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*Yom Kippur Morning*

## Empathy in Vulnerability: Resisting Racism and Antisemitism<sup>1</sup>

I used to think that trolls existed only in fairy tales and Dungeons & Dragons. And then I got a Twitter account.

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It's a cold December morning at Kansas City International Airport. I'm waiting to board a plane with Jeremiah and a very pregnant Jessica, and I'm surprised and disgruntled that the crew won't pre-board us. So, I activate my millennial consumerism and take to Twitter, complaining directly to the airline and to anyone else who cares to listen.

Almost immediately, I receive a public reply from @doorman556.<sup>2</sup> "@dkirzane all Jews do is whine & complain."<sup>3</sup>

I'm stunned; doesn't @doorman556 have anything better to do? Apparently not. Because @doorman556 is a "troll."

In today's age, "trolling" means cloaking yourself in the anonymity of the internet to insult, harass, or provoke people online. It's a pathetic pastime, an unfortunate side effect of free social media, and an abusive form of indiscriminate cyber-bullying. And it's a favorite weapon of modern-day antisemites.

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Antisemitism in America is on the rise. In the past year, Jewish cemeteries were desecrated in Philadelphia, Rochester, and St. Louis;<sup>4</sup> my rabbinical school was

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Jacob Labendz, whose research on the alt-right has deepened and sharpened my understanding. Dr. Labendz served as consultant and editor for this sermon.

<sup>2</sup> The profile's name was then and remains today Trump4USA. The account has often been provocative and, as the name suggests, was a stronger promoter of the candidacy of Donald Trump for president. The last tweet on record is "@tbrooksjr01 @Andy Honey you hate the Jews as much as I do." The overlap of this twitter account's support of Donald Trump and its aggressive, offensive language does not indicate that Donald Trump personally or Trump supporters generally endorse this kind of behavior.

<sup>3</sup> The full tweet read, "@dkirzane all Jews do is whine & complain. No airline pre-boards a woman because she's knocked up –." This, of course, is not accurate. The airline's Twitter account replied, "Our agents and flight crew will help as much as possible during their boarding time. We're sorry to disappoint you."

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-newyork-cemetery/jewish-cemetery-vandalized-in-new-york-third-case-in-two-weeks-idUSKBN1692WE>

vandalized with a swastika, targeted for the first time in its 140-year history;<sup>5</sup> and just last month, neo-Nazis and Klansmen marched in Charlottesville, Virginia, shouting “Jews will not replace us!” and threatening the town’s only synagogue.<sup>6</sup> According to the Anti-Defamation League, antisemitic incidents have surged in the past few years,<sup>7</sup> leading many Jews to wonder for the first time in a generation: are we truly safe in this land we call home?

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Antisemitism is not new. Antagonism toward Judaism lies at the heart of Western society and has often given rise to violence against Jewish individuals and communities. In our own day, antisemitism takes many shapes – so many, in fact, that the very term can be so vague as to be unhelpful. Antisemitism today can refer to a zealous war – fomented mainly on college campuses – against Zionism; it can refer to Islamic extremists who pervert their own noble tradition by vilifying Jews; and it can refer to isolated incidents of the mentally ill or criminally deranged, such as this spring’s barrage of JCC bomb threats or our own community’s deadly shootings three years ago. In truth, each of these phenomena is unique; they all share imagery and stereotypes about who Jews are, but they arise in different groups, pursue different goals, and appear in different forms.

Dominating the headlines in recent weeks has been the particular manifestation of antisemitism known as white nationalism, which caused the terrifying events in Charlottesville. As we more deeply understand this newest kind of racism and antisemitism, we can more effectively protect Jews and non-Jews alike targeted by this dark expression of hatred.

