

We Define Ourselves

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Congregation Rodef Sholom

This past summer, we dropped our oldest son, Zachary off at college in Michigan. I felt so many things at the same time - pride, love, joy, hope for his future, sad that he would not be at home, and a little relief that for the next few months, I would be able to find my socks. He steals my socks.

I also, of course, wonder how he will grow and develop as a Jew. Will he be safe and feel safe to explore Jewishly?

I keep thinking about a song I sang my boys when they were little - when they cared more to have me in the room than that I was out of tune. It comes from Pirke Avot:

אִם אֵין אָנִי לִי, מִי לִי. וְכִשְׁאָנִי לְעַצְמִי, מָה אָנִי

If I am not for myself who will be for me, and if I am only for myself what am I.

When I sang that song, I uttered an unspoken prayer, something like: May you hold your heads up high, proud of who you are, and may you reach out with care and curiosity to those different from you.

I taught this to my children, though, at times, I still struggle with it myself.

I started wearing my kippah in public soon after October 7, 2023. In the grocery store parking lot, on the way home from synagogue, I reached up to take my kippah off, and then stopped. I could not bring myself to take it off. In that moment, taking off my kippah would have felt like a defeat, a diminishment of my Jewish pride. Since then, I wear my kippah in public, not all the time. If I put it on, I leave it on. I love seeing so many of you wearing your *Mogen David* necklaces proudly.

Given that I now so often wear my kippah in public as a symbol of pride in our people, I surprised myself with the choice I made a couple of months ago when Zachary and I took a Lyft back to the airport after his college orientation. I was wearing my new Michigan baseball hat, and had nothing on identifying me as Jewish. We had a very pleasant conversation with the Lyft driver, mostly the driver giving Zachary advice about

bodybuilding and paying attention in school. Fifteen minutes or so into the ride, the driver asked my profession. Without hesitation, I said I was a school principal in Oakland. That of course is my previous profession. I wish I had said I am a rabbi. In front of my son, I wish I said I am a rabbi.

אם אין אני לי

If I am not for myself who will be for me.

Immediately, I felt soul sick. What had I just modeled for my son?

Motivation is not easy to tease apart. In part, I felt concern for our safety as Jews, but I fear I modeled falling susceptible to what author Dara Horn calls weaponized shame. In her book, *People Love Dead Jews*, Dara Horn distinguishes between Chanukah-antisemitism and Purim-antisemitism. Purim-antisemitism, exemplified by the Persian decree to kill the Jews in the Book of Esther, aims to kill Jews. Chanukah-antisemitism works by weaponizing shame, persuading us to give up aspects of Jewish civilization for the prize of fitting in, destroying Jewish civilization while leaving our bodies intact.¹

Weaponized shame tells us being Jewish is bad, but there is something we can do to be good. We can reject whatever aspect of Jewish civilization the majority finds unpleasant. In some times and places, rejecting the *religious* part of Jewishness allows Jews to be okay. We could be “secular Jews” or “cultural Jews” and be okay. At other times, rejecting our names and noses and general Jewiness, as the author Sarah Hurwitz puts it, allowed Jews to be okay. In this moment, increasingly, it is: reject your Zionism. Reject your ancestral homeland because it is viewed by so many as a form of settler colonialism and, if you do, you will be saved and be okay.²

It is so important that we understand: none of what we are experiencing now is new. That so much of it right now centers on Israel, is just a different iteration of an old set of tropes that Jews are powerful, conspiratorial and depraved.

That is why we have been demonized with dizzyingly contradicting accusations: as capitalists by socialists and as socialists by capitalists, as atheists by believers and as fanatics by atheists; landless wanderers and as settler colonialists; as identity-less

¹ Dara Horn, *People Love Dead Jews*

² Hurwitz on Identity Crisis podcast with Yehuda Kurtzer, September 2025.

assimilators and as militant Zionists all depending on who sought advantage in making us a target.

For some of us, the fact that antisemitism backs us away from core Jewish expressions of identity by making us feel ashamed, is the main point. For others of us, what makes this moment confusing is that this Israeli government's choices also make us feel ashamed. For both groups, for both groups, the pain comes from a shared love of, and attachment to, our people.

