

Jewish Power and Powerlessness

Yom Kippur 5780

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Historian Doris Kearns Goodwin recounts that Jews made up about three percent of the U.S. population, but fifteen percent of presidential appointees, during the administration of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Antisemitic opponents of the New Deal would deride it as the “Jew Deal.”ⁱ

That very brief anecdote highlights two dilemmas that are as old as the Jewish people. First: Jewish power is accompanied by risk—that is, Jewish power often highlights Jewish powerlessness. And second: How do Jews use and misuse power when we find ourselves strong?

My teacher, Dr. Mijal Bitton,ⁱⁱ suggests that we start this conversation with Joseph. Sold into slavery by his older brothers,ⁱⁱⁱ Joseph rises to power in Egypt by explaining Pharaoh’s troubling dreams: Seven years of plenty will be followed by seven years of famine; Pharaoh would do well to store up grain for the lean years.^{iv} The King is so impressed that he makes Joseph his prime minister. Joseph has risen to the greatest power imaginable in Egypt.^v

What does Joseph do with his newfound power? Well, for one thing, he saves countless people, including his own family, from the ravages of famine^{vi} --the first New Deal, or “Jew Deal.” In the process, though, Joseph takes advantage of the famine-starved Egyptians, trading food for land, acquiring all the farmland of Egypt for Pharaoh. He also carries out a massive population transfer, moving each Egyptian from one side of the land to the other. He reduces them to sharecroppers on Pharaoh’s land in their new homes.^{vii} However, Joseph’s own family is exempt. The Israelites grow wealthy and numerous in the land of Goshen.^{viii}

In the Talmud, Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish suggests that Joseph exercises his power explicitly for the welfare of his family. Because Joseph has displaced every single Egyptian, nobody knows their neighbors. All appear foreign to them, not merely the Israelite newcomers.^{ix}

Bar-Ilan University Professor Uriel Simon calls Joseph’s plan to ensure his own family’s welfare a mere “illusion,” but “one that comes at a severe ethical cost.” Enriching Pharaoh at the people’s expense,^x Joseph teaches them how to enslave the weakest among them. Soon enough, “A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph,”^{xi} and we all know how that turned out. The Jews return to the ultimate powerlessness, slavery.

We may well admire the Jews in the Roosevelt cabinet who partnered with the President to establish the New Deal, saving America from its own years of

famine. With eight decades' distance, we may be proud to hear that program called the "Jew Deal." Still, we may ask: Did those White House Jews place a target on the backs of ordinary American Jews? Did they worsen antisemitism institutionalized by the power-elite who opposed the New Deal? In short, may we consider Roosevelt's Jewish appointees to be the exact opposite of Joseph, selling out their own people for the welfare of the nation?

The question continues to plague us.

Less than a year ago, a gunman walked into Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh with a semi-automatic weapon, murdering eleven Jews at prayer. Those Jewish victims were powerless to stop the white supremacist who attacked them.

At the same time, in the mind of the Pittsburgh terrorist, American Jews are powerful. In his manifesto, the Tree of Life murderer names HIAS, a Jewish organization that advocates for immigrants and refugees. In the terrorist's words, HIAS—that is, Jewish America—brings "invaders that kill our people,"^{xii} presumably referring to immigrants who supposedly pose a mortal threat to white Christian Americans.

I am reminded of a story, which I first heard from Rabbi Samuel Stahl. During the Nazi era, a certain German Jew walked into a rail car, where he found another Jew doing something most curious: reading an antisemitic newspaper. He asked: "Why are you reading that garbage?" The reader responded: "Oy, who needs the Jewish press? There, I read about a pogrom here, an expulsion there. In the antisemitic press, on the other hand, I read that Jews are ruling the world, and I feel happy and proud!"

Indeed, the Pittsburgh murderer's social media rant proclaims that he "didn't vote for [President] Trump, because he was too soft on [the Jews]."^{xiii} And we all know that the Charlottesville white supremacists chanted "Jews will not replace us" before morphing into "You will not replace us!" Jewish power, real or imagined by anti-Semites, is a tremendous threat in white supremacists' eyes—rivaled only by power in the hands of people of color, women, gays, and lesbians.

