

May 24, 2018; 6:00pm.

Seattle City Hall.

“It’s [Israel is] a secular colonial state founded on the genocide of Palestinian people and it maintains its power through a system of apartheid...”

“It is ironic how much of a gas chamber has been made of Gaza.”

"Judaism has been twisted into a tool of oppression."

Four months ago, Seattle’s LGBTQ Commission, the Commission on People with DisAbilities, and a Seattle City Councilmember invited the community to — and I quote from the formal press release — “learn about and process the intricacies of Israeli-Palestinian relations.” The event’s panelists, three representatives of Queers Against Israeli Apartheid and Jewish Voice for Peace and one former co-chair of the Seattle LGBTQ Commission, shared an impassioned, biased understanding of those intricacies that pole vaulted across the line between legitimate criticism of Israeli governmental policies and statements that inflict harm on the entire Jewish community. Lest you think I have extracted sensational quotes from among reasonable discourse to begin this sermon, a full transcript of the program at City Hall will be available with my words online¹.

While the challenges manifest in this singular event are many — misuse of taxpayer’s money and the diminishment of the work of two important advisory commissions chief among them — they are also indicative of a larger problem. The line between legitimate (and I would argue necessary) critique Israeli policy and incitement against the broader Jewish community is becoming increasingly blurred, with harmful effects:

- Jewish communal alliances — with communities of color, with our interfaith partners, and others — are threatened when political sentiments become interposed with religious indictments.
- Individual relationships are challenged when un-nuanced generalizations and false equivalencies force us to choose between even shared sensibilities and family.
- And our very ability to live out the values of Prophetic Judaism, to pursue justice and bring God’s very presence closer to earth, is made more difficult when our seat at the table of progress is reassigned.

At the risk of being pedantic, I want to put a fine point on this last idea. Woe is not us. The American Jewish community is the most vibrant, free, successful Jewish community...perhaps in the history of the world. My argument is not that the form of antisemitism being espoused here poses existential threat to the State of Israel or to us. It doesn’t not. It does, however, disincentivize and damage the ability of the Jewish community to be moral actors during this increasingly immoral time in our nation’s history. More than weep with the families separated at America’s border or with refugees who are denied access to safe haven, more than rage against the campaign to silence the voices of vulnerable women who share details of their sexual assault, more than bemoan growing legislative threats to reproductive freedom across the country, we must translate our indignation into action. Standing idly by, shouting in our echo chambers, or reverting to the exclusively-Jewish philanthropic organizations of the past aren’t credible options when so much is at stake. We must be engaged with the world around us as Jews, with the people who share the majority of our values, and to do so we must

¹ <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1dyBg6NAkxrpXbk-IT4Sil-gRkL43ZhJk/view?usp=sharing>

increasingly develop tools to overcome the artificial barrier of exclusion this new form of antisemitism is placing in our way.

What are we to do when in a meeting with the great organizers of the Poor People's Campaign, working to undue systemic racism and economic inequality, when someone says "Jewish soldiers target Palestinian babies?" Some of you were in the room with me that evening. Or when attending an Interfaith Iftar, the evening meal after the Ramadan fast, in solidarity with Muslim friends facing a rise in Islamophobia and are told by a panelist that Israel can't exist as a matter of conscience? Even more of us shared that experience this year. What about when a colleague at work questions how you can belong to a religion that makes you an oppressor rather than an advocate for justice? Different congregants have called to ask the same question.

If we hope to maintain the relationships and alliances critical to bringing about the modern realization of our prophetic values while stemming this rising tide, if we hope to answer these questions, we must first understand the unholy confluence of antisemitism and Israel delegitimization, recognize where the line of legitimate criticism actually is — no matter how painful, and know how to thoughtfully respond when that line is knowingly or unwittingly crossed.

Harvard Psychology Professor Steven Pinker, in his new book *Enlightenment Now*, writes that "the world has made spectacular progress in every single measure of human well-being²." Yet the Jewish community knows well that this progress is far from linear: "Real historical curves have wiggles, upticks, spikes, and sometimes sickening lurches³"...and it certainly feels like we are in the midst of one right now. Nationalistic sentiments are increasing throughout the world, which is historically bad for the Jews. The rise of fringe leaders and fringe parties brings all of the baggage of fringe ideologies with them, among them the oldest and most pernicious. Unsurprisingly, then, antisemitic sentiment and actions are on the rise both abroad and right here at home. The Anti-Defamation League reports that in 2017, antisemitic incidents in the United States surged nearly 60 percent⁴. This increase was exemplified, and best publicized, by last year's white-supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. This resurgence of previously marginalized ideology and overt display of hate opened our eyes; it gave us but a small taste of what Jews in France, Hungary, and other increasingly nationalist countries experience; and it reminded us that we may chose to tune out the background muzak of antisemitism but that it remains ubiquitous. Antisemitic sentiment and actions the world over are increasing...

