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We Will Outlive Them - Antisemitism in Modern America

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English 112

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October 26th, 2018 was, for all intents and purposes, a perfectly normal Friday. That night I drove to my synagogue for weekly Shabbat services, schmoozed with my fellow congregants, and said my goodbyes. The next day, I awoke to a chilling headline declaring that 11 people had lost their lives in a synagogue shooting in Pittsburgh that very morning. For anyone who had previously doubted whether antisemitism was a real threat in modern America, there were now 11 more reasons to say otherwise. While much of the world was shocked that such an atrocity could occur, in America of all places, Jewish communities like my own were simply faced with confirmation of a fact we have long known; antisemitism is still alive and well and is on the rise. Only by understanding the nature of modern antisemitism and by actively choosing to show solidarity can this new yet incredibly old hatred be addressed, and perhaps, one day, extinguished forever.

According to the most recent public FBI hate crime statistics from 2019, Jews make up around 60.2% of religiously motivated hate crimes in the U.S., despite only accounting for around 2% of the total U.S. population (Sheskin & Harriet, 2019; U.S. Department of Justice [DOJ], 2019). Only two years prior, that figure was 58.1%, and it was 54.4% the year before that (DOJ, 2019). This massive overrepresentation and upward trend in hate crime statistics is symptomatic of a broader societal trend of growing antisemitism, one which is only becoming more widespread. After all, these statistics only represent those who openly act on their antisemitic beliefs. How many more still hold these beliefs, yet do not act on them? And how many of them are just waiting for the right opportunity? But more importantly, what are Jews supposed to do to feel safe? Since 2018, my own synagogue has worked especially closely with the police to ensure our safety, an uncomfortable thing for some, especially Jews of color, for whom the police can feel like an all-too-recent reminder of the racial unrest which still permeates

our country. Yet even with these extra precautions, my somewhat small congregation has been the target of both phone harassment, and even bomb threats. For Jews across Virginia, and indeed America, it seems to be less of a question of if, but a question of when one of our own synagogues will be in the headlines, and our own names will be added to the ancient and ever-growing list of Jewish women, men, and children murdered in the name of baseless hatred. To Jews in America, simply surviving is feeling more and more like a miracle. For anyone who has ever expressed the sentiment “never again”, the writing is on the wall, and the time to act is now.

The key to understanding how to properly address antisemitism and antisemites themselves, is to understand how someone could come to believe in antisemitic conspiracies in the first place. Sincerely held beliefs rarely generate in a vacuum, after all. In a study conducted on the potential sources of modern antisemitism, psychology professors Miroslaw Kofta, Wiktor Soral, and Michal Bilewicz of the University of Warsaw concluded that there is a correlation between feelings of “political powerlessness” and belief in antisemitic conspiracies (2020). In other words, when people feel like they don’t have control of their political future, they are more likely to conclude that Jews are somehow responsible. But why Jews?

There is an unfortunate and often-unintended result of leaving such a question open-ended, or even unaddressed, when discussing antisemitism, in that answers from both “sides” are readily available online (Teter, 2020). In his book *Anti-Semite and Jew*, philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (1948) answers this question with a story about a French man who fails his teaching examination and blames his Jewish co-candidates for taking his rightful place, despite the fact that he had openly admitted to never having studied for the examination in the first place (pp. 12-13). Sartre (1948) notes how this man did not blame Norman or Breton co-candidates,

but specifically Jews, indicating that the man must have had a pre-existing hatred of Jewish people which was seemingly confirmed to him by the Jewish co-candidates' very existence in relationship to his failed examination attempt (pp. 12-13). To the outside observer, there is simply no evidence that the man failed due to his co-candidates' Jewishness; in fact, it seems rather more likely that he failed due to his laziness. Sartre concludes that "far from experience producing his idea of the Jew, it was the latter which explained his experience. If the Jew did not exist, the anti-Semite would invent him" (p. 13). This concept of self-affirming antisemitism is true on a broader scale as well.

