



FAMILY TIES

After a hard year for the Jews, what can we learn about Jewish peoplehood, antisemitism, and our rightful place in a sometimes hostile world?

Yom Kippur 5780

In our first year of college, David and I would stay up all night sharing stories from our childhood. One night, we started talking about our b'nai mitzvah, and I asked him what the theme of his bar mitzvah had been. "Theme?" he asked. "What do you mean?" I said, "You know: carnival, baseball, Under the Sea, Vegas... the theme! Mine was ice cream." He said, without an ounce of irony: "The theme of my bar mitzvah was Torah."

That sealed it for me: this nerdy Jew would be the father of my children.

Cut to this past spring, it's our daughter Sami's bat mitzvah. We spent about 13 years looking forward to it—and having now walked through this experience with so many of you and your families, and with our oldest, Eva, we had our priorities straight. The theme of her bat mitzvah would be Torah. (With a subtle nod to Star Wars. It was on May the 4th.)

But when the big day finally came, we were holding not only joy and gratitude, but also real fear and great sadness, all in the same heart, because just one week earlier, a white supremacist walked into a Chabad in Poway shouting "F- the Jews," and shot the place up. It was a terrifying indication that the massacre at Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, exactly six months earlier, had not happened in isolation, but was perhaps a harbinger of a newer, more violent trend in antisemitic hatred in America.

I have spent the past several months wondering: what really is the Torah of this moment? What does it mean to be a Jew in the world today? How can we walk through the world as thoughtful, open-hearted, intellectually curious and spiritually alive human beings in a time when it is, once again, not terribly safe to be a Jew?

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It sometimes takes overt hostility from the outside world for us to cast loving eyes on our own Jewish family. After the shooting in Poway, I felt a desperate need to talk to my kids, not just about the dangers of extremism, gun violence, racism, and our toxic culture of hatred. I wanted to talk to them about Jewish peoplehood. I felt the need for them to understand that as different as many Jews dress, daven and vote, I know in my heart that something powerful and perhaps eternal binds us to one another. I wanted my kids to understand that on some mystical level, there is a force that stretches invisibly between every Jew, binding us to one another over the generations and across geographical and ideological boundaries. That's why an attack on any Jewish community feels like an attack on us all.

And even still, I admit that I struggled to articulate what unites us beyond the fact that we are hated by the same White Nationalist terrorists, or that we'd have been thrown into the same cattle car.

Last month, I joined a group of thirty-six scholars in Jerusalem for a forum called Our Common Destiny, convened by President Ruvy Rivlin. It was a diverse group of Israeli and diaspora Jews—rabbis, professors and activists—from Tel Aviv and hilltop settlements, from Los Angeles, Paris, Hong Kong, Buenos Aires and Budapest. It included, among others, two Haredi (Ultra-Orthodox) settler rabbis and three women rabbis. We were brought together in a time of growing polarization and division to determine what, if anything, unites us as a people, and what, if anything, we are willing to do about it.

We met with President Rivlin at *beit haNasi*, his home, and I was honored to be asked to address him, to share my perspective as an American Jew.

I started by saying that every time I step off the plane at Ben Gurion airport, I think of the miraculous birth of the state of Israel, the ingathering of the exiles, the countless acts of heroism, the revitalization of Hebrew as a language and culture, the stunning achievements in art, science, medicine and technology. I realize that my great grandparents, and their parents, and theirs could only have dreamed of walking the streets of Jerusalem and breathing its air.

And even as I hold a profound awareness of the miraculous and the remarkable, I must be honest that my heart is heavy when I think of the Jewish State and the Jewish people today, as I see the growing rifts between religious and secular, right and left, Israeli Jews and diaspora Jews that threaten to tear our people apart.

I went on to address some of those rifts. I spoke about how many American Jews, who are deeply invested in protecting an endangered democracy here in the United States, are pained to see a right-wing ultra-nationalist government actively undermining democratic norms in Israel, not to mention willing to align with extremist and even antisemitic regimes abroad.

