

It was Passover evening, and like many of you we had marked the holiday with a wonderful seder with family and friends. We had finished with the traditional wish "*l'shanah ha-ba'ah b'Yerushalayim*" – an expression of the Jewish people's ancient desire to live in safety and freedom. Little did we know that right around the time we were wrapping up, that very safety and freedom were being threatened; a man named Codey Balmer had broken into the home of my longtime friend Josh Shapiro, the governor of Pennsylvania, shortly after his family had concluded *their own* seder, and set the governor's mansion on fire. Josh and Lori and their kids – Sophia, Jonah, Max, and Reuben who were classmates of our own children at the Solomon Schechter school in Elkins Park – were all sleeping inside and only made it out thanks to the quick response of state troopers and capitol police. When I learned what had happened I texted Josh to say how grateful we were that he and his family had escaped unharmed and he wrote back, "Thank you Josh and Aimée, hug the people you love."

When located by the police, Codey Balmer made no secret of the fact that he had targeted Governor Shapiro because he is Jewish, and he saw him as complicit in Israel's military operation in Gaza. The same is true of Elias Rodriguez who chanted 'Free, free Palestine' after shooting young Jewish couple Yaron Lischinsky and Sarah Milgrim, point blank in Washington DC in May, or of Mohamed Sabry Soliman who threw Molotov cocktails at marchers in Boulder peacefully gathering in support of the hostages in June, and who told police he wanted to "kill all Zionist people." We don't know if this was the impetus behind flyers with anti-Israel messages that were strewn across lawns a few blocks from the synagogue in May, since the police still haven't identified a suspect or a motive. But we do know that animus against Israel was at the center just last week in Ridgewood when a woman named Becky Sosnov – a member of Glen Rock Jewish Center – was finishing dinner with a friend when they were targeted by a group of people who got in their faces, yelling and accusing them of genocide while chanting pro-Hamas slogans. And what we all know – and unfortunately are increasingly experiencing firsthand – is that there has been a massive spike in anti-Semitism in this country over the past decade and especially since October 7 that is raising anxiety and leading many of us to hug the people we love a little tighter.

Just to put this in perspective, a few numbers: according to the ADL which tracks anti-Semitic incidents – harassment, vandalism, and assault – in the US, there were 942 such incidents in 2015. Two years later in 2017 that number had more than doubled to 1,986. By 2022 it had nearly doubled again to 3,698 and *the following year* with October 7 that number more than doubled again to 8,873. In 2024 there were 9,354 attacks – almost exactly *ten times* the 2015 figure. In 2024, 33% of American Jews said they had been the personal target of antisemitism, in-person or virtually, at least once over the past year. And 56% of American Jews – including TBR members who have sought me out to share their experiences and concerns – said they altered their behavior out of fear of antisemitism over the past year. On a per capita basis Jews are far and away the most targeted minority group in this country; although Jews make up only 2% of the US population, anti-Semitic incidents account for 15% of all hate crimes. At the same time, official denunciation of acts of anti-Jewish bias is routinely muted, as though we weren't worthy of the same concern and protections as other targeted minorities in this country.

While anti-Semitism is by no means new – and a number of us here today attended a very powerful and disturbing overview of the history of anti-Semitism at the synagogue by

Fordham professor Magda Teter in June – we could also be forgiven until not so long ago for thinking it was largely a thing of the past – at least the pervasive, institutionalized, and societally sanctioned anti-Semitism that was a mainstay of American Jewish life for much of the twentieth century. Certainly many of our older congregants retain vivid, indelible memories of being excluded, insulted, threatened, and made to feel ‘other’ because they were Jewish. My father and Aimée’s mother both attended Cornell, at least in part because Cornell did not set quotas for Jewish students, unlike many other Ivy League schools where their religion would officially be used as a factor against them. When Aimée and I applied to college, this sort of thing was absolutely not a consideration: *of course* there would be no formal mechanisms designed to keep us out because we were Jewish. Ironically, when we were considering colleges for Adir this past year, the issue of anti-Semitism on campus and what kind of reception Jewish college students might receive was once again at the fore.

