



VOICES OF AMERICAN JEWRY ON ANTI-SEMITISM: A JOURNALIST'S PERSPECTIVE

I am repeatedly asked, "So what does American Jewry have to say?" If there's anything I have learned since we started our *shlichut* here, it is that there is no single perspective called "the perspective of American Jewry." It would be the same as describing "the perspective of Israeli Jewry," which, we all know, comprises many different viewpoints. There are different voices on a range of topics. Here are some of the inspirational voices I have heard here since the wave of anti-Semitism began.

1. H. is an emissary of the World Zionist Organization in one of the large communities on the West Coast. This is how she sees what is happening here from the perspective of an Israeli

on the sidelines:

I am here only two-and-a-half years out of hundreds of years of Jewish existence in America, but you can feel the change. In our first year here everything was normal. It was understandable why "aliyah" was a tough sell. Try to persuade people who have a villa with a pool in Costa Rica and who go skiing in Vermont about the ideals of Zionism. The American dream is about the here and now. Then there was the attack in Pittsburgh, and something fundamentally changed about the sense of security of the American Jew. Suddenly, instead of one guard at the synagogue, there are two. Then after an incident in Chicago, the kids were told not to roam around the synagogue. They have to go immediately to youth groups,

because who knows, God forbid, what would happen if an armed man entered while children are roaming around? Another incident in Brooklyn and the community added another layer of security: a community member greets anyone who enters and screens them. During the preparation for the new school year at the end of the summer, a full two hours were spent on security, with detailed guidance on how to handle a situation where there is an active shooter. This was the first time they had spoken so explicitly about these possible scenarios. And the school shirt? The Hebrew letters and the Star of David that were on the shirt were replaced with English letters. And when you go on a trip? Please wear a hat instead of a kippah, even if only going out to the museum. Perspectives are starting to

shift. A little at a time, but it's noticeable. Just this week, a community leader spoke to me about aliyah.

2. Shana Schochet Lowell is a doula and lactation counselor, a mother of three who lives in Memphis. Her take, like many others, is not to go into hiding, but to do the opposite: to stand out. This is what she wrote on her blog¹ following the Monsey attack:

At 16, I was at the Hadera bus station just 15 minutes before it was bombed on Yom HaZikaron, Memorial Day, 1994.

Some years later, I was in Sbarro for a lunch date about five minutes before it exploded. We left because it was too crowded — the exact reason it was a target ... My mother would call me after each attack, wanting to know that I was safe. What is safe? I came to realize that I was one of the lucky ones. It was my duty to live. As much as I possibly could. Knowing in the back of my head that if something were to happen, I couldn't control it. In the meantime, as one of the lucky ones, I could control my response to the hate and violence.

Want to know what I did each time I had a close call? I went back. The shuk was attacked? The next Friday I would be there. Something at the Jaffa Gate? I stubbornly walked through it. Stifling my inner fear and forcing myself to walk confidently with each step. Because what I was secretly afraid of did not matter. What mattered was my response. That whoever perpetuated that hate would see they hadn't won. That I was not afraid to be a Jew or to show it ...

Hate is everywhere. After eight years of worrying, my mother was relieved when I returned to the United States to go to graduate school in Manhattan. Two weeks later, 9/11 happened, and we both realized there is no way to avoid hate. Only to fight it.

I am only one person. I moved away from the New York area this past summer and I now live in a small Jewish community in the South. It is a wonderful place, but I don't think many people are seeing my menorah in the window in my small subdivision. And yet, you fight the fights that are worth fighting. Yes, someone might drive by and attack us because of those menorahs. The thought occurred to me more than once, as my family lit our candles. And then I opened my plantation shutters wide and put my biggest menorah up front.

3. Now to the media. As expected, we hear a lot of left vs. right arguments about the rise of anti-Semitism, but I have hope that slowly but surely, people will understand that it comes from the extreme right and the extreme left. Jewish journalists have been an important voice in this discussion. Recent events have shaken them. Even some very liberal journalists, who have been critical of Chasidic Jews, have come to defend the Jewish people. Here are some thoughts from writers in the Jewish media. Prof. Liel Leibowitz in *Tablet Magazine* wrote,² “Nothing could be more toxic and counterproductive than this kind of politically motivated redescription of the wave of hate-fueled violence that is turning New York into Kishinev.” Avital Chizik-Goldschmidt wrote³ after a visit to Monsey: “But there is no way to hide. That is the realization dawning on us all. There is no way to hide, for good or for bad. We wear our religion on our sleeves. Is it starting to feel like a yellow star?” Batya Unger-Sargon, editor of *Forward*, described⁴ what many American Jews feel:

There's a poem Jews sing every evening after lighting Hanukkah candles. It's called “Maoz Tzur” — Rock of the Ages

— and was written during the Crusades, one of the many times when Jewish blood ran through the streets; its lines are laced with the tragedy and longing that typifies Jewish liturgy.

