

RH2 Rabbi Amy Joy Small
Turning the Tide on Hate

Some stories in the Torah raise troubling questions when they touch on difficult trends in our culture or personal experiences. A story about a woman praying to conceive will grip you if you have lived that reality. A story about a parent favoring one child over others may be provocative if you were the unlucky one in such a family.

Given the divisions and strife in our world today, yesterday's Torah reading of the banishment of Hagar and Ishmael, presented a challenge. Its underlying premise is that Hagar and Ishmael were different, and Sarah was threatened by their presence in the family. The family's unhappy separation is put forth as an explanation for the founding of two peoples, two nations, Jewish and Arab. While it has been interpreted as a necessary chapter in our formative story, it is also a difficult story of rejection, alienation and division.

Two nations. The Jewish people, our people, have long considered ourselves to be a nation, even after we scattered around the world in the shifting winds of our diaspora. Am Yisrael, the People Israel, is us -- the souls assembled at Sinai and, moved by God's presence, welcomed the revelation of Torah. Our religious faith, practices, ideas and identity are inseparable in Judaism from the Jewish people -- a collective, the Jewish nation.

What then, is nationalism? Is being a nation a positive or a negative? There is no doubt we have been a nation apart for much of our history, holding fast to our covenantal faith and distinct traditions, identifying ourselves by our bonds of peoplehood. Our history is filled with too many painful chapters of hatred directed toward us because of our differences, first as a religious rivalry perpetrated by the Church, then morphing into hatreds expressed as national, economic, and, most dangerously, racial.

Our insistence on following the Sinai covenant *as the Jewish people* has nourished us and we are proud of who we are. But difference has also armed those who threatened us because of it. Through the ages, we have cultivated resilience through community.

Jewish peoplehood is about *belonging* and *behaving*, based on faith. For three millennia our prophetic voices urged our particularism to be balanced with universalism. In that delicate balance, our creativity flourished. Yet, today we are living in a time of critical thinking about difference, especially given the excesses of nationalisms that have caused our people, and many peoples, a lot of pain.

Today, questions regarding nationalism abound. A dictionary definition of nationalism reads, “*Devotion, especially excessive or indiscriminating devotion, to the interests or culture of a particular nation-state. The belief that nations will benefit from acting independently rather than collectively, emphasizing national rather than international goals. The belief that a particular cultural or ethnic group constitutes a distinct people deserving of political self-determination.*”

Nationalism today is a biting concern, as the recent emergence of White Nationalism out of the dark shadows has unleashed toxic, dangerous hatred. We have seen a torrent of hatred aimed at Muslims, people of color, immigrants, the LGBTQ community and Jews. This nationalism is a response to fear of loss, fear of change and fear of the unknown; it reveals deep-seated insecurities. With the internet, White Nationalism has become very dangerous.

Last year I studied a thought-provoking book by Washington Post journalist Eli Saslow. *“The White Flight of Derek Black”* documents the development and transformation of the heir apparent of the White Nationalist website, Stormfront, an extremist platform started and run by his father. In adolescence, Derek helped to expand the reach of Stormfront with a daily radio show, a blog and annual conferences which he organized and co-led with David Duke, the infamous KKK leader who was also his godfather. In a remarkable turn of events, Black enrolled in a liberal college near his Florida home, unknowingly embarking on a journey that eventually came to open his eyes to the lies of White Nationalism and the damage it was doing to good people. But before he realized that path, he fashioned the language of “White Genocide” that is now common currency among hate groups who fear the cultural changes facing our world.

Derek was first shunned on campus for his views. But then a Jewish student, Matthew Stevenson, decided that instead of shunning or attacking or arguing with Derek, he would see what could happen by befriending him. After he read Stormfront and listened to Derek’s broadcast, he and friends

invited Derek to their apartment for Shabbat dinner. Behaving intentionally with kindness, this student gave Derek a chance, meeting him where he was. Derek enjoyed the friendship and conversation, and so he accepted continued invitations for Shabbat dinner on a weekly basis. Stevenson did what few of us probably could have done. After observing how Derek had been publicly outed and ostracized, Matthew chose the path of Proverbs 26:5: עֲנֵה כְּסִיל כְּאִוְלָתוֹ פְּרִיָּהֶיָּה חָכָם בְּעֵינָיו “Answer a fool in accord with his folly, else he will think himself wise.” If only all of us were lucky enough to discover the error of our ways through the civility and respect of others.

Derek Black ultimately came to the conclusion that he had to separate from his family and the community that had been his family for the first 20 years of his life. Imagine the courage that it took, and the pain it involved?

Our community learned the sting of fear of White Nationalist hate this past winter when a group called the Patriot Front pasted their flyer over our outside sign. Patriot Front was a group involved in the neo-Nazi rally in Charlottesville two years ago – when the marchers, demonstrating with the Nazi salute, chanted, “Jews will not replace us.” According to a news report, they broke from the organizing groups of that march, considering them insufficiently forceful or radical. While they have done little more than terrorize with these hate signs – not only here, but also at the Pride Center, Outright VT, on the UVM campus and around town, they surely do know how to stir up worry. While their lawful rally at City Hall last year was disgusting – and thank God not violent -- many worry about what could happen if they escalate the hate. Many worry about what could happen if

one or two of them snap, like the shooter in Pittsburgh did, and shooters in mosques and churches and elsewhere.

