

Antisemitism and Our American Democracy

Yom Kippur, 5786

By Rabbi Josh Jacobs-Velde

I'd like to speak with you this morning about antisemitism. We have all found ourselves in this new world where antisemitism has become part of our lives in a way few of us could have imagined not so many years ago.

What I want to say to you is not in any way comprehensive in addressing the nature of contemporary antisemitism. Many of you may feel like there are important things I left out. You are right. But my goal is to share several key points that I think are important to make sense of the complex firehose that is contemporary antisemitism, but I don't want to speak to you for an hour.

First, let's talk a little Torah. It's not an easy thing to come up with Torah related to antisemitism, but I tried to come through for you.

In the Haggadah there are three words that come in the Magid section: *arami oved avi*. There's at least two very different ways you could understand these words. One is: "my father was a wandering Aramaean."¹ And here we get one very important element of Jewish existential reality, one that many of us feel in our kishkes – that in poet Marge Piercy's beautiful words, "we Jews are born of wanderers."² So many of our commitments to immigrants, to the stranger, to the undocumented, stem from the orientation represented by this understanding of these words, often reflected in our own family histories. These words originally come from Deuteronomy (26:5) where they are the first words that the ancient Israelite was to say when they presented their first fruits to the priest. This

¹ I am indebted to Rabbi Lindsey Danziger for this Torah connection.

² Maggid, by Marge Piercy. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/57595/maggid>

reading – that my father was a wandering Aramaean – is probably what the Torah meant.

But the authors of the Haggadah have a completely different way to read these three words: an Aramaean (i.e. Jacob's uncle Lavan) sought to destroy my father. And so from here we get this other existential orientation of Jewish life, that "they" are always trying to kill us. Three words that *simultaneously* yield two totally different approaches to being Jewish: We are wanderers/They tried to kill us.

Antisemitism can very understandably put us in this place of fear, that there are continually malevolent forces out to get us. And it's important to acknowledge that antisemitism is real. In just this past year, we seen horrific attacks like in Boulder, Colorado or at the Capital Jewish Museum in downtown DC. It's affecting our own children in their schools and we've seen it on college campuses.

Fear is a powerful emotional state and a critical adaptation in human evolution that allows us to handle danger by activating stress hormones that cause us to laser focus on a threat.

"But fear also has important implications on our political decision-making. Social psychologists have found that fear makes people hypervigilant...and risk- averse, which may lead us to react to situations that are hard, painful, or uncomfortable as if they represent a direct threat. It makes us seek out people we perceive to be part of our 'in-group' and mistrust people we perceive as different from us. Fear decreases political participation and can even cause people to become more authoritarian. Overall, researchers find that fear necessarily makes us more conservative – it doesn't work the other way around."³

One of the most important themes that this whole High Holyday season is about is our power to choose. Even with all of our entrenched habits and neural pathways, we have the capacity to choose. This is so central in Torah. As this research shows, hooking people into the fear loop sends them in a particular political direction. We don't have to let ourselves be

³ <https://dismantlingantisemitism.org/download/> p. 7.

taken down that path, we can exercise our *b'chirah*, our capacity for choice. We can see the fear arising and choose to orient ourselves to a less reactive path.

Now let me offer a tiny bit of history. My mentor and RRC professor Rabbi Mordechai Liebling has taught,⁴ “Historically, as European Jews— and most of our institutional structures and most of our backgrounds come from European Judaism— for hundreds of years, we didn't have possible allies in the general populace, because of the depth and breadth of popular antisemitism. So, even though we as Jews were used by the ruling class as a buffer with the populace, we turned to the rulers or powers that be for safety.” We were classically middlemen/middle people, occupying a middle position between the ruling classes of European society and the popular masses – think moneylending and tax collecting; we were a wedge.

