

**SERMON ON ANTI-SEMITISM**  
**HUMAN RIGHTS SHABBAT, December 13, 2019**  
**Rabbi Suzanne Singer**

On a Shabbat evening when we are speaking of human rights, we must also address the very unfortunate rise in anti-Semitism that is occurring in Europe as well as in the United States -- I might even say, especially in the United States, where, overall, Jews have felt safe during the past several decades. Gone, we thought, were the times when, as my mother experienced in the 1940s, signs for water fountains were marked: "For Jews and dogs." But then there was Charlottesville, and the Tree of Life shooting, and the Poway shooting. And just this past week, a fatal gun battle at a Jersey City kosher market, which the mayor, Steven Fulop, affirmed was a targeted attack against Jews. According to the mayor, the shootout at a Jewish grocery that left a police officer, three passersby, and the two suspects dead was deliberately started. New York Mayor Bill de Blasio stated: "This tragically confirms that a growing pattern of violent anti-Semitism has now turned into a crisis for our nation. And now this threat has reached the doorstep of New York City."

These shootings are the most violent manifestation of anti-Semitism, but not the only ones. After calls for her resignation, a Trenton City Council member had to apologize for using the phrase "Jew her down" in a meeting. Congresswoman Ilhan Omar responded to GOP threats to censure her for denouncing Israel with, "It's all about the Benjamins baby." She was referring to the financial support the American Israel Public Affairs Committee gives to legislators who stand up for Israel. Omar later apologized. And just this past week, our President told American Jews: "If you vote for a Democrat, you're being very disloyal to Jewish people and you're being very disloyal to Israel." These canards, rooted in ancient and medieval anti-Judaism, actually have a long history in America.<sup>1</sup>

One of the most harmful stereotypes is that Jews killed Jesus Christ. All the way back in 1654, New Amsterdam Governor Peter Stuyvesant tried to expel 23 Jews who had just landed in the colony and who were fleeing persecution. He called them a "deceitful race -- such hateful enemies and blasphemers of the name of Christ." American Sunday school primers, Bible mission tracts and popular novels depicted Jews' complicity in the murder of Jesus as well.

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<sup>1</sup> The historical material here and following, and some of the language, have been drawn from <http://theconversation.com/anti-semitism-in-the-us-today-is-a-variation-on-an-old-theme-123250>

You might also recall Mel Gibson's 2004 film "The Passion of the Christ" which carried religious anti-Semitism into the 21st century. The film's Jewish mob appeared on the wide screen screaming "Crucify him" to a bloodied Jesus standing before the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate.

The anti-Semitism making headlines today doesn't usually refer to Jews killing Jesus. Instead it draws from other anti-Jewish stereotypes that depict Jews as a people interested only in money, malevolently employing their wealth to undermine the political order. The examples I gave earlier underscore this image. But Jews and money was a stereotype early in our history as well. In a late 19<sup>th</sup> century Atlantic Monthly, a friend of Harvard professor and ambassador James Russell Lowell recalled how Lowell – a minister's son – decried Jewish bankers, brokers and the ones who had slipped into politics and diplomacy because Lowell feared that they were poised to control "the Earth's surface." Lowell's sentiment was typical of many of his generation's well-bred, well-educated public servants, intellectuals and civic leaders. Lowell's assertion of an international Jewish conspiracy predated the forgery known as the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion."

This Russian anti-Semitic fantasy imagined Jewish leaders plotting to destroy Christianity and control the world. It inspired Adolf Hitler's "Mein Kampf." The myth of a world Jewish conspiracy found a home in America in the 1920s with the publication of "The International Jew – The World's Foremost Problem" which quoted liberally from the "Protocols." "The International Jew" charged that the Jews controlled the world's finances, that they were the "power behind many a throne." Industrial tycoon Henry Ford was largely responsible for disseminating this screed.

Another trope has Jews putting their devotion to the Jewish people above allegiance to their nation. In 2015, NPR host Diane Rehm asked Senator Bernie Sanders whether his "dual citizenship" with Israel disqualified him to serve as U.S. president. Senator Sanders is not a citizen of the State of Israel.

This stereotype harks back to our history as well. In 1890, the editors of the New York Jewish newspaper, The American Hebrew, asked more than 50 clergy, college presidents, lawyers and politicians about "Prejudices Against the Jews." This was in response to a spike in anti-Semitism that saw Jews excluded from summer resorts, blackballed as members of private clubs and denied admission to private schools. Tufts College President told the newspaper: The Jews could never "assimilate like other aliens; they are always Hebrew ... They never can be Americans, pure and simple."

With anti-Semitism today bombarding American Jews from the right and the left, the moment appears new but, as you can see, its language is not. Sadly, it's a very old theme<sup>2</sup> that seems to rear its head at times of economic, social and political disruption.