All of this comes up when we hear about overt antisemitic acts in our community and around the world. And they are multiplying.

Rodef Sholom college students tell me about litmus tests they face for being a good Jew, particularly to join certain clubs, questions like "Do you disavow the state of Israel?" Or "What do you think of the genocide?" Students strategize in picking classes to avoid teachers like the math professor who tells students in class not to associate with Zionists because they are Nazis. Too many of our students have been threatened with physical violence. Nearly all college students I talk to have experienced outcasting of the wrong kind of Jew, the one who supports Israel.

You cannot pick up a Jewish newspaper without seeing story after story of antisemitism. locally and globally. I remain shocked that the teachers union to which I used to belong in Oakland sent out curriculum including coloring books - coloring books! - with messages like "A group of bullies called Zionists wanted our land so they stole it by force and hurt many people." A public school teacher across the street from my home sued his union over a flyer celebrating the anniversary of October 7 with a picture of person masked in a keffiyeh with the words "One year of genocide, one year of resistance." The union refuses to apologize.

Globally, it seems there is another story each day of Israeli children getting kicked off planes or disallowed from adventure parks.

Add to this cauldron that many Jews see antisemitism being used as an excuse to enact partisan policy entirely unrelated to antisemitism. A non-Jewish cancer patient recently said to one of our congregants "These funding cuts to major universities are to protect the Jews. I'm beginning to wonder why that's more important than cancer research."

Using Jews as an excuse for harmful policy so we can be blamed at a later time is also not new.

All this is part of the moment we find ourselves in this Yom Kippur.

On this day, on Yom Kippur, we stand as one people, taking stock of ourselves and our collective. *Atem nitzvachim hayom kulchem*, our Torah portion reads. You stand here today, all of you...For some of us, today is a pinnacle of spiritual expression and yearning, a day of return to truth, to love, to Oneness. For others, today is the one day we show up to say *hineni*. I'm here. Count me in.

So today I want to address the impact of antisemitism on our souls, and give us tools to respond spiritually and practically.

First, let me put this in perspective. Though antisemitism is on the rise, we have survived much much worse. Today, we have as much power to address antisemitism as we have at any time in our history. We have an infrastructure of institutions working proactively to build relationships so that those in positions of influence understand the concerns and sensitivities of the Jewish community.

We live without quotas and segregation. We have tools for times like those if we need them, but we are not there. Not even close.

Walking down the street, it is safe to be a Jew here. Since I began wearing my kippah in public nearly 726 days ago, I have experienced not one single unpleasant incident while wearing it. May that continue to be so. When incidents do arise, we have allies who respond competently and with care. I am grateful, for example, that a local high school principal reached out last week to make sure I knew how seriously they took an antisemitic incident. We are not alone. We should continue to build partnerships. We do not all need to be on constant high alert that antisemitism is around every corner.

Second, we *would* all benefit from monitoring *ourselves* and our reactions - to notice ways we feel pushed to keep our Jewishness to ourselves. As we do, we may just unlock the invisible shackles on our tradition's treasure chest for which we have

forgotten we have the key. Sarah Hurwitz describes this beautifully in her new book, *As a Jew: Reclaiming Our Story From Those Who Blame, Shame and Try to Erase Us*.

This reclaiming is important both spiritually and practically. Spiritually, because we strengthen our souls when we resist the inclination to hide our fullest selves. Practically, because perhaps our greatest strength is the diversity of opinions and identities we hold. If we each go and inhabit the respective communities we participate in and with neither shame nor arrogance share freely about our Jewishness or Jewish-adjacent-ness and all that relates to it, we show the world what members of the Jewish community look like. And we are beautiful!

אם אין אני לי, מי לי. וכשאני לעצמי, מה אני

If I am not for myself who will be for me, and if I am only for myself what am I.

It might be convenient to leave it to others, but you're needed too.