I say ‘ironically’ because from roughly the mid-1960’s to the mid-2010’s, Jews in this country largely grew up without any experience of anti-Semitism, other perhaps than the stray bigoted remark or insulting stereotype casually hurled their way. During this time it increasingly felt like Jews were accepted as part of the mainstream, like we could be wholly Jewish and wholly American and those two things were not in conflict. I imagine most of us in this room still feel that way; and yet ever since the march in Charlottesville in 2017, since the Tree of Life massacre in Pittsburgh, since the synagogue shooting in Poway, and certainly since October 7 we have been forcibly reminded that there are many in this country who do not share those sentiments – who view Jews as *other* and think nothing of using vicious rhetoric and even violence to let us know that we are not welcome, that we do not *belong*.

And while a portion of the anti-Semitic and anti-Israel sentiment since October 7 has been driven by Israel’s response and by concerns about the plight of Palestinians in Gaza, let us not forget that blaming Israel and the cheers and celebrations for Hamas’ atrocities began on October 8 – as Israel was still reeling and counting its dead and before any kind of military response had begun. And since that terrible time, positions have only become more entrenched and narratives that place the entirety of the blame on Israel for everything that has happened since have proliferated. Taking note of this lose-lose dynamic, theologian and author Rabbi Shai Held, who will be coming to the Temple next month, assessed the way some in our own community have turned Israel into a villain who bore a portion of the responsibility for the October 7 attacks and offered the cogent and powerful analysis: “A century ago many Jews believed that if Jews could just have a state of their (our) own, antisemitism would finally be put to bed. Then a hundred years later some Jews have convinced themselves that if only we *didn’t* have a state, antisemitism would somehow be put to bed. Sadly, both hopes were delusional. Antisemitism is a seemingly ineradicable evil in human civilization.”

The horrifying truth is that, in our increasingly polarized society, sometimes it seems like the only thing that the extreme right and the extreme left in this country can both agree on is that Jews are to blame for their woes, as well as for those of the world more broadly. Tragically, this isn’t an enormous surprise since, as Professor Teter reminded us, Jews have played the role of the scapegoat for whatever grievances the people around them had for centuries, and even millennia. Conor Cruise O’Brien, an Irish writer and politician, noted, “Antisemitism is a light sleeper”: It tends to re-emerge when societies feel besieged and people go looking for somebody to blame. In this climate, it is often increasingly difficult and even scary to figure out

how we – as a community and as individuals – navigate this extraordinarily difficult time we find ourselves in.

Professor Teter's presentation focused on the different varieties of anti-Semitism through the ages – religious, ethnic, political. Each had their own distinct nuances and emphases, but one trait that they all had in common is that our enemies sought to define us in terms that made sense for whatever hateful ideologies they wanted to promote. So for example in the early Soviet Union Jews were portrayed as blood-sucking capitalists while at the same time in the United States Jews were described as Godless communists. In the face of those seeking to define us, my friend and colleague Rabbi Lauren Grabelle Herrmann has suggested that perhaps a step out of the mire of all this hate that threatens to overwhelm us can be found in reclaiming our own power to define ourselves, and in so doing gaining a better understanding of who we are as a people and our sacred mission. To that end, she looks at Jewish identity through the lens of the three terms the Bible uses to describe Jews – *Ivri*, meaning 'Hebrew,' *Yisrael*, meaning 'Israelite,' and *Yehudi*, meaning 'Jew.'

*Ivri* is the first of these terms the Torah uses, applied to Abraham, the very first Jew. The word '*ivri*' means 'edge' or 'side' and is, as I noted, the origin of the term 'Hebrew.' A midrash connects this term with Abraham holding himself off to the side of the idolatrous culture into which he was born, not taking part in the practices of the society that he grew up in as he gradually realized the truth of one God. Abraham was willing to stand apart, stand to the side – even at great personal risk – because of what he believed. I find it reassuring to imagine Abraham holding steady, standing up for himself and his beliefs in a world of people who did not agree with him. What powerful inspiration for us right now: There are times when it is OK, when it is necessary, to stand strong and stand apart for what we believe. And by extension, there are times when we need to stand up not just for what we believe but for *ourselves* and our core values, without backing down.