Dr. Steven Windmueller, who has spoken here, and is the retired dean of the Hebrew Union College, points to four factors that frame today's anti-Semitism. First of all, he notes that "the unique and particular focus" of white supremacists on Jews "is striking, if not scary. Hatred of everyone that is *non-white* represents their generic mantra. Jews are ... charged with framing the ideas and political protocols for "multi-culturalism, pluralism, and globalism."

Secondly, the term "Intersectionality" is "significant, challenging and problematic for liberal Jews. Some progressives are seeking to discredit Jewish... participation as legitimate liberal actors on the basis that 'Jews have become white' and therefore by definition belong to the oppressor class...if you are categorized as a "Zionist," then your standing is further compromised.

Then there is the argument that "*Israel Has No Right to Exist.*" Our enemies are using the imagery of Hitler's Germany to characterize the Jewish State, with Jews and more directly, Israelis, defined as the new Nazis.

Finally, there is *Cyber Hate*, the "newest form of anti-Semitic practice. Cyber political language permits lies and rumors to represent fact. Of special concern social media has increasingly served as a platform for hate messaging in the form of conspiracy theories and the promulgation of 'false facts.'"<sup>3</sup>

How to respond? As you probably know, the President has just this week, issued an executive order essentially defining Judaism as a race or national origin, not just a religion, under the Civil Rights Act. While this seems to protect us, the order has many pitfalls. As you heard earlier, our loyalty as Jews has been questioned throughout history. Will this order actually lead to more, rather than less, anti-Semitism? As Rabbi Jill Jacobs points out: "While Jews do see ourselves as a people — 'Am Yisrael,' the people of Israel — peoplehood is different from citizenship. The name Am Yisrael refers not to the land, but to the biblical Jacob, who in the Torah portion that Jews read in synagogue this week, receives "Israel" as a second name after wrestling with a divine messenger. As the descendants of Jacob/Israel, Jews are a people with relationships to one another, ritual and cultural practices, history, a shared sacred language and, yes, a historical connection to the land of Israel, which according to the biblical text, God promises to our ancestors. The biblical Land of Israel, though, is not the same as the modern state of Israel."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The preceding examples and some of the language is from: <http://theconversation.com/anti-semitism-in-the-us-today-is-a-variation-on-an-old-theme-123250>

<sup>3</sup> <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/confronting-anti-semitism-church-of-latter-day-saints-jewish-dialogue/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/12/12/trump-still-believes-all-jews-are-really-israelis/>

Rabbi Hara Person, the CEO of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, puts it more starkly: “Not to overdramatize, but it feels dangerous,” she said. “I’ve heard people say this feels like the first step toward us wearing yellow stars.”<sup>5</sup> The executive order also expands the definition of anti-Semitism to include some anti-Israel sentiments. Rabbi Rick Jacobs, the president of the Union for Reform Judaism, said he supported good-faith efforts to curb anti-Semitism on college campuses, but also acknowledged the concern over the order’s potential implications for free speech. “It’s something we’re going to closely monitor,” he said.<sup>6</sup>

Rabbi Jill Jacobs explains further: “...redefining some campus criticism of Israel as anti-Semitism does nothing to protect Jews and only makes Palestinian and Muslim students — another group in need of protection — vulnerable to censure. Campuses should be open environments for difficult conversations and protests, sometimes even with harsh language, free from spurious accusations of discrimination. In adopting a definition of anti-Semitism that conflates Jews with the State of Israel, [the] executive order does nothing to protect Jews from anti-Semitic attacks by those affiliated with or influenced by hate groups — such as the murders in a kosher grocery store in New Jersey this week or the deadly attacks on synagogues last year.”

It is definitely a very fine line.

One response that I think is important is not to allow today’s anti-Semitism to intimidate us or to cause us to retreat. Think about the holiday we will be celebrating in a couple of weeks. The Maccabees stood strong and defeated a powerful empire. Think also about how we light the Chanukah candles: we light one, then two, then three, until all the candles are lit on the eighth day. This represents our hope that we can bring more light into the world and that the powers of darkness can be defeated.

I would like to close with this poem by Alden Solovy and Rabbi Ilene Haigh

### **In Unity and Hope**

How fair are your tents, O Jacob,  
When we stand together,  
In unity and love,  
In the the name of hope and harmony.

How fragile are our tents  
When our fears divide us  
When we allow outside winds

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/12/us/politics/trump-anti-semitism-jews.html>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

To blow within.

Who but You,  
*Ruach Elohim,*  
Can define who we are?  
What keeps us strong.  
What keeps us whole.

Who but us,  
*Klal Yisroael,*  
Can shield us,  
Carrying each other  
As one against the storm?

How fair are our tents, O Israel,  
When we stand together,  
In the name of unity,  
In compassion, in strength,  
For our children,  
And for our children's children.

*Ken yihi ratzon.* May this be God's will.

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