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According to Eric K. Ward, the executive director of the Western States Center, white nationalism is a “revolutionary social movement committed to building a Whites-only nation.”<sup>8</sup> The traditional white supremacy of the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries sought to exploit racial minorities to benefit white Americans, but this new social movement is different. White *nationalism*, though it has roots in older white *supremacy*, does not want to **exploit** racial minorities; it wants to **remove** them. White nationalists believe that America was founded by and for white people alone. They seek to seize

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.cincinnati.com/story/news/crime/2017/01/03/hebrew-union-college-sign-painted-swastika/96116230/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://reformjudaism.org/blog/2017/08/14/charlottesville-local-jewish-community-presses>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.adl.org/news/press-releases/us-anti-semitic-incidents-spike-86-percent-so-far-in-2017>

<sup>8</sup> “Skin in the Game: How Antisemitism Animates White Nationalism.” (Available: <http://www.politicalresearch.org/2017/06/29/skin-in-the-game-how-antisemitism-animates-white-nationalism>.) Eric Ward was featured in a webinar with T’ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights, and I owe much of my own understanding of white nationalism to his presentation.

state power in an effort to reassert white dominance, ultimately envisioning an American nation devoid of all people of color.<sup>9</sup>

The most prominent brand of white nationalism today is the so-called alt-right. Like “antisemitism,” “the alt-right” is a slippery term that has different meanings in different contexts. The concept of the “alternative right” has been around for nearly ten years, and until recently, it referred to a wide range of right-wing ideologies. That’s why you’ll find news stories and current accounts of people who identify as “alt-right” who are not white nationalists.<sup>10</sup> But in recent months, the alt-right has come to mean something very specific: a focused program of white nationalism. My use of the word refers exclusively to this ideology.

Accordingly, let me be perfectly clear. The white nationalist alt-right label does *not*, in my mind, apply to political conservatives or the Republican party. I do believe that the alt-right seeks to influence American politics, but the *alt*-right has no standing with the *actual* right.

Indeed, the whole concept of an “alternative right” implies a repudiation of American conservatism. Richard Spencer, who originally coined the term, is the torch-bearer of the alt-right today.<sup>11</sup> To know what they stand for, we need only listen to his own words: “Our dream is a new society, an ethno-state that would be a gathering point for all Europeans. It would be a new society based on very different ideals than, say, the Declaration of Independence.”<sup>12</sup> When someone tells you what they stand for, believe them. The alt-right wants to hang on the Statue of Liberty a giant sign reading “Whites only.”

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Richard Spencer, the leader of today’s alt-right, is also a bona fide antisemite. He put his prejudice into practice last year in a war against the Jewish community of his home town, Whitefish, Montana. There, Spencer’s mother was in a personal fight with a local Jewish realtor, and Spencer commented on the dispute in a podcast with Andrew Anglin. (Anglin is the founder of the neo-Nazi website the Daily Stormer, which called itself “the premier alt-right site”<sup>13</sup> before being effectively banned from the internet for its unconscionable views.<sup>14</sup>)

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<sup>9</sup> Eric Ward shared much of this material, and more that informs this sermon, during a webinar hosted by T’ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights on August 24, 2017.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, the “Proud Boys” fraternity, as reported on by *This American Life*. Gavin McInnes says, “We’re sort of like the alt-right without the racism” and agreed that the Proud Boys are a “subset of the alt-right” (<https://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/626/white-haze>).

<sup>11</sup> For a more comprehensive account of the formation of the idea of the “alternative right” and the fragmented parties on the far right of America politics today, see <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-alt-right-branding-war-has-torn-the-movement-in-two>.

<sup>12</sup> [https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/kwpadw/some-well-dressed-white-nationalists-gathered-in-dc-last-weekend](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/kwpadw/some-well-dressed-white-nationalists-gathered-in-dc-last-weekend)

<sup>13</sup> “The Miseducation of Dylann Roof,” Southern Poverty Law Center. Available: <https://youtu.be/qB6A45tA6mE>.

