

## **Standing Up to Antisemitism: With Courage, Understanding, Joy, and Celebration**

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The statistics are jarring. In 2022, there were 3,697 reported incidents of antisemitism in the United States, and vastly more unreported. That is a 36% increase from the previous year. Incidents of harassment rose 29%, acts of vandalism 51%, physical assaults 26%, campus incidents 41%, K-12 school incidents 49%. Within K-12 schools, 88% of incidents involved swastikas. In 2022, there were 91 bomb threats targeting Jewish institutions. Unconfirmed data from the first half of 2023 show that this year's numbers continue to rise by at least 10%.<sup>1</sup> Just last week, in the days leading up to and on Rosh Hashanah, at least 25 Jewish facilities received bomb threats or swatting incidents (where a prank call sends a SWAT team reporting a fake emergency).<sup>2</sup> As a result, a number of synagogues now routinely bring in a bomb-sniffing K-9 unit before the High Holidays, and multiple synagogues were actively evacuated during Rosh Hashanah services.

Famous celebrities and influencers profess a love of Hitler. Politicians, elected officials, powerful media personalities, and a former president routinely use antisemitic references and dog-whistles. One of the largest tech companies, run by one of the richest people on the planet, threatened legal action when antisemitism was called out. Racists, bigots, and white supremacists are getting more attention, more media spotlight, more fundraising, and more followers. Locally and anecdotally, we are hearing about more and more incidents of vandalism, the use of stereotypes and inappropriate comments, bullying and blaming of Jews, the list goes on.

Away from the headlines and statistics, Jews, our people, our community, our family, our kids are nervous, scared, shocked, unprepared, and struggling for answers and help, which is all quite understandable. For so long, antisemitism was something that happens in other countries, in the past, in other times. It was an amorphous threat that is part of our history, not around the corner. Clergy used to wax poetic with conversion students asking about what it means to join a targeted group of people. But it is not poetry anymore; it is reality, and we make that clear at every Beit Din.

As taught by Ambassador Deborah Lipstadt, of the United States Office to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism, the term "anti-Semitism" was coined at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Vienna by journalist Wilhelm Marr, who blamed large social change on immigrants. Take of this what you will into modern times. While the immigrants were predominantly Orthodox Jews from Eastern Europe, Marr wanted a term that was stronger than anti-Judaism, or Judenhass, in order to encompass all Jews, including those who had given up Judaism, so he came up with the term "anti-Semitism." Marr actually had a deathbed epiphany, realizing that the social change was due to the Industrial Revolution, and he renounced his antisemitic

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<sup>1</sup> ADL Center of Extremism 2022 Report

<sup>2</sup> Secure Community Network

beliefs. Antisemitism originally was, and still is, Jew hatred.<sup>3</sup> I know some may not be used to that phrase, but it is growing in popularity, especially because it is more evocative and hits you in the face. I personally have no problem with that phrase; there is no equivocating there.

Nevertheless, this is not a sermon about the dangers of antisemitism. Antisemitism is wrong. Antisemitism is dangerous. Antisemitism is a real concern. But this is not a sermon about lobbying politicians, supporting national and local anti-hate organizations, and changing social media profiles to a blue square. This is not a sermon about fear, isolationism, or for shock value. This is actually a sermon of four things: courage, understanding, joy, and celebration.

First, we need courage. Let me just state that this is not fair. It just isn't. We are a people persecuted for thousands of years, and while we can boast wonderful positive moments and milestones over time, here we still are, battling flagrant, commonplace, menacing Jew hatred. My ask for us all is to not stand down in the face of antisemitism. Do not let a joke or half-comment go on by or give someone a pass because they are a coworker, classmate, friend, or relative. It may be awkward or embarrassing, but let us have that determination and strength to stop antisemitism immediately when it occurs. Wrong is wrong, and we need be bold and courageous enough to call it out.

This does require us, the adults, to better educate, prepare, and support our children, who sadly must bear this burden and speak up as well. We shoulder that responsibility to teach and help them, and we should not take it lightly.

In some ways, these acts of courage are the most crucial in our fight against antisemitism. Seattle's own Holocaust Center for Humanity, and other groups, teach the "Pyramid of Hate, a visual image to demonstrate how the seeds of hate, once planted, can grow from biased ideas into violence... [The most extreme headline-grabbing acts] represent mere tips of an iceberg; an end result that is [more visible]. Beneath what we can see lie attitudes, behaviors, actions, and inactions that, if unchecked, create the conditions necessary for that tragic result. Unchecked, those attitudes and behaviors become normalized, with the potential to escalate.<sup>4</sup> As Nelson Mandela said, "No one is born hating another person because of the color of [their] skin, or [their] background, or [their] religion." It begins with the off-color jokes, persistent stereotypes, misconceptions, and microaggressions. From there, it grows. Therefore, we must be courageous to stop antisemitism when it is at its smallest point, when, and in truth, it is easiest to correct. Mandela continued, "People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite."

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<sup>3</sup> For those linguistically minded, there has been a recent push to remove the hyphen and just have one, uncapitalized term – antisemitism. This removes any ambiguity about some undefined group of Semites, which in 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany, was part of a pseudo-science racial classification, later adopted into Nazi ideology.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.holocaustcenterseattle.org/pyramid-of-hate>

I would add, and I encourage you to do the same, whenever I speak to any church group, school group, or guest talk, I end with a plea to our non-Jewish neighbors that they must speak up as well. There simply are not enough Jews in this country; we need non-Jews, especially when Jews are not around, to call out antisemitism when they hear it.

