

ISRAEL / ANTISEMITISM YOM KIPPUR DAY 5782

We often think of the process of self-examination around the High Holidays as looking over the past year and considering our actions. This is indeed what the HHDs are about! We take time to, hopefully, reflect honestly about what we did wrong. But possibly missed in this process is introspection about something more basic -- our assumptions and values..... which ultimately determine our actions. Have we taken them for granted? Have we taken the time to check on our beliefs and how we and they may have grown or evolved over the past year? Do they still anchor our lives?

For many of us, our experiences of the global COVID-19 pandemic have pushed us into exactly this examination about whether the way we have been living matches up with how we want our lives to be. Which personal relationships in particular need more attention? Are we spending our time in ways that are meaningful? How have our priorities changed? The Al Het litany on Yom Kippur is also intended to help us do a more complete introspection. It is composed as an n to n acrostic listing 22 sins and moral failures that we confess committing. The list is so detailed and expansive, that it is obvious that no one individual is likely to have to atone for every item. Nevertheless, we read the list in its entirety. The idea is that by reading through this symbolically complete list, we will be led to realize that there are additional areas where we need to do teshuva. We need this comprehensive approach to teshuva, because we should always be learning and growing; and so things that we were at peace with in the past, might, upon reflection this year, no longer be satisfactory. Even the values that are most core to us, perhaps especially these, require particular attention. Because they are such a fundamental part of who we are, this self-examination rarely, if ever, occurs,

Yes, this is the purpose of teshuva, in short actively assessing who we want to be. This, of course, includes our support for Israel as American Jews. Simply asserting this support is not sufficient. We owe it to ourselves to re-engage with the core beliefs that underlie our support and to reconsider how we can live them out more fully. Here are a few questions for your consideration:

- How might the inability to visit Israel during the pandemic year have made you think differently about Israel's proximity and accessibility?
- How have events over the past year (rockets fired from Gaza and the military reaction, violence between Jews and Arabs in Israeli cities, the successful (as of now), formation of a new Israeli government, affected your thinking about Israel?
- How has the recent increase in anti-Semitism, that I will be talking to you about soon deepened or challenged your relationship with Israel?
- What are the gaps between our highest hopes for the State of Israel and the realities it faces on the ground?
- What actions can I, if I consider myself a supporter of Israel, if not as a committed Zionist, take to help Israel thrive?

Yes, as we engage with our core values, we can, we should, we must take the opportunity to recommit ourselves to the importance of a safe homeland for Jews, Jews of all religious denominations and all ethnic backgrounds in the land of Israel, a democratic Israel that lives up to its fullest potential, and that seeks a lasting peace between Israel and her neighbors. The process of teshuva in the High Holiday period allows us to deepen our relationship with God and repair relationships between ourselves and other people. And then, by diligently engaging with our support for Israel, instead of taking it for granted, we can reinvigorate and enhance our connection to Israel and our commitment to ensuring a healthy future for our homeland.

Just as we renew the examination of our relationship with Israel, we also need to reexamine our response to the increasing challenge of anti-Semitism in the United States. I was one who, I have to admit, was often dismissive of those writing about increased anti-Semitism in our country. “Fringe elements.. isolated individuals”... I said. And even today I firmly believe that the vast majority of Americans do not share these negative feelings... interfaith organizations are still strong, all public opinion polls indicate the continued existence of interfaith mutual respect. But the increasingly corrosive activities of extremist fringe groups on social media (on both sides of the political spectrum) as well as both various rightwing and “progressive” politicians who have felt the need to say anti-Semitic falsehoods and thereby popularize and legitimize their beliefs are undeniable. And they are increasingly influencing the young and noninvolved populations of our country.

Alas, this increased anti-Semitism is deeply tied up with anti-Israel positions. In recent years it has become an article of faith on the progressive left that anti-Zionism is not anti-Semitism and that it’s slanderous to assume that someone who hates Israel also hates Jews. But not everyone “got that memo.” Not the people who, waving Palestinian flags and chanting “Death to Jews,” according to witnesses, [assaulted Jewish diners](#) at a Los Angeles restaurant last summer. Not the people who [threw fireworks in New York’s diamond district](#). Not the people who [brutally beat up a man wearing a yarmulke](#) in Times Square. Not the people who drove through London slurring Jews and yelling, “[Rape their daughters](#).” Close at home, remember the stabbing of Rabbi Noginski in Brookline as few months ago!

Also not getting the memo are the people who have tweeted the hashtag #HitlerWasRight along with the hashtag #Covid1948, a suggestion that [Israel is a virus](#) that needs the cure of Hamas’s rockets as a “vaccine.” Apparently, these hashtags count as legitimate political speech at Twitter. In this storm of hate, political leaders such as President Biden and Prime Minister Boris Johnson of Britain have issued appropriate statements of condemnation. But if there’s been a massive online campaign of progressive support for with Jews, I’m afraid I’ve missed it. If academic associations have issued public letters denouncing the use of anti-Semitic tropes by pro-Palestinian activists, I’ve missed them. It’s a curious silence. In the land of inclusiveness, Jews are denied inclusion. The anti-Semitism and anti-Israel feelings that our college-age children and grandchildren are experiencing today is frightening! It is especially aggravating when Israel is singled out in ways that apply to no other country. To take just one example, when was the last time you heard of a campus demonstration or a call for boycotts and divestment in response to Turkey’s 47-year occupation of northern Cyprus [or its routine bombardment](#), using American-made jets, of Kurdish militants in Iraq?

The accusations made against Israel — of stealing Palestinian land (despite the fact that [Israel vacated the territory](#) from which it was subsequently attacked) and of wanton violence against Palestinian civilians, particularly children (despite the fact that Israel [regularly warned its targets](#) to vacate buildings before targeting them) — can’t help but make me think of ancient libels about Jewish greed and bloodlust. Also echoing ancient libels is the idea that 11 days of fighting between Israel and Hamas somehow constitute a unique global horror, even as the world barely takes notice of so many other examples of intentional bombings and deliberate killings.

So why are American Jews, why are we, not as upset as we could and should be? Here’s one possible answer:

The columnist Bret Stephens, well-known writer for the WSJ and the NYT, wrote: “*Look, it's very easy to spot the extreme antisemitism of the right because they're very public in their vile. It's more difficult to see the antisemitism coming up from the left, for a variety of reasons.*”

One is that traditionally, most American Jews have been people of the left. But the most important fact, is that the left, for better and worse, controls the high towers of culture. And cultural attitudes, attitudes about what is taboo and what is not taboo, trickle down from the top. Yes, trickle-down culture theory. The high culture, the elite culture has been saturated with anti-Zionist and effectively antisemitic tropes, which are now spreading down to the lower stages of American culture. It's okay now to say that Israel is the most repressive, colonialist, genocidal state in the world. It's okay to say that. It is okay to say that Israel is gratuitously murdering Palestinian children, apparently because that's something Israelis do..... “

I am not one who shares words from the pulpit that will be considered political. But in talking about Israel and anti-Semitism, which have now become so politicized, I have no choice. And in my evaluations, I deeply hope I am being overly pessimistic. Just before Rosh Hashanah, in the final “Haftorah of Consolation,” we read the stirring, inspiring words of the prophet Isaiah, who challenges us, and ME, ***“For the sake of Zion I will not be silent, For the sake of Jerusalem I will not be still....”***

So this morning I am neither silent nor still.....will you feel the same?.. May you be written and sealed.....