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.latimes.com/nation/nationnow/la-na-daily-stormer-lawsuit-20170816-story.html>

A few days after their conversation, Anglin published – and Spencer distributed – the personal information of several members of the Whitefish Jewish community.<sup>15</sup> Responding to Anglin’s call to action, hundreds of trolls called, emailed, and texted hateful and offensive messages to the Jews of Whitefish. Many invoked the Holocaust in menacing death threats, including some against a 12-year-old boy. The torrent of profanities flowed nonstop until a lawsuit was filed against Andrew Anglin, and he directed the readers of the Daily Stormer to back off.<sup>16, 17</sup> It has taken months for the community of Whitefish to recover from this attack, and their haunting ordeal reveals the power of a fanatic with a following.

The hateful assault on the Jews of Whitefish exposes the connection between two kinds of antisemite, the @doorman556 internet troll and the Richard Spencer ideologue. By the numbers, most members of the alt-right are trolls, young men whose activity is contained in online message boards and whose beliefs about race rarely reach beyond their own echo chambers.<sup>18</sup>

But the incident in Whitefish signals a new reality. According to University of New Hampshire Professor Seth Abramson: “Politically committed white nationalists, ‘actual’ neo-Nazis and Klansmen, use social media platforms to recruit new members, taking advantage of a captive audience of confused young people who really just want to belong to something.”<sup>19</sup> In other words, alt-right leaders like Richard Spencer can turn to the masses of disaffected youth online to recruit “real-life trolls” ready to defend their radical and dangerous agenda.

What happened in Whitefish happened again in Charlottesville on a much larger scale. Beckoned by charismatic leaders, scores of alt-right sympathizers poured into Charlottesville. It was one of these newcomers, 20-year-old James Fields, who murdered anti-racist protestor Heather Heyer and wounded 34 others. The alt-right has spent most of the past decade in the dark corners of the internet; today, however, the movement is energized and emboldened.

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/.premium-1.770475>

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.cnn.com/2017/07/10/us/avalanche-of-hate-daily-stormer-lawsuit/index.html>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/feb/05/richard-spencer-whitefish-neo-nazi-march>

<sup>18</sup> [https://medium.com/@Seth\\_Abramson/listen-up-progressives-heres-how-to-deal-with-a-4chan-alt-right-troll-48594f59a303](https://medium.com/@Seth_Abramson/listen-up-progressives-heres-how-to-deal-with-a-4chan-alt-right-troll-48594f59a303)

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* This is a reworking of the following original passage: “This is why so many alt-right trolls are, without fully realizing it, in danger of slipping into politically committed white supremacy: they’re so committed to their “act” that, for anyone except their closest friends, they might as well be *exactly* what they’re pretending to be. This also explains why **politically committed white supremacists use /pol/, 4chan, and 8chan to recruit new members: they have a captive (because internet-addicted) audience of confused young people who really just want to belong to something, and that’s fertile soil for “actual” neo-Nazi and KKK recruiters. And they know it.**”

The alt-right thrives on antisemitism, as we see in the attacks in Whitefish and Charlottesville. Indeed, as Eric Ward explains, “antisemitism forms the theoretical core of White nationalism.”<sup>20</sup> This is because white nationalists need an explanation for how races they consider inferior could have achieved so much success in today’s world. The only answer they can determine is that white Jews have betrayed their own kind – other white people – enabling the success of non-white groups in order to advance their own perverse interests.

During the course of my research about antisemitism and the alt-right – a chilling curriculum, I assure you – I spoke several times with Jacob Labendz, Assistant Professor of Judaic and Holocaust Studies at Youngstown State University. Dr. Labendz has spent the last year studying the alt-right, in part by engaging them directly online and listening carefully to what they have to say. He affirms that hatred and suspicion of Jews are essential to their movement. And he urges us to take them seriously. We have to sit up and pay attention when Andrew Anglin, the creator of the Daily Stormer, says as plain as day, “The goal is to ethnically cleanse White nations of non-Whites and establish an authoritarian government. Many people also believe the Jews should be exterminated. ... The end goal is ethnic cleansing by any means necessary.”<sup>21</sup> These are enemies to every Jewish value and every American ideal.

