

“Tale as Old as Time”

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I was not yet a teenager when *Schindler's List*, Steven Spielberg's epic Holocaust film, was released- but I remember watching it for the first time as though it was yesterday. My parents rented it from Blockbuster, gathered those of us still living at home, and told us we were sitting down as a family to watch it. I had no idea about the plot, but I was shocked that beyond being simply allowed to watch it, we were being *required* to watch it. It was the only R rated movie I was ever permitted to see before I was 16 and so their decision to break the rules in that moment signaled to me that the story I was about to learn was incredibly important.

But, while that movie certainly enlightened me and shifted something in my psyche, the horrifying details of what I watched were still somewhat distant from me. This was the history of a faith tradition I was not raised in, in an era of time that I did not live through, and at that particular moment in my life I did not personally know of anyone who had any direct ties to it. So it remained a story, a true, powerful story, but one that I could put back on the shelf and move on from any time I wanted. It took years of maturing to realize that this story was not meant to be put down and picked back up so easily. That it was meant to be written on your soul, carried like a stack of bricks in a sack flung over one shoulder.

It was meant to feel heavy- burdensome even, because this story is not even a hundred years old yet. This story is a pivotal chapter in a saga that began thousands of years ago. And it is one of a handful of lessons that humanity as a whole has seemingly yet to firmly grasp and therefore, we must continue to share it, to teach it, to learn from it, and to honor the memories of those who were murdered. We do that by doing whatever we can to love, nurture, and protect those that are still here. This sermon is my best attempt to do so.

But, this sermon isn't about that particular chapter, at least not directly. This sermon is about the whole story as it has thus far been written- the richness and beauty that is the Jewish faith, juxtaposed with the ever-present threat of antisemitism. Now that first part is easy to talk about because Judaism is overflowing with poetry, song, story, art, tradition, and many would say that woven through all of it- the central theme- an insistent call for justice. Justice as the core principle of a religion is something that we UU's, whether Jewish or not, should feel an appreciation for and a connection to.

But of all the beauty that the Jewish religion gives this world, few things are as lovely as Jewish prayers. One of my all time favorites is this one, which is to be uttered upon placing your feet on the ground each morning. "I give thanks unto You, Adonai, that, in mercy, You have restored my soul within me. Endless is Your compassion; great is Your faithfulness. I thank You, Adonai, for the rest You have given me through the night and for the breath that renews my body and spirit. May I renew my soul with faith in You, Source of all Healing. Blessed

are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe, Who renews daily the work of creation.”

Whether you would choose this as your language of reverence or not, the gratitude expressed in this prayer for the things we so often take for granted in our lives is a spiritual gift in and of itself. Thank you for rest. Thank you for healing. Thank you for the breath that fills my lungs. Thank you for recreating life each morning. Thank you for allowing me to see another day. How many of us wake up with such gratitude in our hearts? If it's before 9am, I know I am not as thankful as I could be. There are prayers for the first time you do something, prayers for seeing a natural wonder, a prayer for clarification after a confusing dream, blessings upon seeing a rare animal or a rainbow. It would seem that for each and every moment of wonder, awe, joy, sadness, loss, delight- there is a prayer for that.

In all of my gratitude for the vast gifts of Judaism, however, I, like perhaps some of you gentiles here today, have been embarrassingly naive about the history of antisemitism in our country. This is particularly egregious as the minister of a Unitarian Universalist congregation. We can only enjoy the freedoms our faith affords us- the freedom to learn from, honor, and participate in the theologies and religious traditions from around the world, if we live into our responsibilities as well. It is not enough to share in the beauty and wisdom of Judaism if we are not willing to learn the history, the context, or if we are unwilling to acknowledge the risk of living in the US as a Jew. How can we listen to Jewish prayers and share a seder meal together if we are disinterested in recognizing the thousands of years of discrimination, violence,

and antisemitism that has threatened the existence of generations of people sitting next to you in this very sanctuary?!

