

The Normalization of Anti-Semitism is No Laughing Matter:
Sermon on Chayei Sarah 2022
Anshe Emet Synagogue
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I remember my first Selichot service at Anshe Emet. There I was, fresh from the Seminary, wearing my brand-new white robe. My job was to recite a prayer with the congregation. I left my seat and tried to look confident as I strode to the lectern. I motioned to the congregation to rise, and they dutifully stood up. Wow, this is really happening! The only problem was that it was not a standing prayer. I heard the voice of my Senior Rabbi behind me saying: “Tell them to sit down!” I motioned for them to sit and...everyone laughed. I remember it as a moment of reality orientation. You see, I was under the impression that services needed to be perfect and if I made a mistake the sky would fall down and the world would come to an end. I learned that day that Rabbis could make mistakes in services and as many of you know, I have been doing so ever since!

Reality orientation is a term that we use when we want to describe a moment when we become aware that our actual reality is different than the one we perceived. Sometimes a reality orientation is like my example: a moment of elation when we find out that the worst-case scenario that we have been dreading has actually not come to pass, or our diagnosis is not the one that we have feared. It is also possible that a reality orientation can be just the opposite: an opportunity to discover that one’s situation is worse than you perceived it to be. Abraham offers a great example of the negative side of reality orientation as this week’s parasha opens.

You will recall that as last week’s portion concluded, Abraham had successfully fulfilled the test of the binding of Isaac and had received the blessing from God and descended the mountain with his son Isaac still intact. He was secure in the knowledge that the covenant would continue to the next generation and that the promise would be fulfilled.

Abraham must have breathed a deep sigh of relief that the worst was over. The Patriarchal version of: “Wow, this is really happening!”

Our portion this week, Chayei Sarah, literally just a few verses later, opens with something shocking: the death of Sarah. It is presented without any warning. Abraham must deal with his own mourning for the woman who walked with him into the wilderness, the woman who stood by him in the most challenging of moments, and the woman who at 90 had borne Isaac. As if that was not difficult enough, Abraham was without a burial site. He had to negotiate with the *Bnai Het* for a place to bury his wife Sarah. This man who had just been blessed by the creator of the heaven and earth, who was promised the very land that he was standing on as a Yerusha, an inheritance, for descendants for all time, was forced to acknowledge in this painful moment that he was a *Ger Toshav*, a Resident Alien. In the world that Abraham lived, a *Ger Toshav* was rarely allowed to own land. In other words, Abraham was asking the residents of the land to make an exception for him, the resident alien, so that he might own a parcel of the land that he was promised so that his wife could be buried. It would be hard to fathom how Abraham felt when he was forced to utter those words. I think that we can all agree that this was the ultimate reality orientation. In the end, Abraham purchased the Cave of Mahpelah in Hevron for an exorbitant sum, where Sarah, Abraham, and most of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs are buried. And yet, the difficulty of that moment continues to resonate through history.

Our tradition teaches us that *Maaseh Avot Siman L'vanim*: that the actions of our Patriarchs and Matriarchs will be experienced by their descendants. This story of Abraham identifying himself as a *Ger Toshav* is wonderful example. How many times have the descendants of Abraham and Sarah had their realities re-oriented when they learned that the societies of which they thought that they were citizens, lands on which they thought they had a secure place, became the opposite. Like Abraham, they were resident aliens after all. People without rights. The sad reality is that Jews throughout history knew exactly what it felt like

to be at the mercy of other people, to have their fate no longer in their own hands.

Janet and I were just in Greece. Along with Hazzan Mizrahi and Debbie, we had the opportunity to lead a congregational trip to the place that Hellenism was born. One of the things that I learned along the way was that throughout Jewish history, Greece was a place to which Jews fled when they could no longer live in their country of origin.

Jews found their way to Greece not long after the destruction of the first Temple and were amongst their first Jewish residents.

Jews fleeing the destruction of the Second Temple and the reach of the Romans came to Greece amongst other places.

Western Europeans fleeing from Christian Persecution.

Spanish Jews fleeing from the Inquisition.

All these Jews had something in common besides their faith.

They had all believed that their country of origin was their land, that they were citizens, only to learn that the larger society that they lived in saw them as Jews, as “other”, and they, like Abraham, learned the meaning of the term *Ger Toshav*: Resident Alien.

