

## **Antisemitism and living proudly as a Jew**

YK morning sermon 2024

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As you are aware, I like to start off my High Holy Day sermons with a joke and usually after a bit of searching, I can find something that will make you laugh or at least smile. Sadly, the topic of this sermon has led to a joke that is not funny but very relevant. And so here goes.

In a small village in Poland, a terrifying rumor was spreading: A Christian girl had been found murdered. Fearing retaliation, the Jewish community gathered in the shul to plan whatever defensive actions were possible under the circumstances.

Just as the emergency meeting was being called to order, in ran the president of the synagogue, out of breath and all excited. “Brothers,” he cried out, “I have wonderful news! The murdered girl is Jewish!”<sup>1</sup>

To call that a joke, is a joke. It’s upsetting but it is a perfect segue into a topic that I have avoided throughout my decades as an ordained rabbi. Yes, I have never spoken about antisemitism. I have been a rabbi for over twenty-seven years and up to today, I have never delivered a sermon on this topic. I’ve been aware of it, to be sure, but my personal philosophy has always been to focus on living Jewishly with pride because I believe this perspective leads to a life of greater meaning. I still believe this and this is where the sermon will ultimately lead but first, I need to talk about the challenges of being Jewish in the aftermath of Oct. 7, 2023.

Only days after Hamas launched its murderous rampage in Israel, killing over 1200 people and taking over 250 people hostage, there were immediate protests against Israel celebrating the violence. Mind you, this was long before Israel took any offensive action. Israel was in the process of burying their dead and deep in grief and shock in the aftermath of Oct. 7. During this time the Democratic Socialists of America out of Utah, according to the ADL, “published a “Statement on Palestinian Liberation” on October 7, expressing their “unwavering solidarity with the people of Palestine in their decades long fight for national liberation” and urging Americans “to stand up against settler-colonial, Zionist apartheid.” The statement proclaimed the group’s full support for the attack on Israeli civilians, writing that “it is not terrorism or antisemitism to fight against this injustice.”

A Black Lives Matter account out of Chicago posted an image of a paraglider — referencing Hamas’s use of paragliders to infiltrate Israel and attack civilians — with the message “I stand with Palestine.”<sup>2</sup>

There are only two of many examples that I could share. How does one explain these initial reactions to the horrifying acts of Hamas terrorists as they raped women, brutalized their bodies,

burned whole families alive in their homes, and carted off children and elderly to Gaza? No feeble explanation of Israel bringing it on itself, no victim blaming, can detract from the dehumanization of the victims that included Israelis, Jews, Muslims, Arabs, and people from other countries. Sheryl Sandberg made her movie, “Screams before the Silence,”<sup>3</sup> utilizing videos that Hamas took on their and their victims’ phones and eyewitness accounts, to document these horrific acts. How disturbing that in the wake of overwhelming evidence of Hamas’ rape and brutality of women and others, that organizations that normally speak up on behalf of victims were eerily silent. National Women's Studies Association’s (NWSA) failed to support Israeli women and girls in the wake of the Hamas attack on October 7 along with other international organizations that purport to speak on behalf of victimized women.<sup>4</sup>

Our bewilderment continued in the months after Oct. 7. Protests on college campuses erupted, students called for their universities to divest from Israel and Jewish students were harassed, spit on, prevented from participating in groups or even getting to their classes. Last winter, Dr. Jeff Blutinger, director of Jewish Studies at Cal State University Long Beach, was invited to San Jose State to speak about a two-state solution. The title of his presentation was, “Constructing a Just Solution: Where Israelis and Palestinians Go from Here.” Sounds very reasonable to me. This is exactly the kind of dialogue and talk that we need to be having.

Well, students got riled on social media about his lecture because they labeled him a Zionist and came out in force when he arrived. His lecture had to be moved to a classroom for his safety. Police officers accompanied him on every side as the protesters came into the building. They yelled so loudly that he could hear them from outside the classroom. Dr. Blutinger wasn’t able to give his talk and the police once again escorted him out fearing for his well-being.