Most American Jews, I shared, root their Jewish practice in Torah values of love, justice, and the ceaseless striving for peace—for our own people and for all people. We know Israel must exist in the real world and faces real threats. But the Jewish State—which calls on American Jews for support and partnership—must persist in striving to be not only a Jewish refuge, but also a reflection of core Jewish values, which are also its own founding values. Meanwhile, Israeli society seems now to be turning a blind eye to overt, corrosive racism and xenophobia emerging not only from the margins, but from the Prime Minister's office and permeating much of the political establishment.

I come from a Jewish community, I shared, that is deeply disturbed by the decoupling of Torah from compassion and decency. We are increasingly anguished not only by a 52-year occupation that denies millions of Palestinians their basic civil rights, but also by the hardening of the Jewish heart toward Palestinians, foreign workers and asylum seekers in Israel. We're pained when those who call themselves 'religious' sometimes use our Holy texts to justify hatred, insularity, and violence.

Our Jewish community, I said, knows well the external challenges we face: the ongoing threat of terror and global antisemitism. But until now, we have failed to adequately address the growing chasm—both political and psychic—that is tearing our people apart. It serves no one when we stubbornly persist in waving the banner of Jewish unity, with the all-too-often-empty promises it holds. Indeed, it's long past time for us to reckon with these foundational differences.

After my talk, one of the Haredi rabbis in our group, a leader of the settler movement—by many measures my ideological opposite—told me that he was hurt by my words. I asked him if he'd be willing

to tell me more about what upset him, and then something extraordinary happened: we sat down for lunch together in the hotel restaurant and talked for nearly three hours.

We talked about the settlement enterprise, which he sees as a blessing and a miracle, and I see as an engine of human rights abuses, and a danger to the State of Israel. We spoke about harsh restrictions on the Palestinians, which he sees as necessary for security and I see as a violation of basic principles of both Torah and democracy. We shared our understanding of the Torah's thirty-six commandments regarding treatment of the *ger*, the stranger, which he believes are a suggestion in the abstract, and I believe are the very essence of our religious commitment. We talked about violent Jewish extremism, which he believes does not exist, and to suggest it does is to slander his community, and which I see as a potentially fatal danger to Israeli democracy. And we happened to touch on our feelings about the U.S. President (I'll let you guess where we both stood on that one).

The conversation ended with him inviting me to come out to his settlement for Shabbat (I respectfully declined) and me inviting him to come experience Shabbat at IKAR (he respectfully declined).

Though the conference was designed to lift up our shared bonds, I left with an even clearer sense than before of what divides us. And the answer to that is: nearly everything.

And even still, I admit that I walked away with a strange feeling of tenderness toward him. That, and a strong sense that in this day and age, the fact that neither of us walked away from the table for three hours does mean something.

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One thing I'm certain this rabbi and I would agree on is the fact that antisemitism is back, and it's on the rise. The shooting at Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, last October was the most violent antisemitic attack in the history of the United States.

Many in our community grew up in that shul. My friend and colleague, R' Jon Berkun, grew up there too; his father was the rabbi. Last fall, he shared some of what he experienced at the many funerals he attended in the aftermath of the shooting. One woman, Jeannina, whose father-in-law Daniel was among the victims, was raised Catholic but always knew that her ancestors were crypto-Jews, mysteriously lighting candles on Friday nights and discreetly avoiding pork. She was eager to reclaim her Jewish roots, and she studied with R' Berkun for conversion. She ultimately married a Jewish man whose family was part of Tree of Life, and she had just given birth to their first child when the shooting occurred. R' Berkun described that Jeannina sobbed in his arms at the graveside as she shared: "My ancestors suffered in Spain during the Inquisition. When I had my son, I believed he would never suffer like they did. Now look at him! He will grow up without a grandfather."

R' Berkun wrote:

When someone chooses Judaism as an adult, the Talmud requires that the Rabbi first warn: "Don't you know that the Jewish people are anguished... despised and harassed, and hardships are frequently visited upon them?" (Yevamot 47a). Ten years ago in America, I would say this line as a kind of joke. It simply did not capture the experience of being Jewish in the USA. But I said it anyway in homage to our painful past. I cannot believe that in 2018, I now must say it in earnest.

Pittsburgh and Poway were the most deadly manifestations of this resurgent antisemitism. But over the past couple of years, antisemitic assaults, attacks and incidents of vandalism have risen significantly around the world—in particular in the United States, France, Britain and Germany. And I'm so sorry to tell you this, but we just got [word](#) that a couple of hours ago—on this Yom Kippur day—there was a deadly attack on a synagogue in Halle, Germany, by a terrorist who blamed the Jews for all human suffering.

