

**Changing the Meaning of a Phrase:
Acknowledging the Hands of Esau in Our Time
Rabbi Michael S. Siegel: November 6, 2021**

It is remarkable how a well-known saying can lose or change its meaning over time.

Consider these nursery rhymes that many of us recited to our children:

Baa Baa, Black Sheep, have you any wool? is about the medieval wool tax, imposed in the 13th Century by King Edward I. Black sheep were also considered bad luck because their fleeces, unable to be dyed, were less lucrative for the farmer.

Ring a ring o'rosie, pocket full of posies was about the 1665 Great Plague of London: the "rosie" being the rash that developed on the skin of bubonic plague sufferers, the stench of which then needed concealing with a "pocket full of posies".

One more:

Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush originated at the Wakefield Prison in England, where female inmates had to exercise around a mulberry tree in the prison yard.

In each of these examples, the original meaning of the phrase gave way to something more benign over time, to a point where parents would sing them to their children. This morning, I want to examine one of the most famous statements in the Torah where the opposite happened: the meaning of the phrase became more ominous over time, and should, I believe, serve as a warning today.

In our Torah portion, Isaac planned to offer the birth blessing to Esau. But Rebecca took advantage of Isaac's sight impairment to trick him into blessing the second-born son, Jacob. Rebecca dressed her younger son in the clothes of Esau, and even put the fur of an animal on his hands and the back of his neck lest Jacob touch him. Isaac immediately detected a problem as soon as Jacob spoke. While Jacob lied to his father, saying that he was actually Esau, Isaac remained suspicious. He declared, *Hakol Kol Yaakov Ve Ha-Yadaim, Yedei Esav: The voice is the voice of Jacob, yet the hands are the hands of Esau*. In context, these words appear as nothing more than a benign statement of fact as Isaac tried to determine who was standing before him.

By the time of the Rabbis, this phrase had taken on a far different, far more ominous meaning. Esau's response to learning that his brother Jacob had deprived him of the birth blessing through guile is one of the most poignant moments in the Torah. Esau was seen as a dangerous and murderous brute by the Rabbis and the meaning of those words, *The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau*, took on a very different meaning. Midrash Rabbah states that as long as the voices of Jacob's descendants remain focused on prayer and study, the violent, murderous hands of Esau could not reach him. No longer a sympathetic figure, Esau was now seen as a murderous boor. The change in perception was due entirely to the historical circumstances of the Jewish community. The Jewish community had been subject to the brutal rule of the Romans. Just as Esau was identified with the color red, so, too, was the Roman Empire. When Rome was replaced by the Holy Roman Empire, the treatment of the Jews under Christendom was even worse. The Rabbi determined that the people of the Roman Empire and all Christians were the descendants of Esau.

Meanwhile, the view of the Jew by the Church and Protestant Leaders only furthered this idea. For them, the fate of the Jew was to be a perpetual wanderer, whose abuse would serve as a lesson to the entire world: an example of the fate of those who do not accept the sacrifice of their Messiah on the cross. Jews were blamed for the crucifixion and with it the eternal crime of Deicide, the death of God. As a result, Jews were imagined to have supernatural powers and were seen as the embodiment of evil. Now, of course, not every Christian saw the Jew this way, nor did every Priest or Pastor preach against us. But the expulsion of the Jews from country after country; the Crusades; the Inquisition; pogroms; Khmel'nitsky; blood libels; all of this creating a through line right to the Holocaust, spoke to the chilling power of this narrative.

For years after the liberation of the camps, it appeared that Esau was in retreat: that the hands of Esau were less ominous. Overt anti-Semitism in words and deeds was no longer acceptable behavior. As we get farther and farther away from the Holocaust; as the historical memory of the death camps fades; as the years go by; the hands of Esau are reappearing. The establishment of the State of Israel and the Zionist cause, as well as Jewish political power in this country, have created a new avenue for the hands of Esau to make themselves known.

Three years ago last week, Robert Bowers entered the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, PA and yelled "All Jews must die," then opened fire upon the congregants. He was armed with an assault rifle and several handguns and killed eleven congregants and wounded six others, four of whom are police officers, in the worst anti-Semitic act in American history. When surrendering to law enforcement, Bowers told an officer that he "wanted all Jews to die" and that Jews "were committing genocide against his people." He was reacting to the work of HIAS: the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society's efforts to increase and settle immigrants to this country. Robert Bowers act of shooting Jews whose only crime was attending synagogue was an American illustration of the transformed meaning of the hands of Esau.

Before I go any further, we should also note that the city of Pittsburgh magnificently represented the voice of Jacob in its response. The people of that city taught the Torah of love and caring; from the patch on the jersey of the Pittsburgh Steelers to the signs in windows reading *Love is Stronger than Hate* and the words of the Mourner's Kaddish in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette in Aramaic - the only time any American newspaper has printed such. The people of Pittsburgh represented the best of America. As heartening as that is, as much as we should celebrate the *Kol Yaakov*, the voice of Jacob, in this country and in many parts of society, we must not allow ourselves to be blinded to the hands of Esau making themselves known in this country.