Dr. Blutinger says in an interview for Moment magazine, “... the instant I say that there should be a state of Palestine next to a state of Israel, communication stops, because I’m a Zionist promoting the existence of Israel. I hear this often from protesters on campus—they’re not interested in the peace process, a peace treaty or a two-state solution. They’re calling for the violent elimination of the largest Jewish community in the world. And so, it’s not anti-Zionism. It’s antisemitism.”<sup>5</sup>

We remember well the presidents of Harvard, University of Pennsylvania, and MIT as they sat before congress and couldn’t say if calling for the genocide of Jews would violate their rules or code of conduct. It’s not hard to imagine that if any other group was singled out for death or harassment such as blacks, Asians, gays, transgender, or immigrants, they would’ve answered differently.<sup>6</sup> And Columbia and other college campuses are continuing to struggle with the line between free speech and harassment of Jewish students.<sup>7</sup>

I know that there is fear and concern for ourselves and for our children but I want you to know that there are things that can be done. First of all, it's recognizing that we belong here. This is our country. We are part of the American dream and have contributed to many of the great accomplishments of the US. Secondly, Jews in America are not the people of Israel. We don't control the politics of who is prime minister nor the decisions of the Knesset, the Israeli government. We don't get to make the decisions regarding Israel's security and war. This is for Israelis to wrestle with in their divided country. And thus, even those who fervently believe that Israel has gone too far, should not take it out on us, as we are living our lives here in America. We are not anyone's punching bag and one can see the hypocrisy of those who *only* criticize Israel but have nothing to say, according to columnist Brett Stephens in the New York Times, about Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the fraudulent election in Venezuela, the famine and violence in Ethiopia killing 600,000 people, the civil war killing 65,000 in Sudan, and how Iran murders women for merely showing a strand of hair, the oppression of women in Afghanistan, not to mention what is done to those who are gay in these countries.<sup>8</sup>

And so, we can fight back. And many are standing up for their rights. Three UCLA students, this past June, took action against protesters at their university who "created a "Jew Exclusion Zone" where in order to pass "a person had to make a statement pledging their allegiance to the activists' view." Those who complied with the protesters' view were issued wristbands to allow them to pass through, the complaint says, which effectively barred Jewish students who supported Israel and denied them access to the heart of campus.

In August, "U.S. District Judge Mark C. Scarsi sided with the three students and rebuked the school. "Jewish students were excluded from portions of the UCLA campus because they refused to denounce their faith. This fact is so unimaginable and so abhorrent to our constitutional guarantee of religious freedom," he wrote.<sup>9</sup> And then he ruled that if any of UCLA's programs or campus areas become unavailable for Jews, then UCLA cannot make them available to anyone else.

The presidents of Columbia, Harvard, and Penn have been forced to resign over how they handled antisemitism on their campuses from pressure from alumni, congress, and students.

Currently the ADL is leading a lawsuit in our backyard against the Santa Ana school district. They contend that there is evidence that the school board kept information about proposed ethnic studies courses quiet to prevent the public and the Jewish community, from becoming aware of antisemitic and unlawfully biased content.<sup>10</sup>

Aside from lawsuits, we can speak up. Many of you have already done so. Some attend rallies or the run for hostages in Long Beach. Some here have gone to city council meetings. We can have our voices heard on school boards and even join them.

You can also join the ADL's Kulano cohort as part of Beth David. There will be programming and information on ways to combat antisemitism. You can see me or Charlie Niederman on this if you are interested.

We can choose to speak with friends and acquaintances in person and we can even use social media. While it is not ideal to argue on Instagram, Facebook, or Tik Tok, there can be opportunities to refute or at least show another side. My daughter has countered many of her well-meaning friends and acquaintances on social media with gentle educational explanations that show the complexity of issues in the Middle East. I have done this with an organizer of salsa in Long Beach because I have known him for years. Any time he posts on Instagram or Facebook about Freeing Palestine or when he devoted a night to raising money for Palestine, I put on his post excerpts from great editorials showing the complexity of the issue. I did even arrange to sit down with him to discuss our differing views.

I think it can also be helpful to be aware that the person saying or posting or reposting, may not necessarily be a virulent antisemite. They are often ill informed, ignorant, and myopic in what they see. A few second video or meme on Tik Tok can be the totality of what they know about Israel and Palestinians. A comedian Zach Sage, whom my daughter exposed me to, does this great video highlighting the ignorance of some of the protestors at high priced elite universities. Let's take a look.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R1yRXqW6bq0>

Just because someone is protesting, doesn't make them evil or even complicit in the killing of Jews. They may simply be misguided and misinformed.

Most importantly, we need to remember that we are not alone. Both major political parties in the US strongly support Israel's right to exist and to defend itself. Both parties believe in supporting Israel militarily and through policy. We have more allies than we realize. It's easy to focus on who is being critical but perhaps we can think of some neighbors, doctor, workers, and friends who are sympathetic to us as Jews and who believe that Israel is being singled out unfairly.

