

Antisemitism is Tough, But Jews are Tougher

Erev Rosh HaShana 5786

One of my favorite visual artists is an Argentinian Jew in Los Angeles named Alex Woz, known often by his brand name and online handle, Woz_art. On his website, Woz states openly that it was antisemitism that led him to make art. It is Jew hatred and his experience of it, combined with his self-conception as a Jewish artist, that drive him on his mission. In his words, Woz seeks “to empower the Jewish community to retake control of our own narrative, and to kindle a healthy relationship between ourselves and our identity.” Woz notes something that I, myself, think about often—that though our people have carved out small niches of recognition and representation in our society, they are based in shallow and often self-deprecating expressions. We encourage people to laugh

at us with the faint hope that they will ultimately laugh with us.

We show them only a small part of who we are, something silly or strange, and ask them to accept it as a non-threatening placeholder for a robust identity. As a response to this one-dimensional narrative, Woz's prints and apparel break these stereotypes through his weaving together of Jewish imagery and concepts from across the Jewish world and story.

The core belief behind Woz' art can be summed up by the piece that has hung in my home for the last few years. The piece is relatively simple- a black background makes the collage pieces in the foreground pop in color and meaning! In the top left corner, there is a small Chai, meaning life. In the top right is a photograph of two elderly and bearded Jewish men engaged in conversation. In the upper middle

portion of the print is a small globe, upon which the words “Am Yisrael Chai” are printed. This small world is set between the protective wings of a dove. The sides of the piece are emblazoned with two golden Jewish stars descending outward. The stars flank a simple but powerful mantra in blazing orange and yellow overlaid text: Antisemitism is tough, but Jews are tougher.

Before I continue, I want you to know that, from the bottom of my heart, I don't want to talk to you about this tonight. This is Erev Rosh Hashanah. This should be a sermon about the infinite potential stored in the beginning of a brand-new year. On a night like this, on my first Rosh Hashanah as a rabbi, I would much rather stand here and speak to you about Tikkun Olam or social justice, or about how we cultivate a love for Jewish living and learning. I want to convey lessons

about tradition, and the future, and unbridled hope. I want to speak about these topics because the values contained within them are about who we are and what we can be. Conversely, talking about antisemitism, in so many ways, requires us to speak about what we are not. It also requires us to give our precious time and energy to people and ideas that simply do not deserve it. And yet, I cannot ignore the moment in which we live. But I can still make this about us. I will not squander this opportunity to remind you of the truth on my Woz_Art print: Antisemitism is tough, but Jews are tougher.

Lately, the toughness comes in all forms and from all fronts, and we must learn to recognize it for what it is. We cannot afford to be confused. Antisemitism is not a problem exclusive to the political left or right. It neither silos itself among the ignorant and uneducated nor

among the highly educated in high society. Its range of expression is not limited to supernatural conspiracy theories or pseudo-academic scholarship. There is no singular source, and its expressions range from nearly imperceptible microaggressions to acts of deadly violence. Yet despite the extreme range in the expression of antisemitism, in all of its iterations there are two common inclinations. The first is that antisemitism attempts to appear reasonable. The second is that it attempts to put the blame on its targets. For the antisemite, hatred of Jews is not only logical, but our fault. The relationship between these beliefs is circular and they reinforce each other. But we, within ourselves and for ourselves must internalize that Antisemitism is NOT logical and it is NOT your fault.

I will admit to you that, even though I know the truth about this hatred, I'm worried. I'm worried that not enough of us believe it anymore. I am worried that we have become so fatigued over the last 8 years, from Charlottesville, the tree of life synagogue, covid, January 6th, October 7th, and this constant environment of toxic polarization and algorithmic amplification, that we have begun to internalize the lie. I'm worried because I've heard some of us say it.

Recently, the lie has come in the form of blaming Israel and the Netanyahu government and their prosecution of the war in Gaza for the global rise in antisemitism. I will level with you, I can understand why it is tempting to believe this. For almost two years, we have watched the war triggered by the attacks of October 7th turn a once beautiful Gaza into a place of smoke and ashes. We have seen pictures

and read news articles (some real and some fabricated) that have painted a picture of wanton violence and inhumane disregard for the sanctity of life. We have heard the world cry out for the plight of the Gazans and against the so-called evil intention of the Israelis. We have been told that if we, the Jews of the world, experience any hatred it is only a backlash from Israel dragging our Judaism through the mud. It's overwhelming, and honestly, it is easier to believe it because it would at least give us a solution. If we could just stop Israel or convince the rest of the world that we aren't connected to it, they would leave us alone....but this belief is wrong. Israel and Israel's leaders are not the cause of antisemitism or its recent surge. The root cause of antisemitism, *every time*, is the antisemite. It is the person who would take events and stories, the true ones and especially the false, and use

them to fabricate a web of hatred that is meant to ensnare and ultimately eliminate an entire people, no matter where they might be found.

It is a hard web to break out of for some of us. I have heard many Jews, in my personal life, on the internet in viral videos, on college campuses, and in awards show acceptance speeches, who believe that Israel, Netanyahu, and his cronies actively cause antisemitism. I cannot say for certain what it is that brings them to that conclusion.

Sometimes I think it is simply an unfortunate circumstance of fear, which is a difficult emotion from which to act rationally. Sometimes it seems to be that, because they reject what they see in Gaza as against their values, they assume that what Israel does reflects its Jewish values and that therefore the State is a perversion of their own Judaism. Other

times, it seems to be an attempt at self-preservation; perhaps by rejecting and identifying the bad Jews, one might be able to redirect the hatred away from themselves. Ultimately, many have unfortunately internalized the logic of the antisemites themselves: Israel is the Jewish state, so if they do something bad it reflects on all Jews, and so it would be reasonable to hate them if Israel does bad things.