In the decades since Israel's birth many American Jews were lulled into believing that antisemitism has finally been overcome. Jews are accepted, successful and proud -- a huge shift from what had been before. The resurgence of antisemitic violence in Europe in the last decade has sadly demonstrated how far that is from reality. American Jews traveling to Europe would often return home with troubling tales of locked synagogues, inaccessible to anyone who has not been cleared in advance. But then we'd say, "Oh, that's Europe. They can't seem to cleanse themselves of centuries of hate." But now, most American synagogue doors are locked some or all the time and security has become the most pressing conversation among Jewish communities locally and nationally. We can no longer assume it won't happen here. Pittsburgh and Poway tore our hearts apart, while smaller, less violent and increasingly frequent antisemitic acts are reported in communities across America. Antisemitic acts, mostly vandalism and internet-based hate speech, and sometimes violence, are now near-daily occurrences.

What is going on?

Preeminent Holocaust scholar Deborah Lipstadt recently published a new book to address this question. My colleagues and I learned with her this past summer at the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem. She talked about how her book, *Antisemitism: Here and Now*, was a hard book to write and

harder to finish because, as she worked to document this trend, “everyday something else is happening, it seems,” she said.

As a professor at Emory University, she is in the midst of a dramatic upsurge in conflicts on college campuses. She sees a McCarthyism of the left evolving on the campus, where antisemitism can -- and does-- find a comfortable home to breed.

We wondered, what has changed that has made this conversation front and center? Lipstadt commented that “Pittsburgh didn’t surprise me, but it shocked me.” She compares antisemitism to a Herpes virus; it lies dormant and then emerges by 2 ways: *stress* and *hospitable conditions*. Right now, there is a lot of societal stress. Lipstadt feels (and other scholars concur) that this started with the presidency of Barack Obama and those who couldn’t bear a black family in the White House. Further, it has arisen out of a backlash to globalism. There is also the effect of the tremendous wave of migration happening all over the world, which has given rise to renewed and hateful intolerance.

The thing about a virus that can’t be cured is, that it leaves the perpetrators feeling powerful and their targets feeling highly vulnerable. So then, what can we do about it? Who becomes responsible for defeating it? Lipstadt said, ‘I am not sure you can cure anti-Semitism. It is too deeply embedded in society and has metamorphized in many ways. It has become ‘the oldest/longest hatred’ -- over the years it has been used by too many people to explain the world they see. It makes sense to them. It is so deeply embedded in the roots of society that even people unaware of its dangers

use its dog whistles in common parlance. An example is the noxious phrase, “to Jew someone down.” People use the term without realizing it is an antisemitic term. The solution to this insidious problem is for all of us -- Jews and non-Jews, to take it seriously and expose it. We must make sure people are aware of the meaning and power -- and destructive potential -- of their words.

When asked what is similar and what is different regarding racism, Lipstadt first opined that we can't be upset about one “ism” and not about all “isms.” But what is unique about antisemitism is the idea of a conspiracy to harm/destroy others. Antisemitism rests on the notorious and poisonous idea that Jews are inherently evil, manipulative and intent on domination of the world. The far right are convinced that there is a White Christian genocide going on, as Derek Black reminds us. But they do not believe that people of color or Muslims are smart enough to be engineering this genocide; they see it as coming from George Soros, meaning it is *the Jews*.

The *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* lay this bare. This is different than racism: being wrongly judged as lesser is terrible, but being wrongly judged as demonic in nature, well that is even more dangerous.

In today's world, Jews don't present as victims; we are viewed as “white” and privileged, and this does not look like victimhood. That is why this rise in antisemitism is different and it is scary. The challenge, Lipstadt urged, is to tell Jews that this is serious, and we need to understand it.

When asked about the antisemitism within the right/left divide in America, Lipstadt reflected that just as partisanship has become America's religion, so too is anti-Semitism tied up in partisan worldviews. Is BDS on the left the same as White Nationalism on the right? Lipstadt expressed distress about the political weaponization of anti-Semitism, on both the right and left, who see it through their own lenses. But still, the antisemitism is the same: it focuses on money, power, intellect supposedly used nefariously, and conspiracy theories; these are all the same motifs.

Still, left/right expressions of antisemitism are demonstrated differently. There has been more violence on the right, such as that expressed by the alt-right and White Nationalist, as seen in Pittsburgh and Poway.

