

Let My People Go

Shabbat B'shallach 5779

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Rabbi Barry H. Block

The Exodus from Egypt is our people's great story of redemption. Reading that liberation story, and singing its songs, throughout the year and particularly on Passover, we come to know God as the Source of our people's freedom. We learn that flawed human beings, beginning with Moses, are empowered to be God's partners in bringing salvation.

The Exodus is a powerful narrative, forming our people's understanding of itself: "We were once in bondage, but now we are free!"ⁱ Throughout our history, our people has also seen the Exodus as the model for contemporary or future liberation movements – praying for our own people's freedom from persecution or seeking justice and liberation for others, be they persons of color or immigrants in the United States, gay men in Chechnya, or Rohingya Muslims in Burma.

Tonight, I would like to focus our attention, and the need for liberation, on our free and prosperous American Jewish community. American Jews face antisemitism in 2019 more than at any time in our recent history. Yes, for many here, antisemitism of America's past is no lesson in ancient history; you lived it. People in this Sanctuary were excluded from career opportunities, from community organizations and clubs, from neighborhoods, and from social interactions, for no reason other than that you are Jewish. Stretching back further, American immigration policy established in the 1920s was fatal for many European Jews. American antisemitism has occasionally turned violent, even deadly. Therefore, in encouraging our congregation to stand up for others who are oppressed, I have often called upon our concern, not only because we were slaves in Egypt, but also because we have been strangers in the Land of America.

Tonight, my message isn't about standing up for others who are oppressed. Instead it's about us. We must be vigilant about antisemitism in America today, for our history teaches us that one anti-Semitic incident can become many, and that the murder of eleven can be the forerunner to the murder of millions.

"In its [latest] annual Audit of Anti-Semitic Incidents, ADL found that the number of anti-Semitic incidents in the U.S. rose 57 percent in 2017 – the largest single-year increase on record and the second highest number reported since ADL

started tracking such data in 1979.”ⁱⁱ We do not what ADL will report about for 2018, but we do know that it will include the murder of eleven Jews worshipping on a Shabbat morning at Pittsburgh’s Tree of Life Synagogue, the deadliest anti-Semitic crime in American history.

American antisemitism thrives at the extremes, on both the right and the left. Rabbi Sharon Brous, speaking to her Los Angeles congregation composed almost entirely of progressives, distinguishes between the impacts of antisemitism from the right and the left. Let’s hear her words, and then I’ll respond to them. Weeks after Pittsburgh, Rabbi Brous said, “The actual threat to American Jews today comes from the armed and state-supported far right, but it’s antisemitism from the left – where most Jews find our home – that poses the greater psychic threat. It hurts our hearts and challenges our sense of self. Even still, I’m not walking away from intersectional justice movements. It’s not only because together we’re fighting bigger battles, but also because I really want to see you. And I want to be seen by you. And walking away might feel good and righteous for a moment, but surely it will not help us see one another.”ⁱⁱⁱ

For the most part, the first part of Rabbi Brous’s assessment is undeniably accurate: Antisemitism from the right poses the greatest potential threats to our lives. Yes, those who hate Israel around the world, including some in America, are armed and dangerous. However, the overwhelming majority of violent anti-Semitic crimes in America, including mass murder in Pittsburgh, come from the right.

I do not quite agree with Rabbi Brous that right-wing antisemitism is “state supported.” I suppose she is referring to President Trump. We were rightly appalled when the President of the United States said that Charlottesville’s tiki-torch marchers, chanting, “Jews will not replace us,” included “some very fine people.” Let there be no doubt: White supremacists are emboldened by the President’s failure to condemn them categorically, a failure he repeated this week when he seemed to be the only Republican in Washington not to disavow the self-proclaimed white supremacist Congressman, Steve King of Iowa.

Still, I cannot agree that antisemitism from the right is “state supported.” The police and FBI responded promptly and forcefully to mass murder in Pittsburgh. Charlottesville murderers have been successfully prosecuted. We recall that our Governor, Lieutenant Governor, Senator, Congressman, and the man who is now our Mayor, among many others, stood with us in solidarity at Congregation B’nai Israel after the Pittsburgh massacre. And just this week, three

dedicated FBI agents – Special Agent in Charge Diane Upchurch, Supervisory Special Agent Todd Adams, and Special Agent Stephanie Post – went out of their way, at their initiative, at a time when they’re not even receiving their pay checks, to meet with Carol Parham and me to discuss security in our own Temple.

Like Rabbi Brous, I am more pained than frightened by antisemitism on the left. I am particularly sad when I read about Jewish college students who are accused of being insensitive to repressed minorities and consistently placed on defensive about Israel. Nobody’s life is threatened, but Jewish college students have faced exclusion that would be familiar to their grandparents, albeit in a different form.

Antisemitism on the left has come into sharp relief with tomorrow’s Women’s March. Two of the March’s key leaders have come under well-deserved fire for their antisemitism. For example, Michelle Greenberg writes in today’s *New York Times* that Tamika Mallory has “refused...to denounce the Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan, whom she once called ‘the GOAT,’ or Greatest of All Time.”^{iv} We are talking about a man who refers to Jews as “termites.”

Even Farrakhan doesn’t present a credible threat to Jewish lives. Tamika Mallory certainly does not, so I’m not afraid of her. I am, however, deeply sad that Jewish women must choose between participating under the leadership of anti-Semites or boycotting a march for women’s rights and reproductive justice. Thankfully, several state and local marches have explicitly disassociated from the national Women’s March and its anti-Semitic leaders. Though no march is being held here this year, the Arkansas Women’s March organization is no longer affiliated with that national group.

Reform Judaism practices and preaches zero tolerance for racism, for bigotry toward gay, lesbian, and transgender folks, or for persecuting immigrants. Zero tolerance must also be our approach to antisemitism. We have seen this scourge of antisemitism before, and we know its death toll. We have seen the anti-Semites defeated, dead on the shores of the sea, and we have joined in freedom’s song. Now, the time has come for American Jews to arise, together with all who would be our partners, and cry like Moses before us: “Let my people go!”

Amen.

ⁱ The Passover *Haggadah*.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.adl.org/resources/reports/2017-audit-of-anti-semitic-incidents>, accessed January 18, 2019.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://ikar-la/sermons/>, accessed January 18, 2019.

^{iv} Michelle Goldberg, “The Heartbreak of the 2019 Women’s March,” *The New York Times*, January 18, 2019.