) West Bank settlers would go missing". And then in another tweet, Salaita referred to anti-Semitism as "something" that is "honorable". Notice he did not say opposing Israeli *policy* is honorable, but anti-Semitism, hatred of all Jews, is honorable. Such a statement clearly validates and encourages hatred.

Plus, the nature of the protest *against* the Board's decision, testify *further* to the spread of anti-Semitism. For example, many of the oppositional comments made suggest that Salaita's rejection is just another example of how "Zionists and Jews" are using their power to manipulate

the world. This rhetoric is an eerie revival of old anti-Semitic stereotypes of Jewish power and a further illustration of the conflation of Jew-hatred and opposition to Israel on our campuses. The offer to Salaita was *not* rescinded because he was anti-Israel: in 2011, well before this summer, he published a book entitled "Israel's Dead Soul," and he still got the initial U. of I. job offer. Any professor can choose his politics for himself. However, it was his endorsement of *hatred*, specifically in this case, of Jews, and his willingness to express it in such public and caustic ways that cost him the appointment.

In this case, responsible alumni, students and administrators prevented a professor from coming to their campus who demonstrated his willingness to demonize a particular people and to incite antipathy, disdain and perhaps even hatred of them. Yet, on many campuses around the country such professors are already there. Combined with the existence of student organizations like the SJP chapter at Temple, the environment for Jews on college campuses should concern us all.

This of course is all taking place in parallel to the scary rise of anti-Semitism in general around the globe. Even in the United States, where

the level of anti-Semitism is lower than in other countries, we have seen an up-tic in hate crimes against Jews. For example, swastikas have been spray-painted on the walls of synagogues and Jewish institutions throughout the country with increasing frequency, including Philly, Miami and here in Chicago. In Los Angeles the Jewish comedian and actor Elon Gold and family, while walking home from shul, were accosted by a group of young men shouting anti-Semitic slogans and one actually yelled, “I hope **your** children die! Just like *you* are killing children in Gaza!” He wrote an op-ed on the experience worth reading. And then there were the incredibly disturbing murders in Overland Park, Kansas, where a gunman killed three people at Jewish communal institutions while shouting “Heil Hitler”. Fortunately, our government, on all levels, has been quick to decry these developments and to pursue the legal means to address them.

But these troubling incidents *pale* in comparison to what is happening in Europe. As every European Jewish leader has stated, they have not seen anti-Semitism at these levels since the 1930’s. In France, which contains the largest European Jewish community, this summer a group of 100 Parisian Jews were trapped in a synagogue by pro-

Palestinian rioters who were chanting “Death to Jews” and “Slit Jews’ throats”. They had to be rescued by the police. This was part of a one week stretch in the summer when seven other synagogues in France were attacked as well. Notice that the chanting was not about Israel but about Jews. And this is in the context that only two years ago a Toulouse gunman Mohamed Merah shot dead seven people, including three children and a young rabbi outside their French Jewish school.

In England, where acts of physical violence are less pronounced officials reported that there were roughly 100 anti-Semitic incidents in the month of July alone, double the usual number. And according to a Haaretz Poll 80% of England’s Jews feel personally *blamed* by fellow British citizens for the deaths of Palestinians in Gaza and an overwhelming majority are seriously concerned for their safety. As a British Jewish citizen wrote in an open letter published in the UK Gaurdian:

I’m just an ordinary middle-aged Londoner. I work in an office. I go to football. I pay my taxes honestly. But there appears to be something that sets me and my kind apart. At a pub in Bath my wife gets called scum when she mentions her background. In a student hall in Manchester a friend’s son is asked to leave as the food he chose to eat is not permitted because it carries a label written in a

language used by a country that is “banned” by the student union. In theatres in Edinburgh and London I am told to denounce my opinions or lose the right to perform. A sportsman in Ireland tweets if he sees my kind he’ll punch us in the face and recommends others follow suit. Protesters across the country show no shame in shouting that my historical persecutors were right. And in Bradford I’m told by an official that citizens of my home-land are not even permitted to enter the city. What is this? Racism. Where is this? Britain and Ireland. When is this? Now. Who am I? I am a Jew.

In Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, Spain, and in other places, Jewish shop windows have been defaced, Jewish owned stores boycotted, messages reading “Torch the synagogues” and “Jews your end is near” have been displayed, signs posted in cafes saying *dogs* allowed Jews are not, and numerous assaults on individual Jews. And horrifyingly, in May a man shot four people at the Jewish museum in Brussels.

Most surprising and perhaps most painful though, is the wave of incidents that have washed over Germany, where atonement for the Holocaust and other Nazi crimes has been a bedrock of their modern society. Plaques and memorials across the country exhort, “Never Again.” Children are taught starting in elementary school that their country’s Nazi history must never be repeated. *Yet*, Molotov cocktails have been hurled at

synagogues in Germany, where chants heard have included “ Hamas, Hamas, Jews to the gas” and the most chilling of all “Hitler was right”. An anonymous caller even threatened a rabbi that he would kill 30 Frankfurt Jews if the caller’s family in Gaza was harmed. These incidents are personal, scary, violent and filled with explicit hatred for Jews as a people. As experts have reflected, while Operation Protective Edge and the conflict with Gaza may have contributed to the *brazenness* of these acts, the presence of anti-Semitism was clearly already there.