And at the same time, Labendz reminds us that, even though the alt-right depends upon antisemitism to exist, white nationalists still spend most of their time focused on other groups. He says, “You should be livid about antisemitism. But people didn’t come to Charlottesville because they hated Jews. Those people hate Muslims and Blacks and mourn what they perceive to be the downfall of white people and the advancement of minorities. They’re not marching about Jews; Jews [just] give them a language, a way to unite diverse parties.”<sup>22</sup> In other words, white nationalists *hate* Jews, but they want to *act* against Blacks and Muslims and women and immigrants and people who are transgender. Our vulnerability in the Jewish community, which for the most part still benefits from being white, helps us empathize with these other targeted groups, whose standing in society is much more precarious than our own.

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It’s satisfying to condemn the alt-right’s tactics and beliefs, but it is not enough. It is our sacred duty to work to ensure that their agenda come to naught. When we hear about or experience antisemitism, our sense of fragility can make us shrink, can make us feel as though we are weak and unprotected. But when we stand arm-in-arm with people who are different from us, declaring together that America has room for us all, we emerge from our vulnerability as stronger and better people. We owe it to ourselves

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<sup>20</sup> <http://www.politicalresearch.org/2017/06/29/skin-in-the-game-how-antisemitism-animates-white-nationalism/>

<sup>21</sup> <https://web.archive.org/web/20170721200853/http://www.dailystormer.com/ahead-of-clinton-speech-wapo-does-another-alt-right-article/>

<sup>22</sup> Personal interview, 1 September 2017.

and to our neighbors to engage in thoughtful and collaborative non-violent resistance against white nationalism in all its forms. Fortunately, there are many pathways to choose from, and each of us can find one that fits our own talents and interests.

Let's start with today. Right this very moment.

Simply by being here, at Yom Kippur services, we engage in a kind of spiritual resistance against those who hate Jews. The alt-right doesn't want us here. By making room in our lives for Jewish observance, by ensuring that Judaism remain strong and vibrant in America, we—Jews and non-Jews alike—counter their aims. Some of you may know that a rally against white supremacy is taking place in Washington, D.C. as we speak, and they stand in solidarity with Jews around the country observing Yom Kippur. The organizers of the rally have stated: "Holding fast to Jewish tradition is also an act of resistance."<sup>23</sup> Whether we pray with our legs—as civil rights heroes have done for generations—or with our mouths and our hearts, we resist the despicable goals of the alt-right by stubbornly refusing to go away.

There's also important work to be done tomorrow. Literally.

Tomorrow, in cities across the country, from New York to Los Angeles and including our own, communities will speak out in common resolve, insisting that peace overtake the terrorizing agenda of white nationalism. Such events affirm our interfaith and multi-racial alliances and help inoculate us against racist rhetoric and ideology. So please: join me tomorrow night at 7:00 pm at the Church of the Resurrection, where local faith leaders, including Rabbi Nemitoff, will state with a unified voice that our community will remain a safe haven for people of all colors and backgrounds, each of whom has been created in the infinitely precious image of God.

And then, there's the day after tomorrow. And the day after that, and the day after that. How can we resist white nationalism in the months and years to come?

First, we must continue to build bridges in our professional and our personal lives between neighbors of different backgrounds. People stand up for the individuals and communities they know and care about, and the deeper our relationships, the deeper our commitment to one another. Houses of prayer like our own congregation must be beacons of hope and exemplars of unity as we create sacred communities of understanding and respect.

