

## Responding to Antisemitism

Sunday Service, April 16, 2023

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of San Miguel de Allende

I'd like to start in the momentous year of 1938. In March, Germany annexed Austria. Six months later, Hitler annexed the Sudetenland, a mainly German speaking part of Czechoslovakia. On the night of November 9, the Nazis destroyed synagogues and shop windows of Jewish-owned stores throughout Germany and Austria, an action known as *Kristallnacht*, or night of broken glass.

Several months later, in early 1939, in a small village in Czechoslovakia not far from the Austrian border, a Jewish family was growing increasingly concerned about the spread of Nazi control and rising antisemitism. Two sons in their twenties decided to flee the country. Their parents and 18-year-old sister remained behind. Hitler invaded Czechoslovakia the next day. One of the sons was my father. More on this story later.

Antisemitism is a form of racism defined by prejudice against or hatred of Jews. The Holocaust was a state-sponsored persecution and destruction of European Jews by Nazi Germany between 1933 and 1945. Though the Holocaust is history's most extreme example of antisemitism, the systemic hatred and oppression of Jews preceded the modern era. Among the most common manifestations of antisemitism throughout history were pogroms, violent terrorist riots launched against Jews and frequently encouraged by government authorities. Pogroms were often incited by blood libels—false rumors that Jews used the blood of Christian children for ritual purposes.

In feudal societies Jews were purposely placed as intermediaries between ruling elites and oppressed masses and were therefore despised by both sides, with few allies. The issue of Jews not being a nationality with a country cast them always as outsiders, denied citizenship, and led to suspicion of nefarious intentions and Jewish cabals.

In the nineteenth century, antisemitic political parties were formed in Germany, France, and Austria. Publications such as the fraudulent *Protocols of the Elders of*

*Zion*, first published in Russia in 1903, generated support for fake theories of an international Jewish conspiracy. This viciously antisemitic publication is today widely available on the Internet in dozens of languages.

The xenophobic "*voelkisch* movement"—made up of German philosophers, scholars, and artists who viewed the Jewish spirit as alien to German gentiles—shaped a notion of the Jew as "non-German." Theorists of racial anthropology provided pseudoscientific backing for this idea, and departments of "racial hygiene" were established at 20 German universities prior to the Nazis.

The Nazi Party, founded in 1919, gave political expression to theories of racism. In part, the Nazis gained popularity by disseminating anti-Jewish propaganda. Millions read Hitler's book *Mein Kampf*, which called for the removal of Jews from Germany.

With the Nazi rise to power in 1933, the party ordered anti-Jewish economic boycotts, staged book burnings, and enacted discriminatory anti-Jewish legislation. In 1935, the Nuremberg Laws racially defined Jews by "blood" and ordered the total separation of so-called "Aryans" and "non-Aryans," thereby legalizing a racist hierarchy. The Nazis proudly used US racial segregation laws as their models, but they admitted that their definition of Jewishness was far less stringent than most Jim Crow laws, which defined blackness by a single drop of African American blood. Meanwhile, rampant antisemitism in the US blocked the immigration of Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany.

Back to my family's story. In 1939, after a difficult journey through southern Europe and across the Mediterranean, my father and uncle found refuge in Palestine. My father joined the British Army and fought in several battles in World War 2. After the war, he learned that his parents and sister had been deported to Theresienstadt and then to Auschwitz, where they were murdered. His family's modest property in Czechoslovakia was confiscated by non-Jews. This experience helped motivate my parents to raise me and my brother with the imperative of Tikkun Olam, the Jewish call to repair a broken world.

So what about antisemitism today?

78 years have passed since the Holocaust, and antisemitism is often treated as an afterthought compared to other forms of racism. But it is still pervasive, and in

recent years, anti-Jewish incidents have increased around the world. The Antidefamation League and Simon Wiesenthal Center—two leading organizations dedicated to combatting antisemitism and bigotry—have reported a rise in the number of violent assaults against Jews in the United States and warn of increased antisemitic attitudes across Europe. Antisemitism continues to be widespread throughout the Arab and Muslim world and elsewhere.

At a Unite the Right white supremacist rally in Charlottesville in August 2017, “Jews will not replace us” was a prominent chant. In Pittsburgh, the Tree of Life Synagogue was attacked during sabbath services in October 2018. In January 2022 four people were held hostage at Congregation Beth Israel in Colleyville, TX. Recently, rap artist Ye, formerly known as Kanye West, spewed antisemitic verbiage in several media appearances. These are only a handful of examples.

Just last month, the Antidefamation League reported in their ongoing audit that antisemitic incidents in the U.S. reached an all-time high last year with 3,697 reported episodes of assault, harassment and vandalism. This is the largest number of attacks against Jews in the U.S. recorded by the ADL since this survey began 44 years ago.

Jonathan Greenblatt, CEO of the ADL, has recently said:

“The American Jewish community has not seen this level of antisemitism in mainstream political and public discourse since the 1930s. Sadly, it is only being matched with escalating levels of hate against other minorities, too, including Latinos, the disabled, Muslims, African Americans and the LGBT community. ... The sum of these signs? People are afraid.”

Classic expressions of antisemitism include a plot of Jews to take over the world, blame for the crucifixion of Jesus, the association of Jews with the devil, and conspiratorial accusations such as blood libel and poisoning of wells. Recent forms of antisemitism include the reappearance of classical expressions including the depiction of Jews as evil and subhuman, their cartoon representation as spiders, bloodthirsty vampires, and octopuses, and their quest for world domination and control over the media, economy, government, or other societal institutions. A major manifestation of modern antisemitism is the denial and distortion of the Holocaust.

