

Zakhor 5768 Anti-Semitism

Shabbat Shalom.

During our first year here in Lexington, my daughter Talya and I were walking home from services one Friday night in December. Suddenly, we found ourselves under a tree with simple white lights. The lights wove their way through the branches like an elegant necklace, and Talya was mesmerized. My three-year-old daughter stood transfixed by this beautiful sight. She asked me what these lights were.

At first I hesitated, not sure of how to embark on this first-of-its-kind-for-me parental conversation. But I gave it a try.

“They’re Christmas lights.”

“What’s Christmas?”

“It’s a holiday that Christians observe.”

So far, so good.

“Do we do Christmas?”

“No Talya, you know that we’re Jewish and we observe Hanukkah.”

Phew, that was close.

“Well, Abba, the lights are so beautiful that I would like to do Christmas”

Oy. I had failed my first Christmas conversation.

As Jews living in an overwhelmingly Christian nation, there are times when we feel like outsiders. Many of you have told me of challenging experiences explaining Judaism or being labeled “the resident Jew” at work.

Living as American Jews, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, we face a complex dynamic. On the one hand, things are great – we live in a prosperous nation (recent economic news notwithstanding), and most opportunities are available to us on the highest levels. Let’s not forget that an observant Jew was almost elected vice-president just eight years ago.

But things are complicated for us. America's warm embrace has made it easier for Jews to leave Judaism behind, making Judaism less relevant. Since there is less hate, there is less external pressure for us to remain a distinct group. Think about it. While anti-Semitism was not a good thing in the Middle Ages, it did guarantee that the Jewish people remained a vital, distinct community. In addition, we live in a world where many do hate us, though, thankfully, most of those people are not in this country.

How do we live as Americans and Jews? How do we dance at both of these weddings, as the Yiddish expression goes? How do we raise our children to be aware that there is anti-Semitism in the world, but, at the same time, that they need not be afraid?

These identity issues are complex, and they are informed by our own experiences and by our friends and families. Many of us have non-Jews who are part of our families and certainly as friends, co-workers and neighbors. What are the appropriate boundaries and how do we and our families navigate those delineations?

Just the other week, I was speaking with a member of our shul who was struggling with just this issue. How much should she share about her family, some of whom had been murdered by the Nazis just two generations ago, with her child? The conversation turned to Jewish peoplehood; focusing on anti-Semitism with her child could lead to a certain amount of xenophobia and possibly dangerous insularity and isolation. But leaving out that part of our history negates our narrative - who we really are - and does not allow us to learn from our past.

I find myself struggling with just that. Sacred survivalist Judaism – that we must preserve the Jewish people at all costs – is an incredible motivator for me and for many, but it is not the Judaism I want to focus on. When I teach about our tradition, I want it to be a gift, a path of how to live a joyful, beautiful life. I cannot be only a Holocaust Jew.

But there is hate. Many of us experience anti-Semitism personally in our lives. One incident sticks out in my memory. When I was six, my family moved from Manhattan to Long Island where my

father became the rabbi of a shul in West Hempstead. We lived in a home owned by our synagogue. I woke up on the morning of Halloween to find toilet paper strewn about our front yard, the smell of rotten eggs that had been thrown against our house, and a swastika next to the front door.

Perhaps attacking the rabbi's house seemed humorous to whoever perpetrated this act, but it left me as a young boy feeling vulnerable and afraid. To this day, I am not a big fan of Halloween, and it does not contain positive memories for me.

As Sara mentioned in her dvar Torah, this is Shabbat Zakhor – the Shabbat of memory. We remember the Amalekites, an ancient people who attacked our ancestors from the rear as we wandered through the Sinai wilderness. We are commanded to remember what the Amalekites did to us and never to forget.

The rabbis then associate Amalek with other evil powers who tried to destroy us: Haman (why we read this the Shabbat before Purim), the Romans, and others throughout our history who have been our enemies.