In America, the rise in antisemitism mirrors the broader trend: an indisputable rise in hate crimes related to race, ethnicity, religion and sexuality over the past three years. So we must consider antisemitism in the context of racialized hatred that today tears our country apart, while acknowledging, as Eric Ward reminds us, that antisemitism doesn't function quite like any other form of oppression or hatred.

Antisemitism is a conspiracy theory that makes us, the Jews, the greatest threat to the human family. Read Deborah Lipstadt: antisemitism today is rooted in the notion that Jews control the banks and the media. We are cheap and rich, capitalists and communists, nationalists and globalists. Dually loyal and disloyal all at once. And now, *shifty* too (as in, Shifty Schiff).

Antisemitism is a pervasive, viral form of hatred that lives on the left and on the right, among the rich and the poor, the educated and the ignorant, in blue states and red. Antisemitism anywhere is a threat to Jews everywhere.

And at the same time, it's important that we're clear: the people who have engaged in murderous acts of violence against Jews in this country are all right-wing White Nationalist terrorists whose goal is nothing short of the total eradication of Jews and People of Color from this country.

These White Nationalists abide a particular brand of antisemitism that was honed over centuries in Europe and has now successfully migrated to the US. This is a right-wing, nationalistic antisemitism, in which the Jews—the ultimate outsiders—conspire to commit a “white genocide” by undermining systems of white power through funding and supporting movements for social change.

Over the past three years, America has turned from a place with a constant but quiet undercurrent of this antisemitism to a place in which antisemitism is fed, fueled, and funded from the highest offices. The Pittsburgh shooter wrote that he believed Jews were responsible for bringing a “third-world caravan” of approaching “invaders” to our borders. This language is inspired directly from the President's Twitter feed.

Now accusations of Globalists manipulating the economy and cheating American workers have permeated the consciousness of a generation of angry, disaffected white men who were looking for a scapegoat, and have been handed one. Just a few days ago, the President's son attacked the Jewish Chair of the House Intelligence Committee as “hand-picked and supported by George Soros.” We all know where this kind of rhetoric leads.

At the same time, we must remain vigilant to all manifestations of antisemitism, even when it comes from allies and friends. As my friend Rabbi Jill Jacobs writes, antisemitism in America today “increasingly masquerades as criticism of Israel.” Criticism of Israel is not necessarily antisemitic, but Israel's critics often—whether through ignorance or hatred—slide seamlessly from criticism of the policies of the state

of Israel into criticism of the Jewish people. We've now reached a point at which "Jews increasingly feel unwelcome on the left unless they abandon their commitments to Israel" altogether.

I have also experienced an alarming and concerning lack of sensitivity to Jewish history and the experience of Jewish suffering, even among some leaders in movements for racial, economic and gender justice. It's not uncommon to hear voices from the left playing with the same antisemitic language and tropes of their ideological foes from the right. And critically, many downplay Jewish vulnerability, failing to understand the peculiar trajectory of Jewish trauma. Historically, even from positions of power, privilege, and security, catastrophe has come abruptly and without warning.

This year when I read Megillat Esther, the Purim story, I was most taken by one detail in the text I hadn't noticed before. The villain, Haman, is in great distress about Mordecai the Jew's refusal to honor him by bowing before him. He approaches King Ahashverosh and asks for permission to kill not only Mordecai, but all the Jews—because then, as now, one Jew represents, to the antisemite, all Jews. He tells the king that he is so determined to kill the Jews that he's willing to pay for it—10,000 talents of silver! (Esther 3:9) But the king, rather than take Haman's money, says "You know what? Go ahead and do it for free."

We don't know exactly what Ahashverosh's relationship was like with the Jews before this. We know there were Jews in his court, among his judges and officials, maybe even friends.

But why would he agree to Haman's plot to kill all those innocent people? The Rabbis answer (Megillah 14a): Ahashverosh himself harbored resentment toward the Jews. His hatred was more subterranean, more of a passive racism. But when given the opportunity, he was delighted that Haman had similar aspirations and was willing to do the job for him.