A year earlier, neo-Nazis walked through Charlottesville carrying tiki torches, crying: *Jews will not replace us*. A slogan based upon the canard that Jews are behind the rising number of people of color in this country and their increased rights; that the Jews are a globalist threat; led by George Soros and others. People around the country might have laughed at these neo-Nazis, referring to them as an adoration, but Robert Bowers and many others took note of those words, *Jews will not replace us*, as a call to action.

Last Shabbat, we commemorated the 3rd anniversary of the Tree of Life Pogrom and this past week, the perpetrators of the Charlottesville march were put on trial thanks to the efforts of a remarkable organization, Integrity First for America, whose leader I had the privilege of interviewing over the summer.

This past week, Deborah Lipstadt was called to testify just days after the anniversary. One of our most important scholars on anti-Semitism, Lipstadt is the person who stood up against the Holocaust denier David Irving and won in a British Court Room.

In Charlottesville, Deborah Lipstadt was asked to again define the Holocaust:

“A state-sponsored genocide by the Hitler regime, which took place between 1933–45. A systematic plan to annihilate all the Jews of Europe and actually beyond as well,” she said of the Holocaust. “It didn’t matter if the Jews lived inside German territory or outside. It didn’t matter if they were old or tiny babies. If you were a Jew, you were to be annihilated.”

She was asked to define Jew hatred:

“You know they’re a Jew and you despise them and you want to do them harm.”

She was asked to define replacement theory:

She said the theory began to gain traction in the 1960s and '70s, and then again in the 1990s, when legislation focused on voting and civil rights was passed.

“There were some people who were disturbed by this, and they were convinced that people of color couldn’t be doing this on their own,” she said. “There had to be someone behind the scenes manipulating it, making it happen. People of color were the puppets, and Jews were the puppeteers.”

All the while, the organizers of the neo-Nazi march were representing themselves at the trial, asking each other questions like, “What is your favorite Holocaust Joke?” It is hard to believe that the acts of Pittsburgh and Charlottesville are part of our present; that the reality of the Holocaust was on trial as we continue to struggle with the hands of Esau in 2021, 76 years since the end of the second world war.

Dara Horn is a nationally celebrated novelist. She is a brilliant writer and, as she says, a go-to person whenever there is a Jewish tragedy for newspapers like the *New York Times*.

But after Pittsburgh, she refused to write for the newspaper: In her words:

There was no way I could write about any of this for the New York Times, or any other mainstream news outlet. I could not stomach all the “to be sure” and other verbal garbage I would have to shovel in order to express something acceptable to a non-Jewish audience in a thousand words or less. I could no longer handle the degrading exercise of calmly explaining to the public why it was not OK.

Or that we all ought to care about it because they serve as a warning—because when Jews get murdered or maimed, it might be an ominous sign that actual people, people who wear athleisure, might later get attacked! I was done with this sort of thing, which amounted to politely persuading people of one’s right to exist.

In other words, Horn was no longer willing to explain the hands of Esau in our world as the work of a few demented people, or to help the public learn moral lessons from acts of abject anti-Semitism. Instead, she wrote a book of non-fiction with the uncomfortable title, *People Love Dead Jews: Reports from a Haunted Present*.

Her point is that the world is comfortable mourning dead Jews, whether it be victims of the Holocaust or Pittsburgh. It is living Jews that the world has a problem with, whether here in America or in Israel. It is a fascinating, disturbing, and very important book. It will be our honor to have a conversation with Dara this Thursday night on Zoom and I hope that you will join in the discussion.

Dara Horn’s book focuses on different examples of people around the world who are unwilling to acknowledge the hands of Esau in our society; the uniqueness of anti-Semitism; the actual danger that Jews are living with; in short, a blindness to the real and present threat that the hands of Esau represent in our world to living Jews, whether it be in Pittsburgh, Amsterdam, or Harbin China. Spoiler alert! Dara Horn offers no answers but her ability to describe the Kafkaesque, irrational reality that Jews live with and embrace the chilling irony of it all spotlights the world’s unwillingness to acknowledge the work of the hands of Esau.

The fact is that there are phrases whose terrifying meaning has been lost to us and which now serve as the stuff of nursery rhymes that we sing with our children. But there are other phrases whose meaning has become more ominous over time and we dare not blunt their meaning. The words of a blind father who was confused by the voice of his son and the feel of his hands has reflected a differently reality for Jews, a terrifying image of the danger that lurks. Living Jews must be vigilant in our response to anti-Semitism and its victims. Living Jews must be quick to correct

those who would prefer to ignore the uniqueness of Jew hatred. The fact that Deborah Lipstadt had to testify that the Holocaust actually occurred and explain or define what anti-Semitism looks like in America in 2021 under oath should tell you everything that you need to know about the moment that we are living in. Ignoring the hands of Esau, not using the voice of Jacob in our day, is something that Jews do at their own peril .

I ask you to rise as we remember those who died in Pittsburgh 3 years ago.