

**I'M OPTIMISTIC!  
ANTISEMITISM, ANTI-ZIONISM  
AND THE SHAPING OF MODERN JEWISH IDENTITY  
Kol Nidre / Yom Kippur Evening  
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*(I dedicate this sermon to the memory of my teacher, friend and colleague Professor Clark Williamson, a scholar committed to confronting antisemitism and eliminating anti-Judaism from the teachings of the church. Clark Williamson died on June 26 at the age of 85. His memory lives on with the disciples he raised and in the example he modeled.)*

A group of elderly Jews gather in a cafe each morning. They drink coffee and sit for hours discussing the state of the world. Their conversations get depressing. One day, one of the men startles his friends: "You know what? he says – I am an optimist!" The others are shocked. But one of them notices his somber face and says: "If you are an optimist, how come you look so worried?" He responds: "So, you think it's easy to be an optimist!?"

We are living through unprecedented times. But I want to be an optimist. The arc of Jewish history bends in the direction of hope.

If "racism" is America's original sin, "antisemitism" is the original sin of western civilization. Both are endemic and systemic; they are viruses that resurge and mutate with variant expressions and force.

Anti-Judaism began as religious prejudice that informed nascent Christianity, and later, Islam. Anti-Judaism evolved from religious hatred to racial hatred, culminating in the lethal antisemitism of Nazi Ideology. More recently, antisemitism has mutated into anti-Zionism, relegating Israel to a pariah state among the family of nations.

Someone suggested that had Descartes been Jewish, he would have proclaimed: "I worry, therefore I am". You all remember the quintessential old Jewish telegram: "Start worrying; details to follow".

But we cannot build an identity based on worrying, on the attitudes of others towards us. Despite rising antisemitism and anti-Zionism, we cannot affirm who we are by being "anti-anti"-Semites, or "anti-anti"-Zionists. What is it that we stand "For"? How do we shape and communicate a positive, hopeful, joyful, authentic Jewish identity to our sons and daughters?

Deborah Lipstadt, the Administration's newly appointed Ambassador to Combat Antisemitism, reminds us that antisemitism is adaptable and thrives in any hospitable environment: "...When it comes to antisemitism, the right and the left...find common ground." Racial conflict in America has afforded both the right and the left opportunities to seize on anti-Jewish sentiment.

After the Holocaust, the Western world felt embarrassed by antisemitism's lethal outcome. The birth of Israel, through edict of the United Nations, helped to assuage the world's guilty conscience. But as Israel prospered and defeated Arab aggressions, as American Jews attained economic security,

social acceptance, and political influence, Jews and Israel began to lose their “victim” status. Palestinians have emerged as the new victims and Israel’s image as a beleaguered nation has faded. Despite the vicious actions of Hamas and Hizbollah, Israel is portrayed by many in the left as the aggressor, a symbol of Western imperialism and colonialism.

Israel, like all other countries, can certainly be faulted for many political and social inequities, but the malicious charge that Israel is an “apartheid” state is intent on casting Israel as a racist and colonialist society. This pernicious accusation has been embraced by campus activists and social justice movements on the far left in promoting the BDS agenda.

Yet, Israel is a place where Jews and Arabs, including Palestinians, receive equal excellent care at Hadassah and hospitals across the country; where Jewish and Arab students do groundbreaking university research jointly; where Arab citizens can sit as Justices on the Supreme Court, serve in the army and in the foreign diplomatic corps; where an Arab party is integral to Israel’s new governing coalition; where Ibtisam Marana-Menuhin, an Arab-Israeli filmmaker and politician who is married to an Israeli Jew, serves as a member of the Keneset for the Labor party; where a Jew can be a member of the Joint List Arab party; where one of the best high schools in Israel is in a Druze village and was led by an Arab educator, Ali Salalha, who is now a member of the Keneset for the progressive Meretz party. Where there are Arab-Israeli beauty queens, prominent literary figures, and leading pop singers.

Have you heard of the Jerusalem Youth Chorus? It is a music and dialogue program for Israeli and Palestinian youth from East and West Jerusalem to grow together in dialogue and song. Truth is, the only country in the Middle East where Arab citizens can participate fully in a real and contentious democracy, is Israel.

Regrettably the Palestinian-Israeli conflict has been conflated by many with American racial politics, the relationship of White supremacy vs. Blacks and peoples of color in our country. This inflammatory mindset is driving much of current anti-Semitic and anti-Israel sentiment. For the far right we are not white or Christian enough. For the far left, we are not perceived as people of color or regarded as victims enough.

Significant numbers of Americans Jews have bought into this false equation and feel estranged from Israel. Many young Jews no longer regard “peoplehood” as a core component of their Jewish identity, and while standing for other oppressed and marginalized peoples of the world, have no problem distancing themselves from Israel. Many even stand on synagogue pulpits self-righteously proclaiming a Judaism stripped of unsavory “ethnocentric” and “colonialist” baggage.

Jean Paul Sartre, writing after the end of World War II, poignantly observed that “If the Jew did not exist, the anti-Semite would invent him”. History and literature document that there is antisemitism even where there are no Jews. In her new book, *People Love Dead Jews*, Dara Horn recounts harrowing stories that highlight the world’s guilt and fascination with the Holocaust and dead Jews. Evidently, some prefer their Jews as victims than as victors.

The late Amos Oz, distinguished Israeli novelist and intellectual, recalled his father's observation that prior to the Holocaust, Europeans would say: "Jews, go to Palestine." In our time, the call is: "Jews, out of Palestine." The message to Jews, said Oz: "Don't be here and don't be there. That is, don't be."