“This was a rational choice; we could not turn to the masses for safety. So, our institutional structures developed a circle the wagons approach, and an approach of looking for safety in aligning with the powers that be. Right now, while there is antisemitism in the American populace, there's not the depth and breadth of antisemitism that existed in Europe. And in fact, it is possible to ally with other oppressed groups in the country.” Rabbi Liebling argues that what we have seen historically is that Jews are safest in robust multifaith, multiethnic, multiracial democracies.

As most of us are deeply aware, the structures of American democracy are profoundly under attack and antisemitism seems to be quite in the center of the mix. Why is that?

I'm going to just say this very plainly: we are all—every one of us—Jews and those who love Jews—being used by the Trump administration as a wedge to dramatically undermine democracy under the guise of fighting antisemitism. This is not about Jewish safety, and in fact it is extremely dangerous for Jews and the future of our country.

⁴ This quote comes from a personal conversation with Rabbi Mordechai, but he makes this point and many other important ones in his excellent article on Evolve: <https://evolve.reconstructingjudaism.org/history-and-update-antisemitism/>

I know some people don't like me to speak about things that are "political," but if you have some other way of talking about the current nature of antisemitism in the US without repeatedly saying the words "Trump administration," I would be very curious to know.

I should say here that for the analysis I am about to share, I am drawing extensively on the words of Rabbi Jill Jacobs, who is the CEO of T'ruah: the Rabbinic Call for Human Rights,⁵ but you can find a similar analysis in other places.⁶

As most of you are no doubt aware, the Trump administration has launched an offensive on universities that includes stripping funding from Columbia, Harvard, Johns Hopkins, other universities, and threatening the entire system. This is funding that primarily supports scientific research, curing disease, discovering the next vaccine, protecting our planet from climate change, etc.

Trump is demanding that universities that want to see their funding restored give up their independence, and allow the government to interfere with academics, admissions, and disciplinary procedures ... This is all justified through saying that this is a way of fighting antisemitism.

Now, there's no question that the pro-Palestine protests on college campuses and beyond have included some antisemitic slogans, chants, and harassment of Jewish and Israeli students. We've seen things like a protester yelling at a student walking across campus wearing a kippah saying "you should go kill yourself," graffiti that reads, "death to Zionists," even "death to Jews," signs saying, "Long live October 7th," and Jewish students pushed out of campus clubs unless they disavow any connection with Israel.

But from what I have been able to ascertain, most of the students who were part of those protests were doing it because they were responding to

⁵ Why is Antisemitism at the Center of Attacks on Democracy? T'ruah webinar, June 30, 2025.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0bmKMt1kygw&t=212s> Much of what I write here are direct quotes from Rabbi Jacobs from this webinar, but slightly adapted.

⁶ For example: <https://evolve.reconstructingjudaism.org/weaponizing-antisemitism-where-are-our-jewish-leaders/>

the overwhelming deaths and destruction in Gaza. They wanted the war to stop and wanted a just solution to the plight of the Palestinian people.

It is, of course, not antisemitic to protest this horrific war. Israelis, some of them dear friends of mine, have been courageously on the street for months and months calling for a deal that's going to end the war and bring home the hostages. But it is antisemitic when you are cheapening the lives of Jews, harassing fellow students on campus, and in the worst cases, moving into violence against Jews.

It's totally reasonable for students, faculty, and parents to demand that universities apply and enforce their codes of conduct which are set up to address issues such as these, and to call them out when they don't. And when appropriate, it's appropriate for students to go to what used to be the Office for Civil Rights in the Department of Education, which had the tools to investigate these kinds of bias complaints.

But that office has been shut down by Trump, which is an indication that he's not really interested in antisemitism. So there's a difference between a university applying its own disciplinary policies, its own code of conduct, and the government coming in to a university to shut down speech. It's not going to be safer for Jews if the government has vast powers over universities, which are supposed to be places for critical inquiry.

The Trump administration's approach to universities and antisemitism has been taken out of a plan called Project Esther: a National Strategy to Combat Antisemitism, which was created by the right-wing Heritage Foundation with virtually no Jewish involvement. It's the same people who brought us Project 2025.