While in Greece, I read a piece in the Washington Post written by Dana Milbank, an opinion writer. It begins this way:

On the holiest night of the Jewish year earlier this month, my rabbi looked up from his Kol Nidre sermon — a homily about protecting America’s liberal democracy — and posed a question that wasn’t in his prepared text: “How many people in the last few years have been at a dining room conversation where the conversation has turned to where might we move? How many of us?”

He was talking about the unthinkable: that Jews might need to flee the United States. In the congregation, many hands — most? — went up.

The name of the piece is: “American Jews Start Thinking the Unthinkable”.

On the bus traveling through Greece, I asked my fellow travelers the same question and a meaningful percentage of hands went up, including my own. Janet and I have had that discussion.

I must admit that for the first time in my life, I am feeling the power of those words, *Ger Toshav*, as an American.

It is not as though I have been unaware that the cancer of anti-Semitism exists in the country. After all, anti-Semitic acts are taking place across this country, and the Internet is rife with anti-Semitic conspiracy theories.

It is the normalization of anti-Semitism that is new; its acceptance in American culture, in our schools, on our campuses, in our daily discourse, in the words of celebrity icons, or in the threats of ex-Presidents, that is so chilling.

Most painfully, our children are experiencing Abraham’s dilemma of discovering that they are a *Ger Toshav* as well.

On the campus of Northwestern University, a Junior wrote an op ed piece in the school newspaper of which she is an editor. Lily Cohen wrote of her love of Judaism. She spoke of her Shabbat experience on campus in glowing terms. She also wrote about her love of Israel while acknowledging her concern for the rights of Palestinians. In the article Lily voiced her concern for signs across the campus that read: “From the river to the sea Palestine will be free.”

She noted that the phrase originated more than 30 years ago, evolving from language in the 1988 Hamas charter that promoted the destruction of Jews. She wrote:

When that slogan is plastered around the walls of buildings where I study, when it's hung across The Arch that I walk under every day, when it's painted over The Rock that I helped paint only five hours earlier — in support of voting for gun safety and reproductive rights — I take offense. I feel hurt. I get angry.

What Lily asked for understanding.

What Lily asked for was dialogue.

What she was met by were posters made from multiple copies of her article pasted to poster board with the words: “From the river to the sea Palestine will be free” plastered across it in large print hanging throughout the campus.

To be honest with you, I am not surprised by posters around the campus. On campuses rife with anti-Israel sentiment, where political discussions quickly devolve into anti-Semitic tropes, it is not all that shocking that Lily’s appeal was turned on its head. What is surprising is the school’s response. The first came from Robin R. Means Coleman, Vice President and Associate Provost for Diversity and Inclusion:

Northwestern encourages and protects freedom of expression — a foundational principle of our democracy. The fact that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is being vigorously debated on our campus is testament to that commitment. As we engage in dialogue, we ask that all students, faculty and staff practice those freedoms responsibly and with

a concern for other members of our community in adherence to campus policies and community standards.

Nothing about the sign or the feelings of a student; nothing about the hatred being expressed in the face of an appeal for dialogue. Instead, the person whose job it is to protect students and ensure that they feel safe on campus, calls for both sides to behave themselves.

Yesterday, the University President wrote a stronger statement:

In this latest incident, one student sought to express how she felt, as a Jewish person, upon viewing the sign, “From the River to the Sea.” I would have hoped that the people who put up the sign near Deering Meadow, painted on top of pasted-together copies of her well-reasoned op-ed, would have responded instead by discussing the issues, perhaps through their own op-ed.

As we deal with some of the knottiest issues on campus — and the Israeli/Palestinian conflict is among the most difficult — I hope that we can remember that persuasion through reason is always more appropriate than intimidation. And, at the end of the day, we are a community dedicated to knowledge, not slogans.

Please note the words unacceptable or consequences for hateful behavior do not appear in the President’s words. His message is, let’s be more reasonable in our conversations.