In a recent report issued by our own State Department, their investigation found that the result is (and I quote) “throughout Europe, the historical stain of anti-Semitism continues to be a fact of life on Internet fora, in soccer stadiums, and through Nazi-like salutes, leading many individuals who are Jewish to conceal their religious identity.”

Congressman Debbie Wasserman Schultz wrote, “This anti-Semitism is real, this hatred is real, and the violence is real. We must stop it”.

Perhaps even more significantly Deborah Lipstadt, renowned historian of the Holocaust, Professor at Emory, and historical consultant for the US Holocaust Memorial Museum wrote the following: “I have

criticized community leaders who, either out of genuine concern or to advance their own purposes, use Holocaust analogies to describe contemporary conditions. These claims . . . *overstate* what is going on now and completely *understate* the situation in 1939. And despite all this I wonder if I am too sanguine. . . I am un-persuaded by those who try to dismiss what is happening as “just rhetoric.” It is language, after all, that’s at the heart of the ubiquitous slippage from anger at Israeli military action to hatred of Jews. . . . Seventy years after the Holocaust, many Jews in Europe no longer feel safe. The telegram has arrived. Jews are worrying. It is time for those who value a free, democratic, open, multicultural and enlightened society to do so, too. This is not another Holocaust, but it’s bad enough.”

The rise of anti-Semitism in Europe is clearly a serious problem, and one that is deeply troubling given the unique and tragic history of our people. But we must be clear with ourselves and others that this problem has serious implications not only for the Jewish communities of the Diaspora, but also for Israel, and for the *world at large*. The independent mission of Palou, a tiny Pacific Island country, of all entities, hosted a

forum on anti-Semitism held at, but not hosted by, the UN. There Brigitte Gabriel, a Lebanese-born Christian who is the founder of ACT! for America, the largest US citizen network dedicated to national security, made the case for why the entire *world* needs to stand up against anti-Semitism. She said, “The world should care out of fundamental self-preservation. We are at a dark precipice: a holocaust might be coming and *not* just against the Jews: ISIS, for example, is against Christians, Shiites, Sunnis, Alowites, Assidis and anyone who does not believe in their version of Islam. Israel and the Jews fight today is the world’s fight tomorrow.”

And we all know that acts of hatred against one minority lead to hatred against another. As I learned at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum luncheon, when James Grover McDonald accepted the appointment by the League of Nations as High Commissioner for Refugees in 1933 he wrote: “To me the threat of *Jewish* extermination in Germany was a threat to all Christians and all democratic principles. Hence it was that not *only* for the sake of Jews but for the larger cause of freedom, justice, and equal treatment for human beings everywhere, that I—a blond “Aryan,” offspring of Scotch Canadian and Midwest American stock --

became a champion for Jewish aspirations”. Thus, stated Natan Sharansky, civil rights legend and head of the Jewish Agency, the question for Europe and other Western countries “is not whether there is a place for Jews in Europe, but whether there is a place for **Europe** in Europe.” The significance of the outcome of this struggle against anti-Semitism might just be the fate of the values of any country that believes in a free democratic society where people can live in peace and tolerance whatever their ethnic, religious and national backgrounds may be.

But what can *we* do? Now I want to state clearly and unequivocally that I firmly believe in our ability to overcome these challenges and in fact think that the Jewish community has *never before* been so ready and empowered to do so. *At no* time in Jewish history has a Diaspora Jewish community had such an assemblage of organizations and institutions with real power, influence and expertise to handle issues of anti-Semitism, the welfare of Jews around the world and the protection of the democratic freedoms promised to all by the nation in which we live. We, each of us, must be ambassadors of the truth as individuals to our friends, families and

anyone in our sphere of influence. We must know the facts and inspire others to be advocates on behalf of tolerance.

However, to have a true impact on this global problem we must re-invest in the trusted organizations to which I was referring that have the relationships and abilities to affect policy, opinion makers, decisions makers and therefore law and culture. I am speaking of the Anti Defamation league, built for this very purpose. Our incredible Federation system, here represented by JUF Chicago and within it the JCRC, the Jewish Community Relations Council. These organizations have access to, and influence on, government and civic leaders from the local police departments, who are crucial on this issue, to mayors, county officials, state officials, members of congress and representatives of the administration. We should also be grateful for the existence of The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, as well as the local Holocaust museums and education centers like our own Illinois Museum in Skokie and the Museum of Tolerance in LA sponsored by the Wiesenthal Center. To understand their impact, it is important to note that over 2000 people came to the Chicago US Holocaust Museum lunch just two weeks ago,

Jews and non-Jews alike. Their education programs are educating and engaging millions around the world in 15 different languages, including Arabic, Farsi and French. These educational efforts and advocacy on behalf of freedom and tolerance have a huge influence on our society and beyond, which combat both anti-Semitism as well as *all* hatred and acts of intolerance in the world. There is also the American Jewish Committee, amongst others, who have relationships with diplomatic representatives from countries world-wide, and particularly in Europe, who can influence policies in nations around the globe. The Jewish Agency and the Joint Distribution Committee, who are Federation partners, as well as our own Conservative movement's international organization, Masorti, have *local* influence in countries around the world and can work on the ground to strengthen the Jewish communities from within and provide direct services to Jews there. These relationships, on every level, make a huge difference. These organizations change the equation. These institutions help make dialogue possible, advance our educational efforts on this issue exponentially and increase our advocacy abilities enormously.