Now, some believe that antisemitism is also expressed as opposition to policies of the State of Israel, or even challenging Israel's right to exist, including demonization of its people and its leaders and drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis. But others, including myself, think that criticism of the Israeli government or of the philosophy of Zionism may be appropriate and should not be considered antisemitism by itself in the absence of discriminatory statements and behaviors toward Jews.

According to the group Jewish Voice for Peace:

“...antisemitism is part of the machinery of division and fear politicians and pundits use to hold onto or expand their power — the same machinery that is used to target people of color, Muslims, Palestinians, and other minority communities. At a time when the dangers of white nationalism, racism, antisemitism and Islamophobia are all too apparent, the need to build safety for all people has never been greater.”

So what can we do now as Unitarian Universalists to follow this legacy and confront rising antisemitism? Let's first look to those who came before us.

Unitarians and Universalists have a long history of participating in interfaith struggle to combat racism in all its forms, starting with many who fought for the abolition of slavery. In 1939 Unitarian minister Waitstill Sharp and his wife Martha were sent by the Unitarian Service Committee to rescue Jews from Nazi-occupied Europe. Risking their lives, they saved hundreds, and were recognized posthumously as “Righteous Among Nations” by Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. In 1965, Rev. James Reeb and Viola Liuzzo were among many UUs who heeded the call of Martin Luther King, Jr. to go to Selma, Alabama, where they were murdered by Klan members.

More recently, in response to the 2022 antisemitic attack in Colleyville, Texas that I mentioned earlier, the Unitarian Universalist Association stated:

“This is a time to lift up and strengthen the life-giving power of community, as demonstrated by the rabbis, imams and leaders of other faiths who came together to demonstrate their unity. Antisemitism is a form of virulent hate that Unitarian Universalists work to dismantle through public

witness, education, intolerance of prejudice, and a deep commitment to interfaith solidarity.”

In part of a Statement of November 2022 entitled “Rejecting Anti-Jewish Hate,” a Massachusetts UU congregation said:

“There has been a disturbing rise in antisemitic incidents in Massachusetts, across the country, and in other countries. History has shown us the horribly high cost of allowing such behavior to become normalized. Our own Unitarian Universalist faith compels us to acknowledge, call out, and disavow the growing extremism and hate.”

So some of the actions recommended by these UU voices include:

- To acknowledge that antisemitism and other forms of racism are deeply present today.
- To offer public witness against antisemitic incidents.
- To educate at all levels about the history of all forms of racism.
- To join in interfaith solidarity.
- And we must call out and disavow extremism and hate in all forms.

The Rev. William J. Barber II, who was a guest preacher at my former UU congregation in Charlotte, has been a national leader in interfaith organizing for social justice. He said:

“Only a fusion coalition representing all the people in any place could push a moral agenda over and against the interests of the powerful. But such coalitions are never possible without radical patience and stubborn persistence. . . . We were black, white and brown, women and men, rich and poor, gay and straight, documented and undocumented, employed and unemployed, doctors and patients, people of faith and people who struggle with faith. . . . All of our faiths made clear that the codification of hate is never righteous.”

Several European countries have done a lot in recent decades to remind their citizens of the dangerous consequences of antisemitism, including public plaques and sculptures, exhibits and educational curricula on the Holocaust for all ages. Though it must be said that while most German cities commemorate the victims

of the Nazi period, there are no significant monuments to the thousands of victims of German colonialism in Africa in the early 1900s. Meanwhile, in the US many states are now going in the opposite direction by banning books and prohibiting teaching about our country's legacy of racism, as well as blocking teaching about sexuality and gender diversity with so-called "anti-woke" laws.

Nazi hunter and Holocaust survivor Simon Wiesenthal said:

"For your benefit, learn from our tragedy. It is not a written law that the next victims must be Jews. It can also be other people. We saw it begin in Germany with Jews, but people from more than twenty other nations were also murdered. When I started this work, I said to myself, 'I will look for the murderers of all the victims, not only the Jewish victims. I will fight for justice.'... Survival is a privilege which entails obligations. I am forever asking myself what I can do for those who have not survived. The answer I have found for myself (and which need not necessarily be the answer for every survivor) is: I want to be their mouthpiece, I want to keep their memory alive, to make sure the dead live on in that memory."

As a child, I was greatly influenced by Rabbi Joachim Prinz, who led the largest Jewish congregation in Newark, where we lived. Prinz had been a young rabbi in Berlin during the rise of Hitler, and he suffered persecution and arrests there before escaping to the US. He was a national leader in the Civil Rights movement and was the speaker immediately preceding Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. at the 1963 March on Washington, where he explained that the most important thing he learned as a rabbi under Hitler "was that bigotry and hatred are not the most urgent problem." Prinz continued that the "most urgent, the most disgraceful, the most shameful and the most tragic problem is silence" in the face of injustice. My family and I were regular visitors to a variety of different congregations in Newark, but my favorite services were led by Rabbi Prinz, whose sermons were always thrilling and motivating calls to advocacy and action. His oratory helped to solidify my commitment to social justice. For me today, part of that commitment is bearing witness to the Holocaust, not as an historic relic, but as a warning of where current oppressive ideologies and policies can lead.

So in the spirit of Tikkun Olam, let us all be vigilant as we go forth today in calling out antisemitism and all other ideologies that conflict with our UU principles of

interconnectedness and our respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every person. May it be so.