One chokes me up every time I sing it — eight nights every year: “Our salvation takes too long, and there is no end to the bad days.”

The words always called to mind Jews practicing their religion during some long-ago horror — the “bad days” of murdering Crusaders and marauding Cossacks, the bad days of pogroms, the bad days spent starving in ghettos and concentration camps. Wherever they were, Jews lit candles and sang this song, waiting, waiting for salvation. How fortunate are we to live in a time without such fear, I would think, tears creeping into my eyes and the words catching in my throat. The bad days are back. Orthodox Jews are living through a new age of pogroms. This week, as we celebrated the Festival of Lights, there were no fewer than 10 anti-Semitic attacks in the New York area alone. She then touches on the elephant in the room. The Chasidic elephant in the room. Over the course of the year, was this story — involving dozens of incidents — suppressed because they involved Chasidim?

It has resulted in a staggering, shameful silence when it comes to speaking out on behalf of the wave of pogroms against the Orthodox. For many people, it seems when they can't blame the other side of the political aisle, they would rather say nothing at all.

This is not acceptable. The Jewish community's most visible, vulnerable members need Americans to stand up and say “no more.” They need us to climb out of our trenches and find common ground to fight this ugly resurgence of anti-Jewish hatred.

We can only fight this fight together,

because it is a pox on all of our houses. It is only by remembering what unites us as Americans that we can help our fellow Jews and, as "Maoz Tzur" suggests, hasten the time of salvation.

4. The World Holocaust Forum recently took place in Jerusalem. Dozens of leaders from across the world came to mark the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. What was so significant about this forum? Many noted the wonderful progress of the Jewish people, who rebounded from the Holocaust and built a proud and flourishing nation that hosted 41 leaders in its capital.

But it is not just us, it is the rest of the world too. The world is making progress in correcting and atoning for what happened 75 years ago. Prof. Deborah Lipstadt again found the right words to describe what was going on: "No, We Aren't Seeing The Return Of Nazi Germany." She writes⁵ that since the murders in Monsey, Jersey City and Pittsburgh, more and more journalists are interviewing her and asking: "Is what we are seeing today akin to Germany in the 1930s?" This is also the discourse she hears on the Jewish street: that history repeats itself.

Her answer is unequivocal: There is no comparison. Fear and confusion cause us to mix up emotions and facts. She writes:

The contrast between the situation of German Jews of the Third Reich and today is best illustrated by a story I heard from a survivor at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. He came from a small town in which the local school was no longer a tolerable place for a Jewish child. His parents sent him to a Jewish boarding school in a

large city. On the night of Kristallnacht (November 1938), German government forces burned synagogues and ransacked Jewish shops. They beat up random Jews on the streets, deported thousands to concentration camps, and murdered close to a thousand.

On that night the teachers burst into the dormitory of the boarding school. They told the children to quickly run out of the building because it was being attacked. As the youngsters emerged onto the street, they wondered where to go. Instinctively, they decided to adhere to the advice parents have given their children for generations: when you are in trouble, look for the helpers. They said to one another: "Let's go to the policeman." They ran to the closest officer, fully expecting to be protected. Instead he sternly rebuffed them: "I don't help Jewish children."

Herein, lies the essence of the difference. During the Third Reich, the government was the very source of the antisemitism. Today, the situation is precisely the opposite in the vast majority of countries. When tragedy strikes political leaders are quick to condemn these acts. Leaders from all over the world gathered together to state unequivocally: an attack on the Jews of France is an attack on France, an attack on the Jews of Germany is an attack on Germany etc. It is true that the recent events need to be taken seriously. We can't ignore them and we need to deal with them. However, we also cannot allow our fears to distort history. The Jewish people have progressed and so has the world around it.

5. And what do the rabbis say? Each rabbi deals with anti-Semitism individually based on his community, his style and his perspective. There are avenues to deal with it on a spiritual level. Here is one example from the

field. A letter sent by our neighbor, Rabbi Aryeh Lebowitz, to his students and his community. I believe that this letter is relevant even to those who don't live in New York:

The messages I have received today, include:

"Do you think that by staying in the US we are akin to the Jew in Germany during hitler's rise to power?"