...at the same time international support for a secure Jewish homeland is eroding⁵. Changing internal demographics on the European continent, frustration the world over with settlements and a century-old conflict that has yet to be resolved, and the evolving discourse of intersectionality here at home are pushing many beyond legitimate criticism of Israeli policy and into Israel delegitimization and subversive calls for Israel's removal from the community of nations. Make no mistake — I am not suggesting Israel shouldn't be held to the same exacting standards of human rights and equality as every other country. The very opposite — and I

² Steven Pinker: *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress*. Page 52.

³ Ibid, 42.

⁴ <https://www.adl.org/resources/reports/2017-audit-of-anti-semitic-incidents>

⁵ <http://www.jewishpublicaffairs.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/10/2015/09/The-20X-Question-Strategic-Framework-vs-DLG-and-BDS-By-Reut-Group-and-ADL.pdf>

suspect many here today believe me too quick to chastise Israel when it repeatedly comes up short of my ideals. What I am saying is that we are witnessing the synergistic confluence of:

- The steady, ever-present drumbeat of antisemitic sentiment from the far-right, and
- The normalization of anti-Israel rhetoric on the far-left.

The result is an increasingly blurred line between legitimate criticism of Israeli governmental policy and antisemitism.

In 2016, The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance — comprised of some 31 countries including the United States — adopted a consensus working definition of antisemitism to help clarify that blurry line⁶. While the definition itself is somewhat amorphous: “Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews;” the accompanying examples are particular insightful:

- “Making mendacious, dehumanizing, demonizing, or stereotypical allegations about Jews as such or the power of Jews as a collective”
- “Denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g., by claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavor.”
- “Drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis.”

These examples may seem obvious to us, but as the events at Seattle City Hall in May illustrated, they cannot be taken for granted. This in a particularly liberal corner of the safest, most free Jewish community in the world! My hope in making the you, the choir, aware of this definition is not to stifle legitimate criticism but to enlist your help in recognizing and labeling transgressive behaviors and statements as beyond the pale of normative discourse. I optimistically believe that many are crossing this blurry line inadvertently, that they are blinded by their own emotional reactions and don't realize the consequences to Jewish communal safety and inclusion, and that together we can begin to stem this tide.

So what it you can do? When you find yourself on the receiving end of these difficult statements or confronting barriers of antisemitic exclusion based on your religious beliefs, you might begin by expressing your feelings: “That feels wrong to me;” or “I'm feeling icky about this conversation.” Try gently pointing out why the words, not the people with whom you are speaking, are problematic: “There is actually tremendous diversity of opinion in the Jewish community and among Israelis— have you ever heard the expression two Jews, three opinions;” or “I think you are conflating Judaism, a religion, and the actions of politicians.” Label that a line has been crossed: “It feels like we have crossed over from criticizing a foreign government to criticizing my whole people;” or “I think comparing Jews to Nazis is commonly recognized as being hurtful and harmful to the Jewish community.”

And, most importantly of all, don't grow silent. Don't allow others to derail your sacred obligations. Refusing to engage in these difficult conversations allows this growing expression of antisemitism to fester at the same time it pushes us away from the very coalitions we need to live out our prophetic values. The stakes are too great, the challenges faced too large to do it alone. As Jews, we make up 2/10ths of 1% of the world's population. To do the important social justice work of our time, we must ensure our seat at the table by standing up to antisemitism in all of its forms, whether propagated by friends, partners, or even elected officials.

⁶ https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/sites/default/files/press_release_document_antisemitism.pdf

We stand here on Yom Kippur 5779 during an auspicious time. As Steven Pinker says “the world has made spectacular progress in every single measure of human well-being.” Yet we are also living through a sickening lurch and uptick in global antisemitism. Combine this steady drumbeat with increasing anti-Israel fervor and the line between legitimate criticism and discourse that incites against the entire Jewish community becomes increasingly blurred. We must no longer sidestep these difficult conversations, ceding the space to the loudest, most polarizing voices. Express your gut reaction. Label when a line has been crossed. Help others in your orbit to understand the harmful effects of their divisive rhetoric. Nothing less than our ability to realize our highest values in this troubled world is at stake.

Shanah Tovah.