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For You Know the Heart of the Stranger

In the days before Rosh Hashanah, we rabbis have a way of doing many ill-advised things: procrastinating (dangerous), rewriting our sermons (also dangerous), asking our families what they really think about our sermons (very dangerous). But until I heard this news story about a colleague of mine, I never thought that ordering a salad would be on the list of pre-holiday tasks to avoid.

Last week, just a couple of days before Rosh Hashanah, my colleague Rabbi Ted Riter, who is serving as the interim rabbi of a synagogue in Jackson, Mississippi, was thrown out of a restaurant for being Jewish. He had ordered a Greek salad, and the owner of the restaurant asked him whether he wanted a full sized salad or a “Jew-sized” salad – which meant a small salad, he explained when asked, because “Jews are small and cheap – everybody knows that.” Rabbi Riter, who has emphasized how welcoming he has generally found Jackson to be, thought that perhaps he had misheard the owner. But instead of denying it, apologizing, or trying to make a joke out of it, the owner asked him, “what, are you a Jew?” And when Rabbi Riter told him that he was, the restaurant owner started cursing, and threw him out of the store.

It’s tempting to laugh this story off as one man’s prejudice, and perhaps to shrug it off as the sort of thing that happens far away from our homes and our lives. But as I look back on the past year, I am concerned that my colleague’s experience is only one of a dark list of anti-Semitic news stories that appeared during the year 5774.

In April, on the day before Passover, three people were shot dead in Overland Park, Kansas, when a shooter attacked the Jewish Community Center and a nearby Jewish retirement home. The victims were, in fact, not Jewish, just local residents attending a program at the JCC, but the shooter’s target was the Jewish community.

In May, four people were shot to death at the Jewish museum in Brussels, Belgium – “the first act of anti-Semitic terrorism in the Belgian capital since World War II,” as the head of the Jewish community there described it.¹

¹ <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/25/world/europe/3-shot-dead-at-brussels-jewish-museum.html>

In July, Shouts of “Death to the Jews,” and “Slit Jews’ Throats” were heard on the streets of Paris and Belgium;² “Gas the Jews!” was heard on the streets of Germany.³ Media outlets ranging from Buzzfeed to the Anti-Defamation League noted the rise of the hashtag “#HitlerWasRight” on Twitter.⁴

In January, in historically tolerant Italy, boxes containing pigs’ heads were mailed to the synagogue in Rome, the Jewish museum there, and the Israeli Embassy. The synagogue also received an anonymous bomb threat. Over the summer, Jewish shop windows in several neighborhoods in Rome were vandalized with the words “Torch the synagogues” and “Jews, your end is near.”⁵

In Paris, a Jewish mother and her six-month old baby were attacked by a man who shook the stroller that the baby was in, and yelled, “Dirty Jewess, enough with your children already, you Jews have too many children, screw you.”⁶ In New York City in August, a Jewish couple was attacked on the Upper East Side of Manhattan by assailants who yelled anti-Semitic slurs.⁷

In Sydney, Australia, usually a quiet haven for Jews, residents of two neighborhoods with large Jewish populations found flyers in their mailboxes in August that read “Wake up Australia! Jews have been kicked out of countries 109 times through history.... Could it be that having them in a European country is harmful to the host?”⁸

I don’t mean to be overly alarmist, but I am concerned. As noted Holocaust scholar Deborah Lipstadt wrote recently in the New York Times, “the differences between then and now are legion. When there is an outbreak of anti-Semitism today, officials condemn it. This is light-years away from the 1930s and 1940s, when governments were not only silent but complicit.”⁹ “But despite all this,” she writes, “I wonder if I am too sanguine.... This is not another Holocaust, but it’s bad enough.”

It might be tempting to shrug off the incidents of the past year as purely a European problem, but too many of them occurred here on our shores. It might be tempting to shrug them off as a time-limited reaction to the war in Gaza, but several of the most violent incidents took place before that war. It might even be tempting to shrug them off by saying that many of the

² <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/aug/07/antisemitism-rise-europe-worst-since-nazis>

³ <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/24/world/europe/europes-anti-semitism-comes-out-of-shadows.html>

⁴ <http://blog.adl.org/anti-semitism/hitlerwasright-hashtag-twitter-gaza-israel>,

<http://www.buzzfeed.com/alanwhite/the-hashtag-hitlerwasright-trends-on-twitter-after-palestini#2x8e5kg>

⁵ <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/02/world/europe/anger-in-europe-over-the-israeli-gaza-conflict-reverberates-as-anti-semitism.html>

⁶ <http://www.tabletmag.com/scroll/173071/jewish-woman-attacked-at-paris-bus-stop>

⁷ http://gothamist.com/2014/08/26/jewish_couple_attacked_on_upper_eas.php

⁸ <http://www.tabletmag.com/scroll/183205/anti-semitic-fliers-appear-in-sydney-mailboxes>

⁹ <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/21/opinion/deborah-e-lipstadt-on-the-rising-anti-semitism-in-europe.html>

incidents are anti-Israel and not anti-Semitic, but I am not satisfied with that answer. Were the Israeli tourists who died in the shooting in Brussels somehow a more reasonable target than the others who died? Since when is it acceptable for political protests against governments to target innocent civilians? I don't think we can shrug off these incidents aside at all: they are a reality of 5774's legacy. They are a reality of our world.