"recent events, including the one last night in Monsey, have shaken me... I have no idea what to say"

"How does a Jew respond to what we are living through?"

I don't have any answers, and I have all of the same questions. Only Hashem knows the historical importance of the times we are living in. We don't know if these events are a prelude ׀ to something much worse and more systemic, or if they will serve to awaken good and decent people who will work harder to educate against anti-semitism, and protect us.

Here are a few things that we all do know, and perhaps are worth reminding ourselves of.

1) *If you are struggling, there is a reasonable chance that your children are as well. Let them talk. Let them share their fears. Tell them that you love them. Tell them stories of good people. Tell them that we trust in Hashem to protect us.*

2) *As believing Jews, we know that while we put in reasonable השתדלות, and work to improve our security, the only security comes from Hashem. It is therefore incumbent upon us to draw closer to Hashem. This means more לימוד התורה, stronger תפלה, increased precision and energy in our fulfillment of mitzvos, greater acts of חסד, and more thinking about our fellow Jews. As everybody knows the daf yomi begins a new cycle*

on Sunday. DON'T WAIT UNTIL SUNDAY TO START! Start right now! Every day and every moment of limud hatorah is valuable.

3) The Jewish people belong in Eretz Yisrael and there is no doubt that our future is in Eretz Yisrael. That was true before any of these attacks and remains true after what ה"ע"ב was the last of these attacks. Please always remember this and realize that we are in galus. Fear should never be the primary motivation to make aliya, just as the terror attacks in Israel should not chase our brothers and sisters out of our land. We should each periodically assess whether it is the right time for our families. Do we have a strategy for success? Where are our children more likely to succeed emotionally and spiritually? Of course, as believing Jews we know that making aliya does not end the galus, and only the arrival of mashiach will accomplish that. We should each assess what is best for the spiritual development of our families and the Jewish people.

4) Daven for all of the families of the victims of anti-semitism. Daven for our own safety. Daven for the wisdom to make the right decisions for our families. There is nothing that we can accomplish without davening, and there is nothing that cannot be accomplished with davening. To this end, make a commitment to enhance tefilah. If you aren't always careful to daven in a Beis HaKnesses, make an extra effort to take advantage of the extra kedusha that comes with tefilah b'tzibur in a designated Beis HaKnesses. If you aren't

always careful to arrive at davening in a timely fashion, make an effort to do so. If you miss a tefilah every now and then, let's try not to miss.

5) The Jewish people, whatever they look like, are our brothers and sisters. We sometimes bicker. We frequently disagree. We ALWAYS love. Let's make an extra effort to avoid all lashon hara about our fellow Jews, all gratuitous insults or hurtful characterizations. Let's use our dinner tables to tell stories of greatness about Jews that are not the same as us. Chazal teach us of the terrible impact of שנאת חנם and the great benefit of אהבת ישראל. Let us shed tears for other Jews and show ourselves and our children that our love for our fellow Jews is stronger than ever.

Wishing everyone a lichtige Zos Chanukah and a time where the light of our torah will chase away all of the darkness that pervades so much of the world.

b'ahava rabba v'ahavas olam,
Aryeh Lebowitz

6. A few weeks ago, I was in Boca Raton, Florida. I met with Rabbi Efreim Goldberg, Senior Rabbi of the Boca Raton Synagogue who told me this:

Perhaps Hashem is not happy with the situation in America. Assimilation rates are alarmingly high. The ignorance, alienation, and disappearance of the Jewish people, all voluntary, without any persecution is our failure. This anti-Semitism is perhaps a wake-up call

for all of us. A reminder that we need to act. Let us not think that it is easy and comfortable here, life is perfect, that we no longer have any missions as Jews because we have reached complete redemption.

After the recent events, a student approached me and decided to wear a necklace with a Star of David. A student on campus here in Florida first decided to place a mezuzah on his door in the dorm to highlight to his peers that he is Jewish. We do not know why this is happening, but we must use what happens to make improvements in our lives. If there is anything we can take from this anti-Semitism, it is that it is a living reminder that we are Jews, and should be connected to our Judaism.

Endnotes

1. <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/we-cannot-avoid-hate-but-we-can-fight-it/>.
2. <https://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/296292/sitting-ducks>.
3. <https://forward.com/life/437398/when-terror-strikes-in-a-modern-day-shtetl/>.
4. <https://forward.com/opinion/437373/why-no-one-can-talk-about-the-attacks-against-orthodox-jews/>.
5. <https://forward.com/opinion/437485/no-we-arent-seeing-the-return-of-nazi-germany/>.



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