Jews have a history of good eras such as the Golden age of Spain or during the Renaissance, but we also have many terrible events as well. We were expelled from England 1210 and Spain 1492. In the twentieth century, Jews had to flee Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Libya, Morocco, Syria and Yemen due to persecution and anti-Jewish riots.<sup>11</sup>

We have suffered through the crusades, inquisition, pogroms, and the Holocaust. We have lived in fear of our lives in many places and at many times. Just to state the obvious, we are not living in such a dark time. Our ancestors have experienced so much worse. The question is how did they cope? Let me tell you a parable from the Talmud.

In the second century of the Common Era, Rabbi Akiva was secretly teaching students in a cave. A boy came running breathlessly to him and exclaimed, “Rabbi, you must stop! The Romans will kill you.” Akiva shook his head and told the boy, “There once was a sly but hungry fox and he happened to arrive at a stream. Oh there were so many colorful fishes in the water. Licking his lips, he called out, “Oh fishies! Fishies, there is danger downstream. Fisherman are waiting with nets to catch you.” The fishes begin to panic and swim in circles. The fox continues, “However, I can save you. Just jump on my back and I will take you to another stream close by.” One of the fishes points his mouth out of the water and replies, “Oh you are clever, dear fox, but you will certainly eat us. The water is our life. We will remain here and take our chances with the fisherman.

Akiva turns to the boy, “The Torah is our water. It gives us life. I will take my chances with the Romans.”

So what is our water? What gives us life? It is our values. Our Jewish values are study, learning, celebrating, remembering, praying, giving tzedakah, being active in community, and doing what we can to better our communities and world. The waters of Judaism nourish us and make our lives meaningful. If we retreat in fear, we help the terrorists, whether they are domestic, Hamas, or otherwise, to succeed. And so, we must continue to come to synagogue, Jewish community center, and other Jewish gatherings. We must celebrate our holidays, educate our children, and study Torah. It is our heritage that can give us strength and resilience.

At the Olympics in Paris, husband of vice president Kamala Harris said these words, “It is a poison coursing through the veins of democracy and democratic ideals,” Mr. Emhoff said at a commemoration of a deadly 1982 attack on a Jewish deli in Paris. Six people were killed in that attack, including two Americans, and 22 were wounded.

“Part of fighting hate is living openly and proudly as a Jew and celebrating our faith and our culture,” Mr. Emhoff said... “I love being Jewish, and I love the joy that comes with being Jewish. And I’m not going to let anyone tell me how to be Jewish.”<sup>12</sup>

Mr. Emhoff’s words are defiant and hopeful. We don’t need to be exceptionally brave to love Judaism. This is because we have it good here in the US. Yes, we do. We can live where we want to live. We befriend who we wish. Our Judaism doesn’t prevent us from marrying a person of our choice. We can go to school and be in any profession that we wish to. Okay, okay, I can’t be a priest, but you know what I mean. We are freer and more accepted here than at any other time in our past. We don’t live in fear of blood libels or crusades unlike that terrible joke I opened with. This is our country. We are truly Americans.

While I was at a rabbi's conference last spring, one of my colleagues shared this excerpt of a talk that Rabbi David Wolpe has said a number of times. It gives some needed perspective about the time we are living in. Here is it.

<https://www.tiktok.com/@rabbiwolpe/video/7337771043827813674>

How lucky are we to live at this time even with tensions and conflict. We are blessed to be Jews living in America. We can and we will celebrate and observe our traditions as we proudly pass the Torah down, *L'dor vador*, from generation to generation. Because we, as Jews, go back millennia and we have much to do and contribute in the many years ahead. We have much to look forward to especially a good meal later on today.

G'mar Hatima Tovah, may we be sealed for a life of blessing this year.

## Notes

1 <sup>1</sup> <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/jewish-jokes/>

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<sup>2</sup><https://www.adl.org/resources/blog/fringe-left-groups-express-support-hamass-invasion-and-brutal-attacks-israel>

3 <https://www.screamsbeforesilence.com/>

4 [https://www.jpost.com/diaspora/antisemitism/article-778136#google\\_vignette](https://www.jpost.com/diaspora/antisemitism/article-778136#google_vignette)

5 <sup>5</sup> It's antisemitism.” <https://momentmag.com/jeffrey-blutinger-talk-shut-down/>

6 <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/06/us/harvard-mit-penn-presidents-antisemitism.html>

7 <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/30/nyregion/columbia-antisemitism-bias-report.html>

8 <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/27/opinion/gaza-protests-venezuela.html>

9

<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/judge-rules-jewish-students-says-ucla-cant-allow-barred-accessing-camp-rcna166529>

10 [Lawsuit Uncovers Antisemitic Intent Within Santa Ana Unified School District | ADL](#)

11 <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jewish-refugees-from-arab-countries>

12 <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/09/world/europe/doug-emhoff-antisemitism-paris.html>