I have to admit that all of these incidents – and there were others besides the ones I've listed – are difficult for me to reconcile with my own life experience. Some of you, I know, have experienced anti-Semitism in dark and significant moments in your lives. But I know that I speak for many of us at Beth David when I say that living in the comfort of a town like Lower Merion, a city like Philadelphia, a country like the United States, I often find it hard to conceive of anti-Semitism as a real threat. I have lived a life so sheltered from anti-Semitism that I wonder whether my great-grandparents could even conceive of it. I grew up in a leafy suburb much like Lower Merion, where 40% of my classmates in my wealthy public school were Jewish, as was our representative in Congress. I was admitted to an Ivy League University that replaced its former Jewish quota system with a well-financed Hillel, not to mention a Jewish university president who comes from one of the most famous rabbinic families in modern Jewish history. I have traveled throughout Western and Eastern Europe, Asia, and Central and South America without ever feeling unsafe as a Jew. The latest surveys show that in America, not only are anti-Semitism rates low, but Jews are the most well-respected and well-liked religious or ethnic group by our neighbors.¹⁰ I feel blessed to be a Jew because of the ways that Judaism and Jewish community enrich my life, and I have rarely felt that my options in life were limited in any way because of my Jewishness. (Except for my job options, I suppose – rabbi was within reach, but Protestant minister, Catholic priest, Buddhist nun... all out.) I live a life unrecognizably free from the scourge of anti-Semitism that shaped my family's life for so many generations.

Perhaps that disconnect is one of the reasons why most American Jews have expressed so little outrage at the rise in anti-Semitic incidents – it is hard to believe that they are anything more than isolated incidents. How do we hold up the reality that anti-Semitism was on the rise this year in many parts of the world with the experience of safety and acceptance that many of us in Philadelphia take for granted? Working behind the scenes of a synagogue, I see the structures that support our comfortable reality. As a rabbi in New York City, I was briefed by the police about more warnings than I would have liked to imagine about threats against synagogues. Even here in Gladwyne, Jill Cooper and Susan Levey, our executive director and our educator, have been trained in security procedures by our local police and security professionals.

¹⁰ <http://www.pewforum.org/2014/07/16/how-americans-feel-about-religious-groups/>

We need to remain vigilant against the spread of anti-Semitism, to take these threats seriously, to recognize that a threat against a Jew anywhere is a threat against all of us. We will deal with these threats with the help of Jewish organizations that have long led the way on these matters, and in partnership with the many allies we have in this struggle: our interfaith partners, our elected officials, our police officers.

But while dealing with anti-Semitism might be an inescapable part of being Jewish, we cannot allow it to become the essence of our identity. There's an old Jewish joke that every Jewish holiday can be summed up like this: "They tried to kill us, but we survived... now let's eat!" (Oops, sorry for that food reference! Just a few more hours to go...) It's a joke that gets at such a basic truth: Judaism is a strange rhythm of remembering what is painful, and then celebrating anyway. But even though I laugh, too, and even though I love the message of finding joy despite the pain, I admit to joining the ranks of the curmudgeonly rabbis who dislike this joke: not only because it ignores the broad range of emotions that the Jewish calendar encompasses: the joy of nature celebrated on Sukkot, the wonder of learning celebrated on Shavuot, the inner contemplation demanded by Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, but also because it perpetuates the fiction that being Jewish is about little besides persecution and matzah balls.

The Pew Study of the Jewish community released last fall asked survey participants what they considered to be most essential to being Jewish. Remembering the Holocaust was the most common answer given. I'm glad that 73% percent of Jews surveyed believe that remembering the Holocaust is central to who they are as Jews, but at the same time, I find it concerning that that answer should come in higher than leading a moral and ethical life (69%), working for justice and equality (56%), or being part of a Jewish community (28%).¹¹ As Leibel Fein, a legendary Reform Jewish leader who founded the Jewish anti-hunger organization Mazon, and who died during this past year, once said: "Come survive with us!" is not the way to inspire the next generation of Jews to make our sacred heritage their own. "A community that seeks to stand," he wrote, "must stand for something."¹²

And so, for one last time during these Days of Awe, in tribute to Beth David's 70th anniversary, I would like to draw from the metaphors of 70 – because 70 is a reminder of what we have always stood for.