What is taking place at Northwestern has a chilling similarity to what took place at Jones College Prep when a student came dressed in an East German military uniform and goose-stepped across the stage. When the shocked students looked to the Principal for a statement, this is what they received:

I certainly understand and regret the discomfort and harm felt by some members of our school community. Please be assured that we take the well-being of all students seriously and do not tolerate hateful

expressions of any kind. In this situation, it certainly appears this was not the intent of the Halloween costume.

In the same way that there is a difference between dialogue and hanging slogans that advocate the destruction of the Jewish State, one cannot mistake the intent of a student in a German uniform goose-stepping across the stage.

Here, again, it was Jewish students who stood up and raised their voices. The heads of the Jewish club on campus, Gabi Josefson and Riley Ablin, both students who are part of the Anshe Emet community, guided their school community to a strong resolution of the problem. They joined with the Black Students group and staged a sit-in; they went to the news media and served as remarkable spokespeople for the Jewish community. They rejected the normalization of anti-Semitism before their eyes. Gabi and Riley are working to institute meaningful Holocaust education which is sorely missing and have worked to create dialogue on their campus. How sad that the students had to be the ones to remind the administration to teach that *goosestepping across the stage is an overt act of anti-Semitism: it is not a joke.*

On Kristallnacht, we heard from Amy Spitalnick, who headed an organization called Integrity First for America. Under her leadership, they led the effort against those who organized the neo-Nazi march in Charlottesville. One of the points that she made about the trial was how well-trained the defendants were to say that they were joking in their words, slogans, and posts; that they did not intend their anti-Semitic remarks to be taken seriously. Amy reminded us that humor is one of the best ways to normalize anti-Semitism in this country.

For those who watched Dave Chappelle's monologue on Saturday Night Live, you had the opportunity to watch a master class on the normalization of anti-Semitism through humor. It began when he made a mockery of an apology for anti-Semitism, in what sounded like a thoughtful manner, then made a mockery of Jewish claims of anti-

Semitism while the audience laughed and applauded. The best critique of Dave Chappelle's words came from a Black Orthodox Rabbi who calls himself Mahnishtanah. He wrote:

There are lots of jokes made in Hollywood at the expense of Jews. This, however, was not a case of Jews being unable to laugh at ourselves. There's a difference between laughing at ourselves and having someone who isn't Jewish use "wink wink" antisemitic tropes. It's not that Chappelle's monologue wasn't funny on its face, it's that it was harmful. This isn't happening in a vacuum: It's happening in a specific context, particularly one in which antisemitism has already been riled up and emboldened by Kanye and Irving. ("Hebrews to Negroes" became a bestseller on Amazon after Irving tweeted about it.)

In other words, Chappelle's jokes normalized anti-Semitism and stoked the fire that says Jews bring their hatred upon themselves and are deserving of whatever happens to them. With this kind of thinking being shared with millions of viewers on SNL, is it a surprise that anti-Semitic incidents are at an all-time high in this country, where distinguishable religious Jews are beaten on the streets? Is it a surprise that Jews are talking about where they would move?

We are facing a reality orientation in our time, and we had best take it seriously. While Abraham was a *Ger Toshav*, we are not...yet. We are blessed to live in the greatest democracy that the world has ever conceived, a country where we have rights. We must take this moment seriously and do as young people like Lily Cohen, Gabbi Josefson, and Riley Ablin are doing. They are raising their voices and saying, this is not okay. They are calling out anti-Semitism and are not allowing it to be normalized. To say that something is not funny, or that it is unacceptable, or demand that those who have authority - whether it be a school Principal, a University President, an elected official, or a clergy person - be held accountable, is what all of us must be doing. Dan Goldwin is here this morning and I want to say that the work that he is doing as Executive Director, Public Affairs Jewish Community

Relations Council (JCRC) and Government Affairs Department is vital, and he needs our support. Just as our friends do at the ADL. It is imperative that we raise our voices and speak out, but these young leaders and these organizations are doing something more: they are not shutting down dialogue but working to keeping it open. This is what I am doing as well with Black Clergy. This is a moment that calls on all of us to take action when we can, whether it be a conversation at the Thanksgiving table, with a colleague at work, or on an elevator. They may be uncomfortable conversations, but they are vital if we are going to ensure that our reality in this country not be changed. This moment calls upon us to embrace the promise of what it means to be a citizen of the United States and not a resident alien.