Until recently I understood only the highlights of our country's problematic history with antisemitism. Like that we shamefully turned away Jewish refugees during World War 2, but I had no idea that our own homegrown antisemitism was bolstered by Hitler's tactics and propaganda and used to inflict harm on Jewish businesses and families alike at the same time here in the US. I did not realize that it was only in the 1950's that antisemitism began to dwindle.

From Gale online, a research hub with a very impressive collection of information about the history of antisemitism in the United States, I learned, and I quote,

“Once...[World War 2]... was over, the awareness of America's victory over the Nazis coupled with the witnessed atrocities of the Holocaust was jarring enough to result in a noticeable public decline in anti-Semitism in America. Post-conflict criticism of Jewish Americans dropped from 64 percent to 16 percent in 1951... . This trend would continue through the 1970s, as restrictions loosened, and anti-Semitism faded from view.”¹

I read that ya'll and I was shook, (as the youth say). 64 percent of Americans were, for all intents and purposes, antisemitic before proof of the holocaust changed their minds. It took six million murders to change American minds, and still, more than a tenth of us, chose to remain hateful.

¹ <https://www.gale.com/primary-sources/political-extremism-and-radicalism/collections/history-of-anti-semitism>

The article from Gale went on to say:

“Today, complex social change, including anxiety about globalization, economic inequality, the COVID-19 pandemic, and changing demographics, has inspired a resurgence of bigotry, scapegoating, and mistrust. For some, including prominent conservative leaders surrounding [a certain] former President..., the Jewish community once again became the “globalists” responsible for complex social change. As [that former president] rallied behind the slogan “America First,” echoing prominent anti-Semites during World War II, his words found power in the alt-right and hate groups like the [KKK], QAnon, and the Proud Boys. He stood mute as prominent journalists were attacked for their Jewishness, trafficking stereotypes in the media and among his own supporters, and condoned violence in Charlottesville as mobs of white men marched chanting “You will not replace us.”²

You may remember that following that incident in Charlottesville there was much media discussion about white supremacy and anti-blackness. But there was very little said, even within our own faith tradition, about the antisemitism that was on display that night. The UUA’s commitment to multiculturalism, anti-racism and anti-oppression has repeatedly left out antisemitism, even though the quote, “none of us is free until all of us is free” might as well be our faith’s tagline. And, just to be incredibly clear here, we are not comparing oppressions, rather calling attention to the point of their intersectionality, where they cross over.

² ibid

Intersectionality is incredibly important and relevant to our justice work. We cannot speak of the struggle of our fellow BIPOC Americans and not acknowledge the disgraceful state of black maternal care. We cannot work for change in women's rights and completely ignore how these rights affect trans women. If we are going to fight against white christian nationalism, then by god we must be mindful of everyone who suffers the effects of it. And for those of you following along- that pretty much includes every single one of us in this room.

As my Jewnitarian (Jewish Unitarian) colleague, The Rev. Marti Keller, said when we spoke about this topic, "I think we are smart enough, our hearts are big enough, and our arms wide enough, to tackle more than one '-ism' at a time."³

And the Jewish people, they recognize bigotry, racism, xenophobia, and other big bads and isms that impose themselves on the civil liberties of others much quicker than many other religions. When that same former president banned Muslim refugees from entering the US, young, jewish people showed up en masse to protest it and to advocate for those seeking asylum in our country. They did so because they grew up hearing stories about how they are here- alive and safe- because their families were taken in during their time of need. To see the suffering of others, of strangers, and reach out to them rather than

³ Personal interview Jan.2023

turn your back to them- that is *hen*, the Hebrew word for Grace, another beautiful aspect of Judaism.

And while we have established that antisemitism has always been a part of our history, this rebranding of it, rewriting of the story, is devastating in its ability to reach millions of people all over the world in mere seconds. A once small percentage of antisemites have used social media to amplify their violent propaganda, resulting in an actual 2024 presidential candidate tweeting about how he would like to murder Jewish people. Of course, I'm speaking of Kanye West, and unfortunately in our collective willingness to sweep the nasty truth of antisemitism under the rug, we are eager to dismiss him as a disturbed man that has no chance of winning the presidency. And while indeed true, West has twice as many Twitter followers than there are Jews in the entire world. That is 30 million followers. 30 million people who believe this man is saying something worth listening to. 30 million chances to create more fear, division, and hatred towards what is ultimately 2.4 percent of the US population.