How did American Jews rise to relative power and prosperity, unprecedented in two millennia? Those of us who were raised Jewish grew up believing the answer is a unique work ethic and dedication to education. That answer is an oversimplification at best, though it's not entirely inconsistent with an academically-accepted theory. Jews in Europe were typically not permitted to own or work the land. Often, they were also barred from working with their hands. What was left? Buying and selling—and, for a select few, money lending—all roads to poverty and antisemitism in premodern Europe. Buying and selling,

though, is what we call wholesale and retail in industrial America, where expertise in finance is also highly valued. Powerlessness in Europe paradoxically prepared our immigrant predecessors to succeed in America.

Brandeis professor Alexander Kaye offers a different theory: America was largely built on the backs of African American slaves and remains dependent on the labor of a persisting black underclass. Coming to America, Jews encountered a country where we were not the “dominant other.” Unlike our situation in Europe, we always had somebody else beneath us in America.^{xiv} That reality was illustrated recently when my mother was talking with an elderly Houston lawyer, white and Christian, retired from partnership in a major law firm. My mother noted that my father, graduating number one in his University of Texas Law School class in 1961, could not get a job at such firms in Houston. “Oh yes,” the man replied, “we began hiring Jewish attorneys shortly after that. And then a few years later our first woman. And then after that our first black attorney.”^{xv}

Mijal Bitton urges us not to forget our relatively privileged position in America, even in the wake of 5779, the most fatal year of antisemitism in American history. She points to the front-page headline of the Pittsburgh *Post-Gazette* on November 2, 2018. Atop a photograph of mourners huddled under umbrellas at a funeral for Tree of Life massacre victims, the newspaper published a banner headline in Hebrew letters, *Yitgadal v'yitkadash sh'mei rabbah...* Suffice it to say that no European city's newspaper printed the words of our Jewish mourners' prayer in the aftermath of a 19th Century pogrom.

What shall we do with American Jews' relative position of power in 2019? First, we should celebrate it. The gathering of our interfaith community, including Arkansas' highest government officials, overflowing this Sanctuary more than on any other occasion in our history, offers solace if not complete comfort.

That kind of support is something for which we must be boundlessly grateful. Let us never forget that, on November 8-9, 1938, on Kristallnacht, the Nazis destroyed hundreds of German and Austrian synagogues and Jewish businesses and sent scores of Jews to concentration camps. At that time, unlike last year, virtually no one outside the Jewish community rallied to our side.

But, as Joseph's example demonstrates, Jewish power will not last if we do not direct it ethically. Like Roosevelt's “Jew Dealers” before us, let us take up the cause of those whose powerlessness we recognize from our own painful history of harassment, persecution and genocide. Let us remind America of the promise of the Declaration of Independence, that “all...are created equal.” Let us live out the words of a Jewish woman of another era, whose poetic exhortation is inscribed on

our Statue of Liberty, “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free....”^{xvi} Let us assure that the door to those seeking American freedom and opportunity is not slammed shut behind us. And let us never rest until that opportunity is truly available to every single American, native-born or immigrant, without exception. Then, like the “Jew Dealers” before us, let us be remembered for good.

ⁱ Doris Kearns Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time, Franklin & Eleanor Roosevelt: The Home Front in World War II*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994.

ⁱⁱ Mijal Bitton, “Identity Politics: American Jews, Between Power and Vulnerability,” Rabbinic Torah Seminar, Shalom Hartman Institute, Jerusalem, July 16, 2019. My explication of the Joseph narrative here is deeply informed by Bitton’s lecture.

ⁱⁱⁱ Genesis 37:25-28.

^{iv} Genesis 41:25-36.

^v Genesis 41:39-40.

^{vi} Genesis 41:54-57, 42:1-3, 25-26.

^{vii} Genesis 47:20-21, 23-26.

^{viii} Genesis 47:11, 27.

^{ix} Hulin 40b, suggested by Mijal Bitton.

^x Uriel Simon, “Joseph Enslaves the Egyptians to Pharaoh,” *Seek Peace and Pursue It*, Tel Aviv University, 2002. Text provided and translated by Mijal Bitton.

^{xi} Exodus 1:8.

^{xii} Ashley May and Josh Hafner, “Pittsburgh synagogue shooting: What we know, questions that remain,” *USA Today*, October 29, 2018.

^{xiii} *Ibid.*

^{xiv} Yehuda Kurtzer, “The Jewish People in the Family of Nations,” Rabbinic Torah Seminar, The Shalom Hartman Institute, Jerusalem, July 14, 2019.

^{xv} Gay Block email, September 14, 2019.

^{xvi} Emma Lazarus, *The New Colossus*, 1883.