

## Dual Loyalty

### *Shabbat Zachor 5779*

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In 1976, my mother and a friend made a film about the history of Congregation Beth Israel in Houston, where I was raised. The Temple had a famous – some would say, infamous – anti-Zionist history from the 1940s. Over thirty years later, one person who had opposed the establishment of Israel explained: “We were afraid that, if there was a Jewish State, our neighbors would say to us, ‘Now you have your own state. Go there.’”<sup>i</sup>

Put another way, Houston’s anti-Zionists were afraid they would be faced with a charge of dual loyalty. With a Jewish State across the ocean, would Jews’ fidelity to America be questioned? Would we choose Israel over the United States, if push ever came to shove?

Concern that Jews might be faced with charges of dual loyalty are well-founded in our history. Pharaoh seeks to kill every newborn Jewish boy, claiming, without evidence, “[O]therwise in the event of war they may join our enemies in fighting against us...”<sup>ii</sup>

Tonight, we observe *Shabbat Zachor*, the Sabbath of Remembrance before Purim, a most joyous occasion. However, the festivity comes only after thwarting a plan to kill all the Jews. When Haman sells his genocidal plan to the King, he justifies it in terms of dual loyalty: “There is a certain people, scattered and dispersed among the other peoples in all the provinces of your realm, whose laws are different from those of any other people and who do not obey the king’s laws...”<sup>iii</sup> The Jews, Haman groundlessly charges, flout the authority of the King, presumably in favor of Torah.

A week ago yesterday, the United States House of Representatives adopted a resolution condemning hatred – anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, white supremacy, and other contemptible ills facing our society. The resolution has been derided by some for failing to focus exclusively on Congresswoman Ilhan Omar and her remarks which smack of a dual loyalty charge. Be that as it may, the text of the adopted resolution attacks dual loyalty head-on. Jews have been victims of these charges, in this country and others, but we have not been alone. The resolution states:

“...[A]ccusations of dual loyalty generally have an insidious and pernicious history, including –

- (1) the discriminatory incarceration of Americans of Japanese descent during World War II on the basis of race and dual loyalty.
- (2) the Dreyfus affair, when Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish French artillery captain, was falsely accused of passing secrets to Germany based on his Jewish background.
- (3) when the loyalty of President John F. Kennedy was questioned because of his Catholic faith; and
- (4) the post-9/11 conditions faced by Muslim-Americans in the United States, including Islamophobia and false and vicious attacks on and threats to Muslim-Americans for alleged association with terrorism.”<sup>iv</sup>

When Jews or others are successfully accused of greater loyalty to one’s own people than to the nation of one’s citizenship and residency, the results can even be deadly.

Therefore, none should have been surprised by the reaction to Rep. Omar’s remarks, even if they hadn’t come after an even more scurrilously antisemitic words weeks earlier. In late February, “at an event at a Washington bookstore,” the Congresswoman said, “I want to talk about the political influence in this country that says it’s OK for people to push for allegiance to a foreign country.”<sup>v</sup> Some have defended Rep. Omar, noting that she made no explicit reference to American Jews in her remarks. I’m not buying it. The very notion that the American alliance to Israel represents “allegiance to a foreign country” is a charge of dual loyalty, whether she was referring to American Jews or Members of Congress of either party or any faith.

Ironically, Congresswoman Omar was the victim of a vile accusation of dual loyalty at roughly the same time as her bookstore comments. A poster was “displayed at the West Virginia statehouse as part of the GOP’s ‘Republicans Take the Rotunda’ event...The poster featured an image of the [World Trade Center] twin towers in flames [on 9/11] with the caption, “Never forget” – you said..’ above a second image of [Rep.] Omar with the caption, ‘I am the proof – You have forgotten.’”<sup>vi</sup> West Virginia Republicans disavowed the poster. Its maker apparently assumes that any Muslim can rightly be accused of the most despicable act of terrorism our nation has ever faced, and that she is more loyal to the most violent, extreme element in the international Muslim community

than to the nation that took her in as a refugee and where she now serves in the federal legislature.

Tonight, on *Shabbat Zachor*, we read a passage from Deuteronomy, cautioning us to “Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey, after you left Egypt,” attacking the weakest flank of the Children of Israel. “Therefore,” we are enjoined, “you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.”<sup>vii</sup> We read these words before Purim because the wicked Haman is described as a descendant of Amalek. The implication is that failing to remember antisemitism in all its pernicious forms is dangerous, potentially leading even to genocide. Paradoxically, then, we may be grateful to Rep. Omar for reminding us that antisemitism can emanate from any side of the political spectrum. Specifically, we do well to assure that we are aware of the dual loyalty charge and its dangers, lest we ignore it when we are targeted, lest we let it go when others are the victims.

My teacher Yehuda Kurtzer, President of Shalom Hartman Institute of North America, cautions us not to despair, even at this time of confronting antisemitism. He writes: “The primary new data of the past few months in the toxicity of American political culture is not that Jews can be subject to antisemitic attacks in America; that is something we have always known. It is also not that members of Congress can sometimes say unkind things about the state of Israel and that some of those unkind things can take the form of antisemitic tropes. There have been antisemitic members of Congress as long as there has been Congress. The new data is the clarity of the overwhelming American distaste for antisemitism, which is new in our history – from the front page of the Pittsburgh *Post-Gazette* [, featuring the opening words of the Mourner’s Kaddish, in Hebrew letters,] after the massacre, to the widespread condemnations ... that take place in this country against ... antisemitic comments, policies, and injustices.”<sup>viii</sup>

Even as we acknowledge that antisemitism has always been with us, let us permit ourselves to celebrate, in keeping with the instructions of Esther and Mordechai after Haman’s plot was foiled. Ultimately, in America in 2019, as in post-Haman Shushan, in words of the Book of Esther we will now sing in Hebrew, “The Jews enjoyed light and gladness, happiness and honor.”<sup>ix</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Gay Block and Linda May, *A Tribute to Spirit: The Beth Israel Experience*, 1976.

<sup>ii</sup> Exodus 1:10.

<sup>iii</sup> Esther 3:8.

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<sup>iv</sup> “Full text of House Resolution against hate, including anti-Semitism,” *The Times of Israel*, March 8, 2019, 5:10am.

<sup>v</sup> Cody Nelson, “Minnesota Congresswoman Ignites Debate On Israel And Anti-Semitism,” *NPR*, March 7, 2019, 12:47 PM ET.

<sup>vi</sup> Michelle Mark, “A poster that linked Rep. Ilhan Omar with 9/11 sparked pandemonium at the West Virginia statehouse,” *Business Insider*, March 2, 2019, 9:42 PM.

<sup>vii</sup> Deuteronomy 25:17-19

<sup>viii</sup> Yehuda Kurtzer, Facebook post, March 12, 2019, 9:46 AM.

<sup>ix</sup> Esther 8:16.