

Shabbat Vayikra 5786
Antisemitism Is Worse, and The Call is More Urgent
Rabbi Alex Freedman

Shabbat Shalom.

Last week, I was in New York City for the ADL National Conference, Never is Now. I wish I could tell you the title is an overstatement about antisemitism. But I can't. This convention followed only days after a terrorist drove a car into a synagogue outside Detroit, trying to kill as many Jews as possible. Into a building filled with Jewish children. He failed, thanks to their brave security team. Much of the media coverage blurred or avoided the word 'antisemitism'—and then quickly shifted to contextualizing the attacker. The result wasn't just reporting. It was reframing. (Shout-out to Rebecca Jacobson who wrote a letter to the editor about these slanted headlines that was printed in Tuesday's Tribune.) Would the media have done the same if the target had been a church or a mosque? I doubt it.

We all know that the general trend of antisemitism is frighteningly still on the rise. I heard a bevy of stats there, but I want to share just one with you: In the past year, 55 percent of American Jews have experienced at least one form of antisemitism. Let that sink in. That's over half of American Jews! That's many of us in this room right now. If not you, then likely the person next to you.

And the stories go beyond the numbers.

Jonathan Greenblatt, CEO, recalled a little-known story in the aftermath of the awful Bondi Beach, Australia Hanukkah massacre in December, which left 15 Jews dead and 39 injured. One of those injured and taken to a hospital was Rosalia Shikhverg, a Holocaust survivor. As the hospital staff handled her intake, the staff person changed her name to Karen Jones, against her will. A Holocaust survivor: told, once again, that her Jewish name is something to hide. It's unclear if the motivation was to keep Rosalia safe from media, outsiders, or the hospital staff itself. Each possibility points to the same truth - and it is chilling. Greenblatt laments that in 2026 Jews still sometimes need to hide their identity to be safe. That their Jewish name puts them in danger.

The convention had its uplifting moments, to be sure. Like being part of 4000 attendees all motivated to change things for the better. And hearing firsthand from many non-Jewish allies. We Jews are too few in number to do all the repair work ourselves. We need non-Jewish friends, neighbors, and co-workers to assist, and many people are doing exactly that. And when they do, it matters more than we can fully express. The

Jewish community deeply appreciates their real support, and each of us should communicate that to the allies we know personally.

One such outspoken ally, who was given the Ally of the Year Award, is Emmanuel Acho, former football player and current TV host. During the pandemic, he released a series of YouTube videos called “Uncomfortable Conversations With A Black Man” in which he tackles tough questions about race head on because he believes dialogue between different groups is the most powerful tool towards building bridges. He later co-wrote a book with Israel influencer and author Noa Tishbi, called “Uncomfortable Conversations With A Jew.”

He told us a story in which he was eating sushi in North Hollywood. As he was walking out of the restaurant, somebody said to him, “I hope they paid you well.”

Acho said, “Who is they?”

“You know who they are”

“Again, who is they?”

“The Zionists.”

Acho tried to defuse the situation. “Ma'am, what's your name?”

“You don't deserve my name.”

He made his way to the car, and as he got in, he couldn't shake the thought of this person. Not because of what had already happened, but because of what might happen next. Would she try to force him into a crash? This tall, strong former athlete was genuinely afraid that she might. He said, “In that moment, I finally felt what it was like to be Jewish.”

He gave us one more takeaway: “Justice will not be served until those unaffected are as outraged as those who are affected.”

For the Jewish community to have allies, we *have to have* relationships with others. Relationships in which people truly know and care about us. And that's only possible if we know them. And if we care about what's important to them too.

I know many of us felt betrayed by non-Jewish friends and colleagues, whose causes we supported before October 7th, only to feel isolated and abandoned after October 7th. That perception is real for many of us. It hurt then. And it still hurts now. But it doesn't change the basic equation that we must care about *others and their causes too*, not just our own. Our relationships are the bridges needed to carry this unbearable load.

If we frame the fight against antisemitism as something that affects only the Jews, we simply cannot win that battle. Instead we must remind others that Jews are the canary in the coal mine. That other groups will be mistreated next. That antisemitism is a symbol of moral rot and decay, said Greenblatt. Which indicates that intolerance is tolerated. This is an *everybody* problem because this is not the America that we all aspire to live in. When we protect ourselves as Jews, we are simultaneously ensuring the best for everyone in our country. Most Americans do want to live in a society that celebrates freedom for all, that welcomes differences.

Our appeal to the larger world should not simply be: Stand up against antisemitism to protect the Jews. Our lens must be broader, said Noah Shack: Stand up against hatred for all peoples - including Jews - as we all want to live in and create a free society for all. Antisemitism isn't just bad for the Jews, but a problem for America as a whole. Jews aren't asking for special treatment, just the same freedoms and protections everyone else should enjoy.

So what does our tradition ask of us in a moment like this?

Today is Shabbat HaGadol, the Shabbat before Passover. At our Seder tables Wednesday night, we will read the story of our freedom from the Haggadah. Including this passage in the Magid storytelling section: "Even if all of us were wise, all of us discerning, all of us veteran scholars, and all of us knowledgeable in Torah, it is still a Mitzvah for us to retell the story of the Exodus from Egypt. And the more one expands on the story, the better."

If the story's plot hasn't changed in 4,000 years, why tell it again?

Because, to paraphrase the late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the story insists that the G-d of Israel demands freedom for all for all time. Sadly, every year there are groups of people who are not fully free. And the Torah demands that we Jews do all we can to enable their freedom, since we know firsthand the bitter taste of slavery.

So long as antisemitism cripples our community, the Jewish people is not fully free. So long as any group of Americans is unfairly blamed, America is not fully free. All of us have to work on this antisemitism problem, even if we don't want to (and nobody does). Build or strengthen your relationships with non-Jewish friends, neighbors, and co-workers. Call out antisemitism wherever you see it. Communicate why it's such a serious issue. We wish this responsibility belonged to someone else. But like Moses, we are being called. And if we don't answer that call—who will?

Shabbat Shalom.