This standing apart is, in truth, a piece of what anti-Semites sometimes use against Jews, saying we don't truly belong to the societies in which we live. We see these types of accusations going all the way back to one of the first rabid Jew haters in history, Haman, who declares to Achashverosh "There is a certain people, scattered and dispersed among the other peoples in all the provinces of your realm, whose laws are different from those of any other people and who do not obey the king's laws; and it is not in Your Majesty's interest to tolerate them. So if it please Your Majesty, let an edict be drawn for their destruction." (Esther 3:9-10) The perceived problem of our apartness has even been internalized by some Jews at various points in history, who have convinced themselves that this is in fact the root of hatred and suspicion against us, and that if we would just assimilate and put aside our differences and distinctiveness we would be fully embraced by the larger societies of which we are a part – a common belief, for example, among educated Jews in Weimar Germany. But the story of Abraham reminds us that this apartness, this difference, which is positioned by some as a weakness, is actually a strength, part of the fiber of who we are. Abraham was willing to stand apart, on the other side, because of what he believed, was willing to hold his ground in a world that didn't agree with him.

For our part, we too need to be willing to be *Ivri'im*, Hebrews in the model of Abraham, who don't shy away from who we are and what we believe. Who don't apologize for the core values that bind us together or for not fitting neatly into categories society wants to impose on

us. When we stand proud as Jews, when we affirm our solidarity with the hostages in Gaza, when we pray for Israel's safety and security, when we refuse to buy into rising tides of prejudice and discrimination by standing up for those who are marginalized – we are embracing what it means to live as the descendants of Abraham. When we advocate for who we are and what we believe in instead of remaining silent or cowed, we are embracing what it means to live as the descendants of Abraham. When we recognize our kinship and connection with Jewish people around the world – when, to paraphrase the words of Governor Shapiro we hug *that people* that we love – we are embracing what it means to live as the descendants of Abraham.

The second term the Bible uses is *Yisrael*, Israel. This is the name given to the patriarch Jacob after he wrestles through the night with an angel in the Book of Genesis. This wrestling match leaves him permanently changed, physically and spiritually – now blessed with a new name 'Yisrael' which means to struggle with the Divine. Yisrael becomes our people's name – even more, it forms a core part of our identity. We are the people who wrestle with God, wrestle with challenging questions, think critically, refuse easy answers, and embrace complexity.

And in this regard, we need to acknowledge that viewpoints in the Jewish community with respect to Israel have grown increasingly polarized and acrimonious over the past year. There are those who, understandably horrified by the October 7 massacres, take the position that any steps necessary to remove Hamas from power are justified and are concerned that any criticism weakens Israel's ability to do what it must. At the same time, there are an increasing number of people who love Israel and are deeply concerned for its security and wellbeing, but have been experiencing growing misgivings about Israel's tactics in terms of their efficacy, their morality, and the damage they are doing to Israel's standing in the international community. I think we are making a grave mistake if we try to ignore the challenges and complexities this current moment is presenting Jews around the world; and we're not living up to our mandate to be Yisrael if we avoid grappling with these issues by simply writing off anyone who disagrees with us as anti-Semites. Those of course exist as well – those who blamed Israel from the start, who place the responsibility for the October 7 attacks on Israel's doorstep and want to see an end to the State of Israel – and this needs to be called out as the point where criticism of Israel's policies truly does cross over into the realm of anti-Semitism. But at the same time minimizing difficult truths or demanding that everyone think the same way does not fulfill our mandate as Yisrael to wrestle with complexity. On Israel and a range of other issues, there is a diversity of perspectives in our own synagogue community as there is in the Jewish world at large, and being *Yisrael* means recognizing this diversity not as a failure but as a strength. Being *Yisrael* means having honest and open dialogue within our community about the areas where we disagree, recognizing the validity of positions different from our own and never seeking to demonize one another.