In other words, Haman's hatred for Mordecai and Jewish people alone was not sufficient to create conditions for genocide. But his overt antisemitism met up with a more subtle hatred and when given opportunity to erupt, together they erupted.

As Megillat Esther reinforces, antisemitism unchecked penetrates all aspects of a society. If it's not honestly and openly addressed, it—like any viral infection—will fester beneath the surface until it's given permission to emerge dangerously into the light of day.

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I know these are scary times. But we must not be driven by fear.

In the Book of Numbers, the Israelite people are blessed by the gentile prophet Bilam as an עַם לְבַדָּהּ—*a people that dwells apart, not reckoned among the nations* (Bamidbar 23:9). This notion has become critical to our self-definition and identity, and to many seems to reflect an eternal truth: We stand apart from the world. As much as we try to assimilate, or at least integrate into the dominant cultures in which we live, we are consistently reminded that we are different, and will never fully be accepted.

To be clear, this self-understanding has grown out of years of collective trauma. The lesson of our history is clear: we can trust no one. No one will defend us, so we must defend ourselves.

On some level, constant vigilance paired with the sense that we must go-it-alone has been a survival mechanism for our people through the many difficult chapters of history. But sadly, in its extreme, this

am levadad yishkon mentality has become an empathy-blocker when it comes to those outside our Jewish community. With this worldview, compassion is at best a sign of weakness; at worst an act of treason.

The message: our people has been through hell. We have every justification now to do what we need to gain strategic advantage, even if it violates core Jewish values and long standing norms, even if it means alienating our allies and friends, even if it means partnering with known bigots, and even antisemites, like the two white evangelical pastors who were paraded to the new Embassy in Jerusalem to offer a blessing. One of the pastors had preached that the Jews will suffer for eternity in hell, while the other said that Hitler was an agent of God, fulfilling a biblical prophecy against the Jews. But as a people misunderstood and detested by the world, the thinking goes, we must cast our lot with whomever is willing to shower favor upon us.

Of course, there is another Jewish mentality, also rooted in trauma. This camp works to define itself not by its victimhood, but by its values. It is rooted in a *לֹא־טוֹב הָיְתָה הָאָדָם לְבַדָּוּ* mentality, from the Creation story in the Book of Genesis: *“It is not good for a person to be alone...”* (Bereishit 2:18). This Jewish mindset is grounded in compassion and empathy, and responds to Jewish suffering by deepening relationships with others who similarly suffer. Rejecting the false binary of universalist or particularist, this kind of Jew insists on holding both. It is precisely her particular connection to Jewish history and tradition that forms the foundation of her to universalistic commitments.

So are we, at the end of the day, a nation alone in the raging sea of hatred, eternal outsiders understood by no one, suspicious of everyone? Or do we see ourselves as part of a precious and fragile web of humanity, linked by both shared interests and a common destiny? Because the answer to that question may lie at the heart of the schism tearing apart the Jewish people.

In the aftermath of the Holocaust, Abraham Joshua Heschel declared that this was the foundational and eternal question for the Jews. It was clear where he stood: “None of us can do it alone,” he wrote. “Our era marks... the end of self-reliance. [We] share the perils and the fears; we stand on the brink of the abyss together... No religion is an island. We are all involved with one another” (Abraham Joshua Heschel, *No Religion is an Island*).

The fact is, there are good people all over the world who are horrified by the rise in antisemitic violence, who stand with us in solidarity, and who have held us in our most vulnerable hours with love. Like my Muslim friend here in LA who texted hours after one of the synagogue attacks and said: “I am here right by your side. I will do whatever you need. I will stand in front of IKAR to protect your community next shabbat if you want me to.” And my pastor friends, one of whom wrote: “I am so sorry for what hate has done in our midst. I don’t have adequate words and yet I won’t be silent. Whatever I can do to eradicate antisemitism, I will do that. I stand with you.” And so many more.

That indicates to me that yes—we are different. But we are not alone and we are not apart. There are so many good people who are our partners, allies, and friends, who stand on the same side of history we do, who care deeply about our safety, even as they worry for their own.