As the parent religion of both Christianity and Islam, Judaism has borne the brunt of the criticism and rejection of its daughter faiths. When all else fails, blame Mom. In correspondence with our good friend, Rabbi Richard Hirsh, Sandy and I have concurred, with regret, that when feminist theology surfaced in the 70's, Christians blamed the Jews for patriarchy. The environmentalist movement blames the "Old Testament" for climate abuse. Who is responsible for slavery? Well, the Jews? For Homophobia? Again, the "Old Testament" (Leviticus 18). Colonialism is just the latest evil for which Jews are blamed. "Jewish guilt" has taken on a whole new meaning.

So, is there room for optimism? Optimism is not for the shortsighted. That's messianism; utopianism. I am talking about trust and hope in humanity's better nature; I'm talking about the wisdom of our heritage and the genius of the Jewish people to grow and prosper. I am talking about our capacity to contribute to and benefit from the best of the American democratic tradition, strong in its freedoms, generous in its commitment to diversity and equality. I have the same hopes for a secure, democratic, and pluralistic State of Israel.

It is time for American Jews to stop regarding ourselves as apologists or surrogates for Israel. Israel's existence does not need to be constantly justified. Israel is an independent, self-critical democratic nation in a region that is still a sea-bed of autocracy.

Israel's Declaration of Independence reads: "In the land of Israel, the Jewish people was born. In this land their spiritual, religious, and national character was shaped." Jews are indigenous to the land. The modern state of Israel is the fulfillment of a historic birthright and national aspiration. But, there were and are others also living in the land. So, Israel's Declaration of Independence further states: "The state of Israel will devote itself to develop the land for the good of all its inhabitants." Israel should always strive to be true to its founding vision. The prophetic promise of liberty, justice and peace should be the inheritance of all, Israelis, Palestinians, Jews, Muslims and Christians alike.

Israel is both a refuge and a dream; a complex and challenging political reality. Israel's future as a Jewish state requires it to make important short term sacrifices for the sake of long term benefits. While Israel's sovereignty and security are non-negotiable, Israel serves herself and Jews around the world best as it labors to normalize coexistence with its Arab citizens and peace with its Palestinian neighbors. Through the Abrahamic accords, it has begun to do so with nations once deemed enemies. Occupation and increased settlements are not the answer.

Even as Israel labors to make peace with its Palestinian neighbors and to assure the legal and socio-economic equality of its Arab citizens, it also needs to normalize its relationship with diaspora Jewry. The stranglehold of ultra-orthodoxy is not only choking of Israeli citizens, but is dismissive and insulting of Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist Jews in Israel and the diaspora. The abuse hurled at non-Orthodox egalitarian services at the Western Wall – the Kotel – is moral violence.

Israel takes pride in the victory of Olympic gold medalist Artem Dolgopyat, yet, he cannot marry Jewishly in the state of Israel because his mother is not Jewish. Such archaic understandings of Jewish religion, and civil rights are inexcusable in a democratic state.

We should never minimize the significance of antisemitism and anti-Zionism, but they should not paralyze nor define us. Rather, they should energize us to live fuller, more informed and engaged Jewish lives. We need to cultivate a Jewish identity that is not defensive. We need an informed, genuine, wholesome response to the challenges of living in a society that is becoming more and more divided and divisive, more interested in “ice-cream” simple solutions than in the complexity and nuance of real living. We need to own, celebrate, and proclaim a Judaism that is affirmative of individual rights while, at the same time, grounded in the ethics of group responsibility, what Mordecai Kaplan called, “The Religion of Ethical Nationhood.”

And so, we join our country’s struggle against racism and climate change because we are Jews; because our tradition demands it. We need to accept criticism and be willing to be self-critical. If we somehow thought that we were not all in the same boat, the coronavirus has taught us otherwise. Hatred is as effective a tool as the virus for drilling a hole in the boat. Both can destroy us as a people, a democracy and a world.

One of the most misunderstood passages in the Bible is the oft-quoted: “Yea do I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil”. This verse from Ps. 23, has nothing to do with “death.” The mistaken translation goes back to the 17<sup>th</sup> Century King James Bible. The Hebrew means: “Yea though I walk through a valley of deep darkness...” It is not about the valley of death; it is about life and its difficulties, struggles, and adversities. We all face illness, conflict, loss, emotional and spiritual pain. Collectively we deal with antisemitism, division, and a world-wide pandemic. Psalm 23 is not about death; it is about hope. Hope does not guarantee that all will turn out right. It means that even if everything is not the way we want it, we can still walk through the valley of darkness with the support of others, with the guidance of science, with the wisdom of faith. David Ben Gurion, the inveterate pragmatist, said: “...[I]n order to be a realist, you must believe in miracles.”

At a difficult time, the Tzaddik, Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav, would teach his disciples: “Friends, do not despair. When a difficult time is upon us, joy must fill the air. Our hope is never lost”.

In 2012, Elie Wiesel confessed to a college graduating class that after World War II he was pessimistic. “...[T]he world will never learn...,” he lamented. “Otherwise, how is one to explain that ... there is still racism in the world?” ... How is one to explain that there is still ... anti-Semitism in the world? ...If Auschwitz [has not] cured the world of hatred, what will...?”

Still, Wiesel counselled the students: “Despair is never a solution. ....hatred is never an option.” He said: “Hope is not a gift...from God to us; hope is a gift, an offering, that ... we human beings ... give to one another.”

Let this be the gift we give each other on this New Year.

I’m optimistic!