Our Kol Nidrei liturgy opens with a plea "*lehitpalel im ha-avaryanim* – asking God and ourselves for permission to pray with those who have transgressed." Reflecting on these words, Rabbi Tali Adler suggests they are especially necessary at this present moment because in some cases that's how American Jews of different political stripes have started to see each other: not as family, but as people who think the wrong things and therefore as people with whom we cannot be in relationship, with whom we cannot be in community. And this is deeply dangerous because, as satisfying as it may feel to righteously smack down those with whom we deeply disagree, it's actually turning our back on the critical, covenantal work of wrestling: of

engaging and grappling with those who, in good faith, are asking the same questions we are, even if they are arriving at different conclusions. Instead, we are called to be honest about the challenges we face as Jews, not to turn our back on them. To be up front about the fears and misgivings we have, to be vulnerable to the challenges but not give in to them. To embrace complexity and nuance and be willing to remain in relationship even when things are difficult, for the sake of building a better world for ourselves and all who dwell on earth.

The final name by which we are known in the Bible is *Yehudi*, Jew or, more literally, one from Judea, *Yehudah*. The term traces its name back to the Kingdom of Judea – the Southern Kingdom and site of the Jerusalem Temple, where the last kings of Israel reigned. But its origins go back still further – Judea takes its name from the tribe of Judah or Yehudah in Hebrew, the fourth of Jacob’s twelve sons. When he is born, his mother Leah gives him this name, saying “*Hapa’am odeh et Adona’i*” — *this time*, I am thanking God (‘Yehudah’ comes from *todah* – thanks). With the birth of each of her sons, Leah – the less favored wife – had hoped her husband Jacob might come to love her as much as her sister, Rachel. But now with the birth of her fourth son, Leah was not shouting her joy from the rooftops. She had accepted her fate.

In this light, we might translate the name Yehudah as “giving thanks, despite how difficult things are” or a more poetic read: “affirming life, even in the face of despair” Rabbi Grabelle writes: “Leah must have been clairvoyant – because this is exactly who we are. We are the people who keep praying and celebrating even in the most difficult times. Even when we are not “loved” by everyone around us. We are the people who, when our holy Temple and entire way of life was destroyed, rebuilt with an entirely new way of thinking, praying, living.

We are the people whose ancestors lit candles and hid them inside their stove, the people who fashioned makeshift menorahs or other ritual objects in concentration camps. We are part of the same people who today are in the process of rebuilding the kibbutzim and communities decimated on October 7. When anti-Semitism is rearing its ugly head, let us remember that we are Yehudim, a resilient people who affirm life even in the darkest of times. As Yehudim, we can look to past generations as a reminder that no matter what comes our way, we refuse to give into despair. We can raise up and celebrate our traditions which are themselves reminders that life is holy and good – and that we can help make it so. While being *Yehudi* may not solve intractable problems, it can give us the fortitude to face what is hard. It can offer us the assurance that we will not only survive but transcend the challenges and obstacles the world presents.

*Ivri, Yisrael, Yehudi*: the names that anti-Semites might label us with pale in comparison with the power of the names we call ourselves. Yom Kippur is about reaching into our deepest selves and discovering and lifting up what is truest and most enduring. Our own lives and our fates are rooted in the lives and fate of the Jewish people, which is a precious heritage stretching back thousands of years. We are so much stronger than our individual selves when we draw on the strength of the community around us and of our millennia-old identity, traditions, and values. When we embrace the power of standing firm for who we are and what we believe in, for engaging honestly and openly even when it is difficult, and for resilience rooted in gratitude and hope. These values have sustained us for thousands of years and point us in the direction of how we can not only survive but thrive, not only endure but rejoice, not merely accept our identity but celebrate it. How we can overcome hatred and be strong and proud and resilient as part of this precious people, how we can uphold our timeless covenant of identity

and purpose, how we can embrace the sum of *Am Yisrael* with all its flaws, frailties, and complexities – and hug it tight.