If West's violent fantasies were the extent of the issue, damage control might be possible. However, 2021 reported the highest rates of antisemitic assaults, harassment, and violence than any year before it on record. In Georgia, antisemitic incidents more than doubled from 2020. This includes an incident from the high school I graduated from in Cobb County, where students painted "Heil Hitler" alongside swastikas in the bathroom. It happened again last year- this time in a middle school in Cobb County. And only two months ago a

message of hatred against jews was projected for millions to see at the Florida State/UGA game.

So what can be done about the latest resurgence of this long told story? I said earlier that we must honor the dead by protecting and treasuring the living. However, Jewish author, Dara Horn, urges us to think past the lazy, knee-jerk answer that more love will solve it all. She writes:

Love rarely comes up; why would it? But it comes up here, in this for-profit exhibition [about Anne Frank]. Here it is the ultimate message, the final solution. That the Holocaust drives home the importance of love is an idea, like the idea that Holocaust education prevents antisemitism, that seems entirely unobjectionable. It is entirely objectionable. The Holocaust didn't happen because of a lack of love. It happened because entire societies abdicated responsibility for their own problems, and instead blamed them on the people who represented—have always represented, since they first introduced the idea of commandedness to the world—the thing they were most afraid of: responsibility.⁴

End quote. So. There it is. Horn believes that to stop antisemitism we, meaning our society, must take responsibility for our own problems. This makes sense, but it also seems nebulous, intangible. Perhaps we speak of education as the best way to defeat antisemitism because it seems like something each

⁴ The Atlantic, "Auschwitz Is Not a Metaphor" by Dara Horn, January, 2019. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/06/auschwitz-not-long-ago-not-far-away/591082/>

individual can do on their own. It seems tangible and realistic, if a little romanticized. And honestly, because we *have* seen it work.

Back in that same high school, two decades before those swastikas were painted on bathroom walls, I was a student waiting patiently for my turn to listen to this same, sad story I'd once watched with my parents again, but this time, told by a teacher whose family had been imprisoned in a concentration camp. Hearing her tell the story over the course of 90 minutes was one of those very odd milestones you have growing up, like the first time you rode in the front seat of the car, or were allowed to get your ears pierced. Starting from middle school, or earlier if you had older siblings, you began to hear about this teacher and her story. As the years passed you heard that even the biggest, baddest teenagers wept through it. That you went in as one person, but left as another. And miraculously, it was a sort of unspoken pact that no one would share the details of this story before you had heard it from the teacher directly. There was a sense that you had to earn it. And when my day finally came I found that it was all true. That, in fact, two classes were combined in one small room- packed from wall to wall with teenagers who did not make a sound, did not dare to breathe too loudly for fear of missing a single word, until the sniffles began.

This teacher, before she was done, looked us in the eye and said, "I do not share this story with glee. It is painful for me to share it with you. But I do it anyways because if I don't, how will we ever prevent it from happening again? And now that you have heard it, it is your responsibility to ensure it never does."

And this is where I respectfully disagree with our author, Horn. It may not be Holocaust education that prevents antisemitism, but proximity does. Relationship does. Empathy does. And story creates the opportunity for all three in moments when none seem possible. If you are here and are a gentile- a non-Jew, then it is your responsibility to help change the story. To speak up when you hear antisemitic jokes or propaganda, to show up and defend our Jewish beloveds when they are under attack, and as equally life-giving, as equally essential, is creating space for the Jewish people in your life to be free from danger, harassment, violence, AND the emotional work of carrying this story, this sack of bricks they have passed down from one generation to another for thousands of years unable to put it down for fear it will be forgotten and used against them. Offer to carry it for them, even temporarily, so that they might have the energy and freedom to experience some peace. Some levity. And hopefully, an infusion of joy. That is where I hope the story ends one day- *they lived happily, joyfully, peacefully ever after.*

May it be so. Amen. The end.