The enduring perception of Jewish control of money and political power is one without any proof whatsoever; this supposed cabal or group of international Jewry controlling the world simply does not exist. Yet, there are still antisemitic people. To antisemites today, it is the lack of political control which confirms the existence of 'the Jew', as they understand him; it is this idea of 'the Jew' which 'explains their experience' (Kofta et al., 2020; Sartre, 1948). To most, this assumption seems backwards, surely a logical explanation would require the existence of a Jewish cabal for it to follow that this cabal could be responsible for a lack of political control. For this, as well, Sartre has an explanation. He argues that antisemitism is not an opinion or a logical way of thinking, but a passion; it is not rooted in logic, but emotion (Sartre, 1948, pp. 10-11). The problem with arguing against one's emotion, is that logical discourse, facts, and figures do not persuade unless they can support their argument. Antisemites do not want to be persuaded, in fact. As with any passion, there is a certain enjoyment they procure from hating Jews and shifting the blame (Sartre, 1948, pp. 18-19). Any discourse antisemites do engage in, is often in bad faith - a way to "intimidate and disconcert" their intended targets (Sartre, 1948, p.

20). As a result, any engagement with antisemites, however well-intentioned, is not only futile, but potentially giving them a voice and platform.

If engaging in discourse with antisemites is ultimately fruitless, then alternatives must be found to address antisemitism. Unfortunately, here is where the consensus ends, and political opining begins in too many discussions on the topic. In her book *How to Fight Anti-Semitism*, Bari Weiss (2019) offers many insightful solutions which can be implemented in the struggle against antisemitism, including inter-community solidarity as well as support of Israel against double standards (pp. 183-193). However, her book has been criticized for raising a false equivalence between antisemitism on the left and antisemitism on the right (Guyer, 2019). In terms of immediate danger, the antisemitism present in the growing strains of white nationalism in America can feel like a far more pressing issue than insinuations of dual loyalty from prominent Democratic members of Congress. But focusing the argument on which side is more dangerous amounts to exactly nothing in actually implementing solutions. In fact, it only serves to divide and divest Jews and their allies of the solidarity which is absolutely critical in presenting a united front against antisemitism.

Sadly, this is a division becoming more prominent as issues like support of Israel and BDS are being weaponized to drive a wedge between oppressed communities. Even in supposedly inclusive spaces in college campuses, Jews are often excluded from efforts to reach out to allies due to perceived “whiteness”, with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict serving as a “litmus test” for social justice orthodoxy (Farber, 2019). In truth, depriving Jews of allies is every bit as dangerous as targeting Jews outright, in that the former aids the latter. Including Jewish voices and valuing Jewish lives regardless of politics is the only way for the average person to meaningfully contribute to the safety of the Jewish people. Of course, solidarity works

both ways, and it is equally important for Jews to lift up marginalized voices both within and outside of the Jewish community.

In a letter to the Hebrew Congregation of Newport, Rhode Island, George Washington (1790) expressed his well wishes to the Jewish people of the country, quoting the book of Micah and writing: “May the Children of the Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other Inhabitants; while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and figtree, and there shall be none to make him afraid” (para. 3). We are afraid, but we need not be alone.

This essay began with a story about an unspeakable tragedy, the way so many discussions on Jewish issues have since time immemorial, but there is another part to that story. The next time my congregation gathered for Shabbat, our sanctuary was full of Christian, Muslim, Atheist, and Unitarian supporters all together. These were people who had strong disagreements on everything from theology to politics, but there they were supporting us when we felt our most vulnerable. It is truly impossible to fully express the feeling of community that was present in that sanctuary because of those supporters or the immense gratitude my community felt for their presence. In that moment, we were a united community regardless of faith, race, ethnicity, or politics and the message was clear. Survival is more than just living through a tragedy, it is living despite a tragedy, and the Jewish people have lived through more than their share. It has always been the way of racists, antisemites, and fascists to divide and alienate their targets, but by standing together and supporting one another, we will outlive them.

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