We have the resources in our community to prepare our brains, our mouths and our souls to do this difficult work. Plug your soul into Jewish study or music or dance or prayer or meditation to re-charge and engage at the right time for you. We build the soul strength to show the world our full selves including our Jewish selves by lighting Shabbat candles together, gathering at synagogue, and joining Jewish retreats and trips where we can build relationships and share our stories and lean in to connecting. It was such a beautiful thing to go with our 7th graders to LA this past year, and process with them their experience at the museum of tolerance and see groups of them spontaneously put their arms around each other and sing Shabbat songs. I'm certain that is part of why our high school program doubled in enrollment this year.

We have an array of Jewish institutions, many represented by your fellow congregants, to help us do the practical work. Our antisemitism committee, led by Becky Genet, organized parents a couple of Sundays ago where our own Morgan Blum-Schneider, Director of the JFCS Holocaust Center challenged us with a provocative case study and has agreed to return. Our own Laurie Dubin has been a tremendous resource in the fight for an ethnic studies curriculum that advances our students ability to feel at home in the classroom alongside their peers from other backgrounds. JCRC is coming to

teach on this topic in November. We can be proud our legislature passed AB715, establishing among other things a state level antisemitism prevention coordinator.

We also have allies of other faiths and in the secular community, to whom we should continue to reach out to shape the world we all want to inhabit together. When we take pride in our tradition in solidarity with other peoples who take pride in their traditions, we can better resist those who would demonize any of us.

Third, we do well to avoid getting stuck evaluating whether a situation qualifies as antisemitic and focus instead on our vision for the world we want to live in.

For example, when questions arise about a teacher posting a Palestinian flag in the classroom, instead of evaluating whether it crosses the line of antisemitism, let's focus on its impact on our students' sense of self, safety and identity. Having relationships with the school and the teacher in advance smoothes the way to having impactful conversations.

אם אין אני לי, מי לי.

If I am not for myself who will be for me,

As we prepare to support *our* students, we also need to prepare to help shape environments that support, for example, Palestinian-American students, so they also feel affirmed, seen and respected in the same classroom.

וְכִשְׁאֲנִי לְעַצְמִי, מָה אֲנִי

If I am only for myself, what am I.

Fourth, we define ourselves. We do not let outsiders tell us how to be a good Jew. We explore and discover and define that for ourselves. We hold true to and explain the version of Zionism that is meaningful to us. For me, that is the Reform movement's statement on Zionism that affirms the right to Jewish self determination in our homeland and in no way precludes the right of Palestinians to self determination in a land of their own.

We define ourselves. Think about it: on the political right we are told if we care about antisemitism we have to do away with academic freedom, freedom of speech and basic research at universities. On the political left we're told that we can't both be proud Jews

who defend Israel *and* show compassion for innocent Palestinians. I reject both of those claims, I encourage all of us to reject both of those claims, out loud. We define ourselves. We can be both Zionist and for a Palestinian state. That is what it is to be for a two-state solution. We can have compassion for the innocent citizens of Gaza, defend Israel's right to protect itself from those who would kill as many Jews as they can, and demand that Israel fight a just war justly. We can be for academic freedom, for cancer research *and* against antisemitism. We can support a vision of a world in which all people take pride in their respective heritages *and* cherish our own.

אִם אֵין אֲנִי לִי, מִי לִי. וְכִשְׁאֲנִי לְעַצְמִי, מָה אֲנִי

If I am not for myself who will be for me, and if I am only for myself what am I.

In a moment, we will rise for the Aleinu. Originally said only on Rosh Hashanah, the Aleinu became part of our daily liturgy during the Crusades when Jews faced massacres, expulsions and forced conversions. Many Jews found comfort in the Aleinu's message of a Divine power greater than their persecutors. The Aleinu closes with the words *Bayom hahu yihyei Adonai echad u'shmo echad*. On that day, God will be One and God's name will be One. It has come to symbolize our hope for a time of peace and harmony - a vision for a day when we will all take our place, in a kaleidoscope of peoples, each proud of our respective heritages and identities. On that day, we will understand that all the different names we call God refer to the same One.