The Torah does not have any concept of anti-Semitism as it exists in the modern world, but the story at the heart of the Torah, our enslavement in Egypt, is a story of how our people were oppressed because they were Jews. Pharaoh is suspicious that the Israelites will be disloyal, and so he orders taskmasters to "oppress them with forced labor,"¹³ and he decrees that every

¹¹ <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2013/10/jewish-american-full-report-for-web.pdf>

¹² <http://shma.com/2000/11/social-justice-and-renaissance/>

¹³ Exodus 1:10-11.

male Jewish baby should be drowned in the Nile.¹⁴ And so our experience in Egypt becomes broadly metaphorical for our people's experience of prejudice, of persecution, of oppression. "Going down to Egypt" refers not simply to going south from the ancient land of Israel, but metaphorically descending to a place of suffering. And when our people went down to Egypt – when Jacob and his sons head to Egypt to stay with Joseph during the famine – the Torah notes that we were a group of 70 people, "*shivim nefesh*," literally "70 souls," when we set out. But during our time in Egypt, our family grew and grew, so that by the time we escaped Egyptian bondage, we were no longer just a big family, but a nation, a people. As the Torah puts it, "Your ancestors went down to Egypt seventy persons in all; and now the Eternal your God has made you as numerous as the stars in heaven"¹⁵ – "there he became a great and very populous nation."¹⁶

Now the growth from a family to a people is indisputable, but it could have been described by many other points in time other than the descent down to Egypt. We were few in number when Jacob wrestled with the angel. We were few in number when the brothers sold Joseph as a slave. But those moments are not as significant for describing our birth as a nation. The experience of persecution – the going down to Egypt – as well as the way we rise out of it – is what binds us to each other as a people. Seventy, our number when we go down to Egypt, stands for the experience of persecution and suffering, but it also stands for the certainty that we will not remain in Egypt forever, and that our departure will bring about our birth as a people. Seventy means that our experience of persecution should not define us, but should rather transform us.

When our experience in Egypt is mentioned in the Torah, it is most often mentioned not to dwell on the experience, not to put us on guard against future threats, but rather, in the context of the most common mitzvah repeated in the Torah: kindness to outsiders and to those who are vulnerable in our society. "You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of a stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt," God declared to us at the foot of Mount Sinai.¹⁷ "When a stranger resides with you in your land," we read in this afternoon's Torah reading, "you shall not wrong him... you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."¹⁸

70 souls went down to Egypt... but we defined ourselves as a people by how we came out, how we grew out of that experience, not out of the suffering itself. That is the meaning of

¹⁴ Exodus 1:22.

¹⁵ Deuteronomy 10:22.

¹⁶ Deuteronomy 26:5.

¹⁷ Exodus 23:9.

¹⁸ Leviticus 19:33-34.

Jewishness that we need to affirm in this new year, even as we take the threats against our community seriously and work to stand up against that hatred.

This is a congregation that has stood up against intolerance in its many forms so many times in our history. From working to improve Black-Jewish relations in Wynnefield, to marching to free Soviet Jews, to calling our senators last year to support LGBT equality, Beth David has a powerful social action legacy. Looking forward, we need to expand that legacy, and challenge ourselves to explore what social action can mean for us in the years ahead. Just as the Torah commands us that our experience as slaves should inspire us to treat the stranger in Israelite society with kindness, so too should our experience of anti-Semitism today open our eyes to the reality of hatred, whether it is directed at us or at others, and open our hearts to act in solidarity with and in support of others who are targets of discrimination or hate violence.

And of course, the truth is that the challenge of speaking out against anti-Semitism, and speaking out against other forms of hatred or discrimination are not in opposition with each other, but in fact are one and the same. We cannot be so consumed with our safety that we forget our charge to look outward; we cannot be so focused on others that we forget how to stand up for ourselves. *“Im ein ani li, mi li?”* our sage Hillel said so many centuries ago. *“If I am not for myself, who will be for me? U'ch'she'ani l'atzmi, ma ani? But if I am only for myself, what am I?”*¹⁹

Does being Jewish mean being hated for who you are? I wish I could say that were not the case, but sometimes, in some places, it is – and perhaps it always will be. But I hope that, more powerfully, being Jewish means being able to transform that legacy of experiencing hate into a legacy of deepening love and justice, for ourselves and for others in this world.

And finally, I hope that this profound lesson, learned by our people through so many years of hardship, can be one that each of us can take into our hearts this Yom Kippur. For all of us who have suffered this year, for all of us who have felt judged or attacked by others, for all of us who have gone down to Egypt in some way in the year 5774 – let us remember this wisdom. These descents need not define us, no matter what others say – but they can inspire us to live with more compassion and more understanding in the year ahead. As for our people Israel, so for this sacred congregation, and so for each of us as individuals: we have gone down to Egypt, but we have come up as so much more. We began as 70, but we have emerged, ready for sacred work.

G'mar Chatima Tova: may we be inscribed for a year of blessing, a year of freedom from hatred, a year of inspiration toward goodness.

¹⁹ Pirke Avot 1:14.