

Hiding Our Jewish Identity

Shabbat Yitro 5780

February 14, 2020

Rabbi Barry H. Block

December brought a horrific spate of violent antisemitic incidents, primarily in the New York area and largely directed at ultra-Orthodox Jews. A shooter and his accomplice in Jersey City murdered six and injured three others in a rampage in and near a kosher grocery store. During Chanukah, in the largely Orthodox suburb of Monsey, New York, a terrorist with a machete turned the festival of lights into bloody horror, injuring five, two of them gravely, at a holiday celebration in the home of Rabbi Chaim Rottenberg.

By the next evening, though, “many Monsey...residents would be dancing through the streets to welcome a Torah in a defiant act of celebration.”ⁱ A synagogue member who identified himself to a reporter as Haim remarked: “This shows that even after it happened we’ll still continue to do whatever we do.”ⁱⁱ

For many Jews, the defiant response to antisemitism comes naturally. We do not grant power to those who hate us, permitting them to determine or limit our expressions of Jewish identification or observance. Others, though, are tempted to change their ways. The preeminent scholar of antisemitism in the world today, Professor Deborah Lipstadt of Emory University, wrote that, after the Monsey attack, “the news that most depressed me did not involved the violence. It was not something done *to* Jews but something Jews *did*. A synagogue in the Netherlands is no longer publicly posting the times of prayer services.”ⁱⁱⁱ Some of our own congregants told me that they were refraining from wearing a Star of David or *Chai* necklace that they had proudly displayed for years. And Lipstadt adds, “For some time now, many kippah-wearing Jews have adopted the habit of wearing baseball caps when visiting Europe. Young people think twice before wearing Israeli-flag T-shirts when they wander the streets of Paris. Or before carrying a backpack with the name of their Jewish youth group prominently displayed.”^{iv}

The impulse to hide one’s Jewish identity in a time when our people may be unsafe is not new. With Purim approaching, we may note that Mordechai counsels Esther not to reveal “her people or her kindred” when she seeks to become queen.^v Jews in Persia were in a precarious, often confusing, position: On the one hand, Mordechai is a courtier, known to be a Jew, and honored by the King for exposing an assassination plot.^{vi} At the same time, the entire story of the Book of Esther reveals that Persian Jews were vulnerable to genocide.^{vii}

In our own Torah portion, by contrast, Jethro, the Priest of Midian and therefore not an Israelite, honors the Hebrews and their God. He celebrates his familial relationship with our people as Moses's father-in-law, and he bows down to the God of Israel.^{viii} Here we have an eagerness to identify with the Jewish people at a time of trouble.

We can relate. I have been told that our Memorial Service after the Tree of Life Synagogue massacre in October, 2018 was the best-attended event in the 45-year history of this Sanctuary. Yes, members of this congregation attended in large numbers, together with others in the Jewish community, but the majority present that evening were Christians, Muslims, and supporters of other faiths and none, identifying with us at our time when Jews were grieving and feeling threatened. The support of law enforcement—above all, the attention devoted to us by the Arkansas office of the FBI—has reminded us of the difference between times of historical persecution and our own situation in America.

Challenged as we are by rising antisemitism today, that FBI support is among the clear indications that no new Holocaust is approaching. Hiding one's Jewish identity is appropriate at a time when doing so is necessary to save one's life, as it was for European Jews in the late 1930s and during World War II. Thankfully, we do not live in such a time.

Still, we must be vigilant. Our congregation's Security Committee is active—having met this Wednesday night, as it happens—consistently devising new ways to assure that congregants and guests are safe and feel safe when we come to the synagogue. The success of these measures and others that have been taken over the years is measured in the eagerness of members and visitors to continue to join us at Congregation B'nai Israel for worship, study, service to the community, celebration, and mourning.

Still, many Jews fear that they must hide their Jewish identity. Professor Lipstadt explains: "Most Jewish students on American campuses have not been subjected to overt acts of discrimination or verbal abuse. But many among them feel they have something to lose if they openly identify as Jews...Those who want to be elected to student government are learning to scrub their resumes clean of any overtly Jewish or pro-Israel activities. They are not abandoning their identity; they are hiding it." Lipstadt concludes, "They have become *Marranos*," using the term applied to Jews who outwardly converted to Christianity in Inquisition Spain but continue to practice Judaism secretly.^{ix}

Lipstadt laments this development, as do I. In her book, *Antisemitism: Here and Now*," which our book club plans to discuss on Sunday, Lipstadt writes, "[I]f

antisemitism becomes the sole focus of our concerns, we run the risk of seeing the entire Jewish experience through the eyes of those who hate us.”^x Lipstadt admits: “With good historical reason, Jews have long been inclined to assume that some sort of catastrophe was just around the bend. This, of course, fits my...description of the Jewish optimist as someone who thinks things cannot get any worse.”^{xi} Lipstadt concludes, speaking to a fictional young Jewish adult: “[Here is m]y hope for you...Should you choose to, you can participate in a vibrant Jewish future. You will encounter antisemitism along the way, but I entreat you to avoid letting this ‘longest hatred’ become the linchpin of your identity. Jewish tradition in all its manifestations—religious, secular, intellectual, communal, artistic, and so much more—is far too valuable to be tossed aside and replaced with a singular concentration on the fight against hatred. This need for Jews to balance the ‘oy’ with the ‘joy’ is an exhortation that could well be shared with many other groups that have become the objects of discrimination and prejudice. To you...I say, in the words of the Hebrew Scriptures, ‘be strong and of good courage.’ Never stop fighting the good fight, even as you rejoice in who you are.”^{xii}

Let us ever remain vigilant, particularly in these times of heightened antisemitism. And yet, let us never stop celebrating our heritage, publicly as well as privately.

And remember: Only when Esther goes public, exposing her Jewish identity to the King, is she able to save our people. Let our proud declaration and demonstration of our Jewish identity ever be our distinction and our salvation.

Amen.

ⁱ Luke Tress, “In Monsey after Hanukkah terror stabbing, fear and then an insistent celebration,” *The Times of Israel*, December 30, 2019.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Deborah Lipstadt, “Jews Are Going Underground,” *The Atlantic*, December 29, 2019.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Esther 2:10.

^{vi} Esther 6:10-11.

^{vii} Esther 3.

^{viii} Exodus 18:6, 9-12.

^{ix} Lipstadt, *The Atlantic*.

^x Deborah Lipstadt, *Antisemitism: Here and Now*, New York: Schocken Books, 2019, p. 472. (Page numbers from this book are from an electronic edition.)

^{xi} Ibid., p. 474.

^{xii} Ibid., pp. 483-4. Biblical reference is from Deuteronomy 31:6.