We also have a civic responsibility to pay attention to local elections. The alt-right is currently locked out of the government, but their goals may lead them to try to change it from the inside. Richard Spencer himself has said he may run for Congress.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> <https://www.m4rj.com/updates/2017/8/16/yom-kippur-statement>

<sup>24</sup> [http://missoulain.com/news/state-and-regional/richard-spencer-gains-notoriety-for-white-nationalism-aims-to-grow/article\\_6fb8c6fc-81f6-5aae-8ba4-df3a28f96e80.html](http://missoulain.com/news/state-and-regional/richard-spencer-gains-notoriety-for-white-nationalism-aims-to-grow/article_6fb8c6fc-81f6-5aae-8ba4-df3a28f96e80.html)

When a white nationalist does decide to run in a state primary or town council election, it is our duty to make sure they get no further than the ballot box.

And finally, we must be ready to participate in creative responses to alt-right demonstrations. Eric Ward, among others, strongly encourages us *not* to engage in counter-protests.<sup>25</sup> Instead, we should be prepared to organize an entirely separate event that will draw media attention away from hate speech and focus it on a message of love.

Take the example of Wunsiedel, Bavaria. When protests and legal complaints failed to deter an annual Nazi march, the town tried a different approach. Residents flocked to the march, cheering the Nazis on and giving them refreshments and encouragement. Because for each meter they walked, local residents and businesses would donate 10 euros to a charity that helps people escape extremist groups.<sup>26</sup> The residents of Wunsiedel successfully denounced white nationalism while making a positive difference at the same time.<sup>27</sup> And they have modeled for the world how to overcome the forces of hate with creativity and compassion.

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The events of recent months have shaken our community – and they have shaken us awake. From last Yom Kippur to this one, much has changed. Many of us feel differently about our Jewishness today than at this time last year. And still, this year as every year, we recite the persistently hopeful words of Kol Nidre:

מִיּוֹם כַּפּוּרִים זֶה עַד יוֹם כַּפּוּרִים הַבָּא, עֲלֵינוּ לְטוֹבָה.

“From this Day of Atonement until the next Day of Atonement, may it be well for us.”

We can never know the measure of a year. And though we know not what the year ahead will bring, though we know not the contents of our inscription in the Book of Life, we nevertheless dare to imagine that we *will* stand once again before the open ark to recite another Kol Nidre, and what’s more, עֲלֵינוּ לְטוֹבָה, all will – God willing – be well for us.

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<sup>25</sup> This was also the recommendation of authorities in Charlottesville, including University of Virginia president Teresa Sullivan. See [http://www.dailyprogress.com/news/local/citing-potential-for-violence-sullivan-urges-uva-staff-and-students/article\\_6d00ac30-7976-11e7-8e9b-137f0b785b74.html](http://www.dailyprogress.com/news/local/citing-potential-for-violence-sullivan-urges-uva-staff-and-students/article_6d00ac30-7976-11e7-8e9b-137f0b785b74.html).

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/18/neo-nazis-tricked-into-raising-10000-for-charity>

<sup>27</sup> The same approach was taken in Whitefish, Montana. Richard Spencer had been threatening an alt-right rally in the town, so the Montana Human Rights Network organized the community, asking people to donate a sum of money for each minute that the proposed rally would last. Donations would go toward security for the Jewish community, human rights programs, training for response to local hate incidents, and other causes. See: <https://interland3.donorperfect.net/weblink/weblink.aspx?name=mthrn&id=3>

But if there's one lesson this day teaches us, it's that this won't just happen on its own. It depends upon each of us singly and all of us together to ensure that this is a year of blessing and peace, a year in which we cultivate, as our prayerbook says, the "strength to resist all who would oppress us."<sup>28</sup>

Our principles give us inspiration. Our community gives us power. Our tradition gives us hope.

*G'mar chatimah tovah* – may each of us, through our thoughts and our deeds, be inscribed for blessing in the Book of Life.

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<sup>28</sup> From Chaim Stern's "Lord God of night and dawn" in *Gates of Prayer*, p. 352. The version of this passage used in *Gates of Repentance* for Yom Kippur morning, and the version used in our congregation's prayer booklet, reads "power" instead of the original "strength."