What is so disturbing about this is that it is also following the playbook of authoritarians like Victor Orban in Hungary, whose government forced Central European University to move most of its activity abroad. Orban banned Gender and Women's Studies Departments, and he placed all universities under control of a government body. In Turkey, we've seen President Erdogan granting himself the power to install university rectors, and he's fired thousands of academics.

I want to make one final related point, again one for which I am indebted to Rabbi Mordechai Liebling: There is a real difference between left-wing and right-wing antisemitism. Left-wing antisemitism is not ideological. It's mostly situational and very much tied into what's happening between Israelis and Palestinians. We see consistently in the US and Europe that antisemitism goes up when there is a significant increase in violence between Israelis and Palestinians.

That's another reason why it is so important for all of us to advocate for a just solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—it helps our safety as Jews here in the US. While we do see left-wing antisemitism trafficking in traditional tropes like Jewish financial power, doing so is actually against the ideology of being progressive. So, while left-wing antisemitism must be also confronted, you can actually have a conversation because it's not core to the ideology.

On the right, as expressed through the ideology of white Christian nationalism, antisemitism *is* core, and so it is particularly dangerous to us. We see this in things like the Great Replacement Theory which “claims there is an intentional effort, led by Jews, to promote mass immigration, intermarriage, and other efforts that would lead to the ‘extinction of whites.’”⁷ This ideology directly informed the shooter in the 2018 Tree of Life synagogue shooting.

In the words of right-wing extremism expert Eric Ward: To recognize that antisemitism is not a sideshow to racism within White nationalist thought is important for at least two reasons. First, it allows us to identify the fuel that White nationalist ideology uses to power its anti-Black racism, its contempt for other people of color, and its xenophobia—as well as the misogyny and other forms of hatred it holds dear. ... What is this arch-nemesis of the White race, whose machinations have prevented the natural and inevitable imposition of White supremacy? It is, of course, the Jews. Jews function for today's White nationalists as they often have for antisemites through the centuries: as the demons stirring an otherwise changing and heterogeneous pot of lesser evils... Right-wing antisemitism is “often a

⁷ <https://www.aic.org/news/great-replacement-theory-heres-what-jews-need-to-know-about-white-supremacy>

form of conspiracy theory used to generate fear and division”⁸ and is completely antithetical to multifaith, multiracial, multiethnic democracy.

Beyond understanding antisemitism as a form of prejudice and bigotry with ancient roots, “we need to understand [its contemporary expression] as a form of systemic oppression with a specific function – usually to deflect blame for hardships, to discredit leaders or institutions, or to create an imagined ‘enemy from within’ used to justify removing or damaging fundamental freedoms and democratic institutions like freedom of speech or the right to vote.”⁹

To conclude, we must understand how antisemitism actually works and functions, because it can be tricky, and it plays off of our fear pathway. When this sermon goes online, there will be links to a number of important resources that I strongly encourage you to read through, including a piece from Rabbi Jill Jacobs about when criticism of Israel becomes antisemitic.¹⁰

We need to be clear that the fight for democracy in our country is our fight as Jewish-Americans. Instead of being driven by fear, circling the wagons and feeling isolated, one of the best ways to address antisemitism is to continue to build those multifaith, multiethnic, multiracial connections that are essential to our democracy, to do that both as an Oseh community and more broadly as political citizens.

G’mar tov.

⁸ <https://dismantlingantisemitism.org/download/> p. 10.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ <https://truah.org/resources/criticism-of-israel-and-antisemitism-how-to-tell-where-one-ends-and-the-other-begins/> And other outstanding T’ruah resource for adults and teens is their Very Brief Guide to Antisemitism: <https://truah.org/antisemitism/> [This](#) congressional testimony from Rabbi Jacobs about anti-Semitism in K-12 schools is also excellent.

