

Antisemitism and the Meaning of Hanukkah Today
Beacon UU Congregation
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In November 2018, the Smithsonian Magazine published an article in their history section by Dara Horn called “Becoming Anne Frank.” The article is identical to the first chapter of Horn’s subsequent book entitled, “People Love Dead Jews: Reports from A Haunted Present.” The chapter is called “Everybody’s Second Favorite Dead Jew.” Yes, the book has a provocative title, and it has garnered a good deal of attention and praise. Horn also launched a podcast called “Adventures with Dead Jews.” She is bright and unflinching. She makes it hard to look away. And should we, even if we safely can?

In her Smithsonian article, Horn begins with the sentence “People love dead Jews. Living Jews, not so much.” She goes on to explain that “this disturbing idea was suggested by an incident this past spring at the Anne Frank House, the blockbuster Amsterdam museum built out of Frank’s secret annex, a series of tiny hidden rooms where the teenage diarist lived with her family and four other persecuted Jews, for over two years, before being captured by Nazis and deported to the Auschwitz death camp in 1944.”

Her diary has been translated into 70 languages and has sold over 30 million copies. The museum hosts well over a million visitors a year who take selfies in tight spaces like they are at a theme park. The museum is meant to memorialize and honor the memory of a Jewish Holocaust victim but “when an employee in 2017 tried to wear his yarmulke (his skull cap) to work, he was told to hide it under a baseball cap.”

“The museum’s managing director told newspapers that a live Jew in a yarmulke might “interfere” with the museum’s “independent position.” Horn remarks that, “The museum finally relented after deliberating for six months, which seems like a rather long time for the Anne Frank House to ponder whether it was a good idea to force a Jew into hiding.”

It turns out that the success of Frank’s diary depended on playing down her Jewishness. Two direct references to Hanukkah were edited out. Horn explains: “Concealment was central to the psychological legacy of Anne Frank’s parents and grandparents, German Jews for whom the price of admission to Western society was assimilation, hiding what made them different by accommodating and ingratiating themselves to the culture that had ultimately sought to destroy them. That price lies at the heart of Anne Frank’s endless appeal. After all, Anne Frank had to hide her identity so much that she was forced to spend two years in a closet rather than breathe in public.

And that closet, a hiding place for a dead Jewish girl, is what millions of visitors want to see.”

Hence, people love dead Jews, especially Anne Frank. Living Jews, not so much. Yes, this is a blanket statement and of course, there are Jews we love, personally and in society. Even so, I must share with you that this week has been a hard one for me in the sermon research and writing department. When you spend many hours delving into the history of antisemitism and the spike in Jewish hate crimes today, it's no picnic. Just incredibly sad, demoralizing, and in some cases, horrifying. Not just because I am a Jew. But because I am a human being who wants to believe in the goodness within humanity and our capacity to bend towards love, acceptance, reason, and harmony.

Today, we light the first Hanukkah candle. Over the next week, those who celebrate will light a total of eight candles, sing songs, eat latkes, spin a dreidel, exchange gifts and tell the story. Like so many other Jewish festival holidays – Purim and Passover, for instance – Hanukkah is a celebration of prevailing over authorities who wanted to prohibit Jews from being free, practicing their religion, even staying alive. Hanukkah honors dead brave Jews who were very much alive at the time of their peril and their heroism. There's a classic Jewish joke about this: “They tried to kill us, they didn't succeed, let's eat.”

In this story from the Old Testament books, Maccabees I and II, the Jews were under the brutal control of the Syrian King Antiochus in 168 BCE. The Syrians had desecrated their temple and abolished the observance of Shabbat and the festivals. Jews were offered two options: conversion or death. A Jewish resistance movement formed, led by the Maccabees, and when they were fortified sufficiently, they stormed down from the hills and reclaimed the temple.

The observance of Hanukkah, the lighting of the Menorah, is a Talmudic addition. The ritual dramatizes that the liberators found only one small jar of oil sufficient for one day when they entered the ransacked temple. A messenger was sent to secure more oil and it took eight days to complete his mission, and miraculously that single jar of oil continued to burn until his return. Hanukkah means “dedication,” commemorating the purification and rededication of that temple. It reminds Jews (and Jewish allies) to rededicate themselves to keeping alive the flame of Jewish personhood and culture. And perhaps more than ever, to protect Jews around the world from the threat of antisemitism that is as old as time and as new as yesterday's headlines.

I'm deeply indebted today to the extraordinary websites of both the Anti-Defamation League (or ADL) and the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC. Much of the information in this sermon has been provided by them. The museum website includes a 13 minute video on the history of antisemitism that is impressive, heartbreaking and bone-chilling.

Let's begin with a statistic. There were 2,700 reported hate crimes against Jews in 2021 (63% of all religiously motivated hate crimes). According to a nationally representative March 2018 survey, commissioned by the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, only 36 percent of millennials (ages 18-34) in the United States knew that six million Jews perished during the Holocaust.