And we must remember: we are not the only people experiencing profound vulnerability right now. The shooting in Poway was one week after 250 people, including 45 children, were killed in ISIS attacks on churches in Sri Lanka, and only a few weeks after the horrific massacre at the mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, by a White Nationalist inspired by the Pittsburgh shooting. Two months later, suicide

bombers blew up a Catholic Mass in the Philippines. And the terror attack at Zion Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston and the Sikh Temple in Oak Creek are still fresh in our memory.

The fact is that good people everywhere feel under attack amid the broader cultural trend of hatred and demonization of minority communities. Extremist violence threatens not only Jews, but also Muslims, Latinos, Blacks, LGBTQ folks, immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers. Attacks are not only in synagogues, but in churches, mosques, schools, and Walmarts. And they are not only destroying people's lives, they are threatening to undermine our democracy and unravel the entire social fabric.

So, as much as I sometimes feel—as a Jew—deeply misunderstood, and even scared, I know that we gain nothing by further isolating ourselves. Instead, even when we're fearful and anguished—like I am today after hearing of the attack in Germany—we must stand up together, deepening our bonds of connectedness. As much as there is a globally networked community of hate on social media, we are called to build globally networked communities of love. We need our allies and friends by our side, and we must also stand by theirs. Arm in arm, side by side, reclaiming—through our tears and our conviction—an ethic that treats every one of us with love, respect, and dignity.

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So I flew to Jerusalem to see what unites the Jews, and I came back with a deeper awareness of what divides us. But after a really challenging year, here are two stories that give me a sense of where the meaning might be found nevertheless:

Two months ago, an 18-year-old Israeli Jew named Dvir Sorek was stabbed to death in a terror attack in the West Bank. He was raised in the settlement of Ofra and studied in yeshiva in Gush Etzion. He was killed on his way back from Jerusalem, where he bought end-of-year gifts for his rabbis. Those gifts, which were still in his arms when his body was found, were copies of David Grossman's new book. This revelation surprised many people—Grossman, one of the great moral voices in the country, has for years been an outspoken opponent of the occupation and the settlement enterprise. So his work seemed an unlikely choice for Sorek, a young settler, to be reading, let alone sharing with his rabbis.

When he heard about the murder, Grossman reached out to the young man's grieving parents. He [told](#) them he had heard that their son was "a kind, sensitive, youth who loved others and loved peace, with the soul of an artist." "I say from experience, this is the start of a very long and difficult road," Grossman told them. And he knows, having lost his own son Uri in the final days of the Second Lebanon War, two days after he stood with Amos Oz and A.B. Yehoshua to call upon the conscience of the nation and plead for an end to the fighting.

"The image of [this boy] hugging my book breaks my heart," Grossman said.

It is a heartbreaking image. Dvir Sorek, an Orthodox yeshiva student from the settlements, read David Grossman. Maybe it helped him imagine someone very different from himself; maybe it helped him better understand himself. Grossman writes that when someone sees our humanity, it allows us to be complex, multilayered beings. Ironically, because of Sorek's willingness to see Grossman's humanity, he himself will be remembered as a more complex, multilayered being.

A second story, from my friend Sarah Tuttle-Singer, a brilliant writer in Israel, about a recent encounter she had with an Arab taxi driver:

It's evening and the driver is laughing.

"What?" I ask my one earbud still in my ears while I listen to Red Hot Chili Peppers.

"That guy — Menachem," he points to the driver of the taxi next to us. "He makes me laugh."

He rolls down the window. "Shalom! Ma kore? — How are you?" he shouts in Hebrew — his "k" hard and his "o" guttural.

Menachem in the other taxi rolls [down his window and] waves "kif halak?" He replies in Arabic, as he adjusts his black yarmulke.

We drive off.

"Do all the taxi drivers know each other?" I ask.

"Of course! We are family! We all look out for each other even when we don't agree on anything. When Menachem's wife died, I came for shiva, and we break the fast together at least once every Ramadan."

"Wow that's great."

"It's just reality. We have to be gentle with each other. At the end of the day, everyone just wants to get home."

All the violence of these past few years has shattered our sense of safety. But I wonder if the Torah of our time is to break out of the smallness of the moment and remember to look out for one another. To stretch to see one another as the complex, multilayered beings we all are. To be gentle with one another. Because at the end of the day, everyone just wants to get home.

G'mar hatimah tovah.