Who is Amalek today? There are clearly terrorists who hate not only Israel, but Jews. The terrible attack on a Mercaz Harav Yeshiva in Jerusalem is not only fueled by anti-Israel feelings, but by societies that are fed and consume a constant diet of anti-Semitism. Just yesterday, the U.S. State Department issued its report on anti-Semitism, including its manifestation as anti-Zionism, and excoriates its appearance throughout the United Nations system.

The world sadly is still full of anti-Semites. As I was discussing foreign adoption with a family, I was surprised to learn that the Philippines does not allow foreign adoption to Jewish families. Jews in Europe and especially in parts of France are forced to keep a low profile for fear they will be attacked.

Just last month, an American tourist, Marcel Kalmann, a 64-year-old professor, was sitting in a café in Belgium. As I sometimes do, he was wearing a cap over his kippah. When a waiter saw his kippah, the waiter told the owner, who told Marcel, "We are not

serving Jews ... out of here” Marcel, who was born in Auschwitz three days before the camp was liberated, was then mistreated at the local police station where he was told that this incident would not be considered anti-Semitic.

The Venezuelan Jewish community has been harassed by its government led by Hugo Chavez – a virulent anti-Israel proponent.

Even here in America, there are anti-Semitic incidents – here are a few from a week in February: a neo-Nazi desecrates a Jewish cemetery in Chicago, a Los Angeles JCC is attacked with a molotov cocktail, a shul is covered in swastikas.

Surely, we do not live in a time or a place of great anti-Jewish hate, but it is still here and still a part of our world.

On this Shabbat Zakhor, a Shabbat of remembering, we are asked to remember the work of the Anti-Defamation League, the ADL, in its critical work. The ADL has had a tough year – its stand on the Armenian genocide led to several towns in our area canceling their vital No Place for Hate programs. Many of us spoke out to encourage the town of Lexington not to pull out of this worthwhile program at a Town Meeting back in October, unfortunately, to no avail.

The ADL is not only an organization that is committed to fighting anti-Semitism, but also to promoting and educating and building tolerant communities. Its interfaith dialogues teach Catholic teens about Judaism and vice versa; it is on the front lines fighting hate crimes in this country and making sure that no group is attacked.

On this Shabbat Zakhor, the Torah teaches us to remember the hateful acts of the Amalekites who attacked us from the rear, where the women, children, elderly and infirm were. It’s important to note that the text states, “*Tim̄eh et zeikher Amalek* – wipe out the memory of the Amalekites.” Since just before this we are commanded to remember what the Amalekites did, this is confusing. Which is it: remember it or wipe out the memory?

To my mind, we must remember the Amaleks of the past so that we will work to eliminate their memory, meaning their power to do evil in our world and in the future. We must work to eradicate the impact of Amalek in the world today – whether hateful acts are being done to us or to another people.

But it's not only wiping out Amalek through our actions, it's also building a more tolerant world. And we can all contribute to that. How we speak about those who are different from us is part of that. Even a simple conversation about Christmas can make a difference.

We can teach our children about other faiths and even how beautiful they are, even as we affirm our strong identity as Jews. We can talk about anti-Semitism, even as we build a Judaism that focuses on positive Jewish experiences. And we can create Jewish communities that model tolerance and openness, even as we appreciate the centrality of our tradition to our lives.

As Rabbi Brad Hirschfield titles his new book, "You Don't Have to be Wrong for Me to be Right." We can create a tolerant Judaism, a "faith without fanaticism," that appreciates and learns from those who are different from us, even as we assert our own unique path and identity.

As we approach our festival of Purim this week, let us acknowledge other religions' holy days like Good Friday and St. Patrick's Day.

May we, as Jews, create a vibrant Jewish community, one that is tolerant and open, one that combats all forms of hatred, while always remembering the past and enabling it to bring healing to the future.

Shabbat Shalom.