Second, we need understanding. I do not mean understanding of our enemies. I mean loving understanding of each other, our fellow Jews. There are growingly concerning ruptures between parts of our Jewish community. Yes, there is agreement that antisemitism is bad, but I know many of us define antisemitism differently, experience antisemitism differently, counter antisemitism differently, or hold some acts of hate more to account than others. There is a vehement discussion about the relationship of anti-Israel sentiment to antisemitism. There is strong debate about which definition of antisemitism is the right definition, if there is only one such thing. Antisemitism is an emotionally charged, complex, with plenty of nuance to debate and discuss.

But I see no benefit in arguing which antisemitism is worse. If it is wrong, then it is wrong. There is antisemitism on the political right and the political left, from the young and the older, in America, Israel, and everywhere else, and there is antisemitism from Jews as well. Are there all the same? No. Does antisemitism occur more often, or more violently, from some parties and ideologies than others? Yes, it does. Does antisemitism still need to be called out, wherever it lies? Absolutely. I worry that, in such a polarized, never-back-down time, we may ignore antisemitism in our political camp, for a range of reasons. In truth, calling out our allies, in a loving, educational, compassionate way is far more effective than just hearing from our adversaries.

Here is where we need understanding with each other. Let us fully commit to the premise that discrimination, singling out, bigotry, minimizing, dehumanizing, and outright hatred is wrong. While we will always have disagreements, we are indeed Am Yisrael, the people who wrestle. I ask us for more acceptance, openness, and listening to Jews of different generations, experiences, politics, and perspectives. Let us embrace our shared destiny and understand each other's apprehensions, not just create more barriers.

Third, we need joy. Deuteronomy 28:47 tells us to "serve God with joy and gladness in our heart." Rebbe Nachman of Breslov taught "it is a great mitzvah to live in a state of happiness." Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the chief rabbi of the British Palestinian Mandate, taught, "Delight and joy must accompany your every endeavor." And of course, the great Lucille Ball declared, "it's a helluva start, being able to recognize what makes you happy." Our focus should not be on what endangers us, but instead on what makes us deeply proud to be Jewish.

Rabbi Yitz Greenberg helps us readjust our Jewish priorities, teaching, "Most Jews still think that fasting [such as on Yom Kippur] is more righteous than feasting. Yet the Talmud suggests that in the world-to-come a person will have to stand judgment for every legitimate pleasure in this life that was renounced." Rabbi Greenberg goes on to mention that it is antithetical that we often focus more on Yom Kippur, with its self-criticism and deprivation of eating and drinking, than on Festivals of Joy, such as Sukkot and Purim. I do note the irony of giving this sermon in a room full of people on Yom Kippur, when those joyful holidays have far less. Maybe we should switch that.

Ambassador Lipstadt connects this idea to how we engage with antisemitism. Is our Jewish identity defined by the push of antisemitism, or instead the pull of our tradition, history, culture, and values? Our presence and pride in being Jewish is not just to show the antisemites that we will not cower, but more so to being pulled toward the good of our tradition. To quote from Lipstadt, “It can’t just be about the oys; it’s got to be about the joys. It can’t just be about the negative. It’s can’t be about the pushes. We [don’t just engage in Jewish rituals and practice] to show the antisemities. We do it because we care about what this tradition means.”<sup>5</sup>

This transitions to our fourth point; we need celebration and pride. There is pride in who we are as a people and all that we have achieved, despite the struggles. My personal favorite is 22% of all Nobel laureates are Jewish. But we also look to our resilience, creativity, art, poetry, values, and more. This is not to say that we are superior, but we can and should celebrate, not just the endurance, but the thriving nature of the Jewish people.

More importantly, we need to actively, deliberately, passionately, publicly celebrate our Jewishness. For some, this is with a star of David or chai necklace or wearing a kippah in public, proudly saying we go to a Jewish summer camp or support Jewish organizations and causes. For others, it is inviting neighbors to our Shabbat table, into our Sukkah, or for a ridiculous Purim spiel. Frankly, make it a reciprocal thing. Enjoy their Christmas party, and say, “yes Chanukah is a minor Jewish holiday, but we have a wonderful, home-oriented, food-oriented, kid-oriented, multiple-glass-of-wine holiday that is, century after century voted by Jews as their favorite one. Come over for a Passover seder.” Do not be shy or glib when you say you are missing school or work for a Jewish holiday. Share what you know with others and learn with them what you don’t. Do not back down from being who you truly are. We do not stand against hate by defining ourselves by it, but by more wonderfully, joyfully, exuberantly, celebrating our Jewish identities with pride.

Of course, this is hard, yet this is what history and present circumstances have called us to. We need to take this fight seriously. We need to speak up with courage, educating our children to do the same. We need to stand with our Jewish family side-by-side, understanding that we experience antisemitism differently, but get each other’s back regardless. We need to embrace the joy of Judaism, celebrate loudly and proudly what it means to be Jewish, and welcome our neighbors to have a good time with us.

I stand here, on the holiest day of the year, declaring, “I am Jewish, and I am so proud to be part of this community, part of this people, and part of this struggle. Hate may come my way, but it does not define me. I define my Judaism, and I chose to be unabashedly, excitedly, and enthusiastically proud of who I am.” As I step off the bimah, I turn to you, my community. How will you stand up against hate? How will you be there for your community? And, finally, how will you celebrate your Judaism, proudly and with joy?

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<sup>5</sup> CCAR webinar on “Understanding Today’s Antisemitism with Ambassador Deborah Lipstadt, in conversation with Ambassador Rabbi David Saperstein