Antisemitism has commonalities with racism, anti-Muslim bias, xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia, misogyny and other forms of hate and discrimination. It also has certain unique characteristics as a specific set of ideologies about Jews that has migrated across time and space. In almost every part of society, this hatred has been conjured and adjusted to suit the values, beliefs and fears of specific demographics and contexts. We cannot fight antisemitism without understanding how it is both intertwined with other forms of prejudice and how it is unique. While antisemitism obviously harms and worries Jews, we must also be mindful that it threatens democracy and is an indicator of the overall health of a society, of a society's capacity to think reasonably and behave humanely. Antisemitism attacks Jews specifically, but it is the body politic that is ultimately impoverished by it.

We need to acknowledge the intersectionality of hate and oppression. For instance, even as the United States observed the rise of fascism in Europe in the 1930s, plenty of Americans were sympathetic to Nazism, and much of America remained complicit in the Jim Crow racial caste system that legally suppressed Black American life. In fact, Nazi race laws drew directly from the influence of American racial policies. These beliefs still exist today. There are plenty of White supremacists throughout the world who would round up both Jews and African Americans in one fell swoop.

We face complicated challenges in today's world. The lack of simple, straightforward answers emboldens those who seek an easy culprit to blame for those problems. The hateful myths and conspiracy theories levied against Jews throughout history offer accessible templates for such blame. Widespread anxiety about globalization, mass migration and economic inequality — especially after the 2008 financial crisis — have created the conditions in which antisemitism has always festered. Seeking a simple explanation for complex social change, anti-Jewish bias serves as a useful smokescreen as some people entertain a familiar conspiracy theory: when transnational forces provoke crisis or cause injustice, they allege that Jews must be responsible.

The term "globalist" — often used as a derogatory code-word for Jews — evokes this antisemitic myth, falsely accusing mysterious agents of multiculturalism and international cooperation of weakening America from within. You've heard it - Kanye West arguing that Jews are running the world, Marjorie Taylor Greene sounding some looney

alarm about “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion,” a virulently antisemitic tract about Jewish world domination that was written by Russian secret police in 1900 and translated into nearly every Western language. Even though it has been debunked, we still hear it mentioned in reference to George Soros, calling him as the ultimate “globalist.” In reality, Soros, a survivor of the Nazi occupation of Hungary has given more than \$32 billion of his personal wealth to the Open Society Foundation, promoting democracy around the world.

Sometimes the accusation of Jewish greed comes from observations or assumptions about Jewish wealth, perceived as inherently undeserved. Here’s a statistic that may surprise you: While, according to a 2016 Pew research report, American Jews, overall, do represent the highest-earning religious group in the United States, more than half of American Jewish households earn less than \$99,000 per year, with 31 percent earning less than \$49,000. Jews are not all Rothschilds. Moreover, the association of Jews with moneylending began because Christians barred Jews from other guilds and found it convenient for them to handle the unsavory enterprise of usuary.

Jews have given the world some notable human beings, and yes, they have held powerful positions in society. Albert Einstein, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Jonas Salk, Mark Zuckerberg, David Geffen, Steven Spielberg, and Stephen Sondheim. Saul Bellow, Phillip Roth, Elie Wiesel. And by the way, Geffen, Spielberg, and Zuckerberg have also given millions to hospitals, museums and foundations to share their wealth. Yet, cultures of silence and complacent attitudes have helped antisemitism to gain new currency in the United States and around the world. Without the requisite knowledge to recognize this evil, we are at a disadvantage to stop it.

Back in February of this year, I preached a sermon called “Unjudge Someone.” In it, I talked about unconscious bias and how most of us have it in one way or another. So, I ask you to ponder in a private moment whether it is possible that you might possess an unconscious bias regarding Jews? Do you believe that all Jews are affluent, educated? That Jews are shifty or money grubbing like Shylock or a somewhat foreign race? Do you think its plausible that there is a globalist plot led by George Soros that includes a Hollywood pedophile rings and Jewish space lasers?

This question is impacted by the fact that we are here in Flagstaff, AZ with a small and fairly under the radar Jewish population. We are not in Sq. Hill, or Skokie, or Brooklyn. Even so, what did you learn about Jews in your family, in your community, from our culture? Would you have sheltered Anne Frank for 2 years? Would you save a Jewish stranger on a bus in Munich like the character in our story earlier in the service? Would you stand up for the imperiled Jews of the world now? Push back on an antisemitic

comment as you might a homophobic one or a racist one? That is intersectional allyship. That's what we say we stand for as Unitarian Universalists. What our principles ask of us, including the 8th principle that we recently adopted.

This morning, as we begin the annual ritual of lighting one candle each night until the Menorah glows fully, I believe that we can all be Maccabees, coming down from the hills, activating conscience and courage in the fight against antisemitism. And I believe that we can each carry a cruet of oil into humanity's temple, keeping the eternal lamp from going dark. You are the stuff from which such miracles are made.

So may we rise. Blessed be. Blessed we. And Sim Shalom.

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