In fact just last week through the advocacy work of our network of JCRCs across the US, a house resolution that condemns anti-Semitism in all forms and calls on the administration to propose specific action to combat it, passed unanimously. This is just *one* example of what we can accomplish as a community when we direct our energies. And over the summer the *heads of state* in France, Italy, Germany, England and elsewhere all made clear and strong statements *against* anti-Semitism and called for the protection of their Jewish communities. These developments are important and they do not happen by accident.

Another way we counter this modern anti-Semitism that seeks to demonize our identification with our tradition is through greater devotion to our Judaism. Sometimes these moments remind us of things we take for granted and the need to strengthen the institutions and traditions that perpetuate our identity the core values of which we are so proud. Like our synagogues and Jewish educational institutions, and the organizations that *celebrate* Jewish life. As well as our traditions, holidays and observances. Our commitment, as Jews, to *Tikkun Olam*, the betterment of the world. And our support and engagement with the State of Israel. These actions

will strengthen our community, and give it a vitality and light that no one can deny. Living our lives as self-actualized Jews can provide a living example of who we really are: partners with God and the rest of humanity in making this world a better and more sacred place.

And we also do this by coming together as a people. There are many things that divide us but, foremost, we are all one family. Whether we are Conservative, Reform or Orthodox; Diaspora Jews or Israelis; conservatives or liberals and everything in between, we must always remember how important it is that we are all still linked. *Kol Yisrael Arevim zeh ba zeh*, our tradition teaches that all of Israel is inextricably connected to each other. We are *Am Yisrael*, one nation, and we intend not only to live but to thrive together and to continue to contribute to the larger society and to the betterment of the world.

And finally we combat anti-Semitism by also combating hatred and intolerance *wherever* we find it. *Sinat Himam*, unjustified hatred was the reason the rabbis gave for the Destruction of the Temple. *Anger* is appropriate in the face of evil, but blanket *hatred* is a scourge of humanity.

Jews have been, and should *always* continue to be, at the forefront of fighting hatred wherever it rears its ugly head.

So yes, the news for the Jews this year on many levels has not been good and confronting this fact can be very overwhelming.

Understandably, there are those who want to lash out and those who wish to wait for the storm to pass. Those who want to down-play and, even worse, those who will simply opt-out. As my friend and colleague Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove wrote, each of these responses in their extreme is succumbing to a paralyzing form of negativity. A certain amount of anger is motivating, a dose of worry healthy, a little equanimity useful, but if we allow these forces to take over, we cannot accomplish anything. We cannot move forward, overcome, succeed and thrive.

The late Maya Angelou reminded us that “Courage is the most important of all the virtues, because without courage you can't practice any other virtue consistently.” As a people, our faith *is* a combination of courage and hope that impels us to work feverishly towards a bright Jewish future and what is right in the world. We do this not because we are unaware of the hurdles we face. If anything, we *demand* that our eyes be

wide open to the challenges and we be as vigilant and responsive to the landscape as humanly possible. That is why I felt compelled to give this sermon today. However, we must then internalize the truth, that each one of us is the author of a narrative *yet* to be written, and thus we also know that hope exists because *we* are the ones to sustain it. As Rabbi Cosgrove said, “This belief in the hope of possibility and the possibility of hope is not just the essence of courage, not just the essence of faith, but the essence of our people. For two thousand years and change, as long as a Jewish soul yearns, our hope, *tikvah*, is never lost. Yes, the problems are daunting; yes, the future is uncertain; and no, I don’t have all the answers. But that’s the way it has always been, and our challenges must be seen equally as opportunities. Our mood must be one of creativity and collaboration, and most of all, courage. We must be “pugilists of the spirit” and as Heschel once wrote, “optimists against our better judgment.” We have free will, we have the choice, and no matter how hard, we must always find the will to act. Our current reality has blessings and opportunities about which past generations could only dream. It is incumbent upon us to identify these gifts and leverage them towards the

future. As it says in Psalms: *Luleh he'emanti lirot b'tuv Adonai b'erezt hayim. Kaveh el Adonai, hazak v'ya'amezt libekha v'kaveh el Adonai.*

“Mine is the faith, that I shall surely see the Lord’s goodness in the land of the living. Hope in the Lord and be strong. Take courage, hope in the Lord!” Anti-Semitism is growing and hatred abounds but we have the tools, the will and the partners to stop it and all forms of intolerance in the world. The choice is ours. Let us choose to greet our future with courage, and in doing so, step boldly into the year ahead. Shanah Tovah!