This last and perhaps most fundamental piece of today's faulty antisemitic logic breaks down immediately, however, if you consider almost any other contemporary conflict. For example, the Russian war on Ukrainian sovereignty that has now been going on since February of 2022 has killed thousands of civilians and amassed hundreds of thousands of military casualties. While Russia continues to suffer several significant consequences as a nation-state, the world has not

witnessed a massive movement against Russian people. Since 2014, China has been engaged in a state-sponsored campaign that has detained over a million Uyghur muslims. Yet, we have not seen a global protest movement designed to defend Uyghurs or demonize china, nor have we seen an over 800% increase in anti-Chinese hate incidents over the last decade.

What is truly baffling to me, is that I know that if we *had* seen a hate movement arise out of either of these tragic situations, we would not have found them either reasonable or logical. We would, as all decent people should, decry any attempt to assign blame for a government onto its citizens or extended ethnic diaspora. I know that, especially given our community's historical and continuous involvement

in the fight for civil rights and gender equality, we would actively contest *any* attempt to make *any* hatred seem warranted.

So why do we allow others to do that very same thing to us?

According to the ADL we actually saw, and perhaps personally experienced, an 893% percent increase in antisemitic incidents in the United States between 2015 and 2024. And yet, since October 8th, 2023, we have heard voices say that it is Israel that has caused so many in the world to hate Jews, and that we are guilty by association unless we offer total condemnation of the Jewish state. It is time for us to let go of this deeply ahistorical concept. Antisemitism reared its head and was a highly effective tool of oppression for literal millennia before the state of Israel existed. And though I hope to defeat it entirely, I find it

more productive to move forward with the understanding that, at least for now, antisemitism will continue to exist.

So what are we going to do? How do we move forward? What do we do about this scourge in our midst? In moments like this, we certainly cannot disengage with the rest of the world. It would be irresponsible and unrealistic to retreat from our robust lives as Americans. However, our two best solutions for the moment both involve turning inward: we must turn inward towards our leaders, and we must turn inward towards each other.

Our community, here at Temple and broadly in the wider Jewish world, is not short for great leaders. I am fortunate to be only one member of an incredible clergy team and one member of a first-rate team of educators. I know that I speak for all of us when I say that first

and foremost, we are here for you. When the weight of all the rhetoric and rage gets too heavy, when you feel like seeing one more post is enough to make you turn your iphone into a flip phone, you can come to us. We are here to help you carry that weight.

This is also my offer to come to you. I will come to your schools, your offices, your scout troops, and your ski clubs. Wherever there is a need to address antisemitism, whether for awareness or in response, I want to be there with you, I want to bolster you, and I want to advocate for you. As one of your rabbis, I'll have your back. Together we can model what it means for us to be a part of a community that cares and stands up for one another when we are vulnerable. That's who we really are, and I believe we can still show that to the world. And I know that we can show that each other.

In times like these, demonstrating our commitment to one another and to our tradition is a must. We have to be together. We have to come here. Our community and the Jewish life we provide is the salve for our pain and the antibody we need to inoculate us against the infection of self-doubt and self-hatred. Please, for all our sakes, come and receive it.

The beautiful thing about the medicine that is Judaism is that it comes in so many forms. You could take it in the form of Jewish learning every Saturday at our Torah study in Seattle. You could join us for our Wrestling with the Moment series or learn from any of the brilliant scholars and lecturers whom we engage.

You could take it as prayer on holidays and on Friday nights or Saturday morning for shabbat. We celebrate a new student becoming a

bar or bat or brit mitzvah almost every weekend of the year. Imagine showing our 7th graders and their friends and families what it means to show up for shabbat and for each other. My apologies in advance to our students for suggesting it, but we can really pack the house!

You could take the medicine of Judaism in the form of supportive and caring communities. Join our brotherhood or our sisterhood. If you're in your 20's and 30's, come be a part of the Tribe! You could connect with any of our Tikkun Olam efforts; participate in acts of service through our partnership with FAME or literally repair part of our physical world by joining our environmental cleanups at Angle Lake.

You can help us feed the increasing number of hungry people this high holiday season and bring canned goods and non-perishables here on Yom Kippur for the JFS Food bank. The opportunities to be who we are

and to be a part of Us are endless. We just need you, and I feel deeply that, especially now, you need us.

The Hebrew word for synagogue is *Beit Kneset*. Literally, an assembly house. For almost 2000 years since the destruction the Second Temple in Jerusalem, our people have gathered in these places in good times and in bad times. Then, as now, they came to the synagogue to learn, to pray, to lean on each other, and to argue *l'shem shamayim*- for the sake of heaven. The *Beit Kneset* provides a container for the presence of community that is empowered by mutual responsibility and a shared destiny. It is this empowerment that will guide us through this moment.

This new year, like so many in our history, may come to be hard for us. But maybe, there could also be beauty. Let this new year of 5786

be one which we remember for the resilience of our people. Let us assemble and let us serve and let us repair. Let us show the world what it means when we *say kol yisrael aravim zeh ba zeh*, that all of Israel, all Jews, are responsible for one another. Let us be the fullest expression of who we *know* we are.

And when it seems dark, let us remember the eternal light of God and of the Jewish people. Let it illuminate us and remind us of the truth emblazoned on my wall and in my heart: Antisemitism is tough, but Jews are tougher. May this be a good year and a sweet year. May you all be tough. And may you all be safe. Shana Tova.