Are those who fear another Shoah/Holocaust right in their analysis? What does "Never Again" mean now? Lipstadt was critical of comparisons to the Holocaust. Something can be absolutely horrible, but it is not necessarily a Holocaust or a genocide. These comparisons fall short, and we need to be careful not to oversimplify by using the Holocaust to describe our current situation. First of all, the victims of the Holocaust deserve better. This moment calls for us to be very thoughtful. The time to stop a genocide is before it happens. We have to ask, "What can we do to stop this?"¹

Kohelet said it right: there is a time to be quiet and a time to speak. Sometimes a public reaction to anti-Semitism isn't strategically smart.

¹ Deborah Lipstadt, discussion with Yehuda Kurtzer for Rabbinic Torah Seminar, Jerusalem July 2019

Lipstadt said, “This is a war that has got to be fought wisely and strategically.”²

In recent years, the term *intersectionality* has become common in conversations about social justice, making a linkage of one injustice with another. But it has come to trouble me, and Deborah Lipstadt’s critique echoed my concerns. She related that the term intersectionality was born out of a lawsuit brought by three GM workers, women who complained that they couldn’t get good jobs because they were black and women. Their complaint introduced a welcome nuance in understanding prejudice. But today the term *intersectionality* has morphed, providing a home for contempt for Israel, employing common anti-Semitic tropes and memes. The nuance of what had been a decent idea has been lost.

How can we as Jews take antisemitism seriously but not let it become the determining factor of our Jewish identity? Lipstadt’s final section of her book is entitled, “Oy vs Joy: Rejecting Victimhood.” She recalls the highly regarded Jewish historian Salo Baron, who published the influential *Social and Religious History of the Jews* in the 1930’s. Baron opposed the “lachrymose conception of Jewish history,” and strove to highlight the great achievements of Jewish culture and religion.

Another scholar, Shimon Rawidowicz, addressed Jewish pessimism in his 1948 essay, “Israel: The Ever-Dying People.” He called our preoccupation with our victimhood a self-protective “coping mechanism.” If you are

² ibid

prepared for the worst, you are never surprised by it. Lipstadt shared an old Jewish joke, “A *Jewish optimist* thinks things can’t get worse. A *Jewish pessimist* thinks they can, and a *Jewish realist* knows they are.”

We have to fight the pessimism even while we know that it’s valid. In “OY vs. Joy,” Lipstadt asks her reader to turn the page. To non-Jews, she writes, “I don’t want you to see Jews as perennial victims who must be coddled. We are not. We cherish people like you who have stood by us because you have stood by our side not out of pity or guilt, but because hatred in all its forms is something you cannot abide and because you recognize that antisemitism is a threat to the well-being of any just and democratic society.”³

Our motivating factor for Jewish identity must be *joy*. “The Jewish people thrive today as a culture, a community and a nation.”⁴ Rabbi David Hartman (of blessed memory) wrote a critique of what he called, “Auschwitz consciousness,” a worldview of victimhood. “Because of Sinai, Jewish suffering did not create self-pity but moral sensitivity: ‘And you shall love the stranger because you were strangers in the land of Egypt.’ Auschwitz, like all Jewish suffering of the past, must be absorbed and understood within the normative framework of Sinai. We will mourn forever because of the memory of Auschwitz. We will build a healthy new society because of the memory of Sinai.”⁵

³ Deborah Lipstadt. *Antisemitism Here and Now* (New York: Penguin Random House. 2019) 238

⁴ Ibid. 238

⁵ “Auschwitz or Sinai,” Rabbi Prof. David Hartman. 01.02.2013

https://hartman.org.il/Blogs_View.asp?Article_Id=394&Cat_Id=414&Cat_Type=

“Love the stranger because you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”⁶ We will build a world from love. (based on Psalm 100)” This is how we shall thrive -- by singing and praying our way to joy, and by contributing to the repair of the world with our friends in the interfaith community and civil society. We carry with us “historical empathy.”⁷ We have much to share and work to do together. Our community continues the tradition of social justice work in a variety of ways, true to our name, *Ohavei Tzedek*, lovers of justice. This is an essential part of our *JOY* -- joining hands with the broader community work together for justice.

The Jewish college kids who invited Derek Black for Shabbat dinner knew this instinctively. Their example is as challenging -- could you imagine doing that? -- as it is inspiring. We must carry it with us.

Among our many interfaith projects, this summer I started a project with two dear colleagues, Rev. Ken White of College Street Church and Imam Islam Hassan of the Islamic Society of Vermont. Inspired by a rabbi-priest team who called themselves the “God Squad,” we decided to launch a podcast which we hope to call, *GodSquadPod*. We will discuss all kinds of life issues, sharing our views and our stories, and interviewing notables for each episode. We hope to release the first completed podcasts later this fall. This is one way we are working together to turn the tide on hate -- through friendship and understanding.

⁶ Summarized from Leviticus 19:34

⁷ Rabbi Barry Schwatz. <https://jps.org/for-you-were-strangers-in-the-land-of-egypt/>

Yes, antisemitism is our concern. But the only way to walk on a firm path of security and happiness will be if we talk together -- here, as a Jewish community seeking holiness and joy, and together with the larger community -- to build a world of love. May this heal the pain of Hagar and Ishmael, Sarah and Abraham and Isaac, and may we heal the world.