

Rosh Hashanah Sermon
By Rabbi Stephanie Kramer
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There is an epidemic – a herpes outbreak worldwide. Herpes is a virus; it thrives, and, once someone is infected, the virus is always there, lying beneath the surface, dormant, waiting to cause an outbreak. Outbreaks are typically caused in two ways: there is a stress in one's life that brings on an outbreak or there is a hospitable condition, like when an infection, which gives the virus space to breed. And then it spreads – from one person to another. Our society is in the midst of a herpes epidemic.

Of course... I'm not actually giving a sermon on Rosh Hashanah about herpes. This is Deborah Lipstat's metaphor for antisemitism. Deborah Lipstadt is, a world-renowned historian, Holocaust expert, and author, famous for winning a legal battle against Holocaust denier David Irving. I was able to learn from Deborah this summer at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem.

Lipstat says antisemitism is like herpes, because it doesn't ever go away. It will lay dormant until, "Stress, economic stress, social stress and cultural stress bring on an outbreak. It's not just a matter that antisemitism is coming from the poor. That's too simplistic", she explains, "in that we have leaders of countries... who are willing to stir it up, who are willing to stir up divisions... When you have division, it results in a fracturing of society, and that's when people look for groups to blame for their problems, and that often leads to antisemitism."

Since antisemitism has always been around why, talk about it today? Firstly, because *Rosh Hashanah* the start of our year is known as *Yom Teruah*, the day for the sounding of the *Shofar*. The Hebrew word "*Teruah*" comes from the verb *hitria* meaning "to warn." These blasts, as I have said in years past, are supposed to be your alarm clock, your wakeup call.

Antisemitism today is more prevalent than it has been over the last couple of decades and is on the rise. We need to wake up.

I think my peers would agree that growing up, we questioned how important antisemitism education was for our generation. We believed that the Holocaust was far in the past and that, because of our education and the world's climate, it would never again happen. Jews in America 20-30 years ago felt a safety that we have only read about in history books. Now, something has shifted. Was antisemitism ever eradicated? No, it was dormant.

Next year will be 75 years since the end of the *Shoah*. World memory is fading. Survivors are aging and dying. And it seems that, though it was unacceptable after the Holocaust to be anti-Semitic, the further away we get from the horrific acts of World War II, the more and more comfortable people have become showing off that they, too, hate Jews.

In the last few years, hate crimes are on the rise, and anti-Semitic cartoons, comments and propaganda have come to the forefront. Overt antisemitism by leaders is also on the rise.

Some think that the State of Israel has a lot to do with antisemitism today. *The Wall Street Journal*, in an interview with Mr. Francis Kafat, the president of

Representative Council of French Jewish Institutions, reported that, “A critical difference between today’s antisemitism and its pre-World War II iterations is the existence of Israel...On one level, Israel represents a guarantee of security should things get dramatically worse—a “life insurance policy.” Already, tens of thousands of French Jews have invested in property in Israel or acquired Israeli passports.

But, on another level, Jews in Europe, the U.S. and elsewhere are regularly blamed for Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians.”¹ Honestly, this might be the new rhetoric, but this is the same hate in a different package. The truth is, Israel is 70 years old, much younger than antisemitism. Israel is not causing the rise in antisemitism today.

In her new book, *Antisemitism Here and Now*, Lipstat describes four categories of antisemitism. These categories provide an interesting model for understanding the differences in what we are seeing. She describes the categories as The Extremist, The Anti-Semitic Enablers, The Dinner Party Antisemite and the Clueless Antisemite.

The Extremist Antisemite, we know. Their hate oozes from their being. They shout their hate while marching and while physically attacking our community.

The Enablers are those that claim knowing Jews means they cannot possibly be filled with hate, even though their words teeter on being outright anti-Semitic.

Dinner Party Antisemites are the polite antisemites who are easily camouflaged, because their comments are subtle and allusive. They are the people who make comments that you hear and need to essentially do a double-take, before wondering if the person really knew what they were saying.

The final category that Lipstat describes is the Clueless Antisemite. This is just what it sounds like: an otherwise nice, well-meaning person who is completely unaware that he or she has internalized antisemitic stereotypes and is perpetuating them. You can probably think of examples for each kind of antisemitism.

I just hope you do not find comfort living in Northern California. This is not a “center of the country” problem. I know we like to think we live in a bubble. I know we like to think Northern California is hippy liberal, loving everyone, non discriminatory. But it is not.

I am shocked to hear the stories from our teens at public schools. I am shocked to hear that they are nervous wearing stars of David around their necks or outwardly talking about their heritage. What would you say if I told you about a father at my children’s school? When he wears an undershirt, his typical uniform, I can’t help but notice his Nazi tattoo proudly displayed across his chest. The sight of this tattoo frightens me. This is in Santa Rosa.

How many of you can think of a Dinner Party/Polite anti-Semitic comment you have heard in the last year? The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) keeps track of statistics. In 2018, there were 1,879 recorded anti-Semitic incidents in the United States. White supremacists stepped up their activities, and the number of incidents of assault, harassment and vandalism remained at near-historic levels. These attacks

¹ [Trofimov, Yaroslav](#). “The New Antisemitism.” Wall Street Journal.

included incidents on the streets of Jewish neighborhoods in NY, the murder of Jews at prayer in synagogues in Pittsburgh and Poway, school teams signing Nazi songs, and taking pictures of hail Hitler salutes. There were:

39 assaults,
1,066 incidents of harassment
774 incidents of anti-Semitic vandalism.

According to the Simon Wiesenthal Center, “The FBI’s statistics on hate crimes has confirmed that Jews have been the number one religion-based target for hate in America, comprising of 60% of the victims of religious attacks in 2017, even though we make up only 2% of the population.”

On the ADL interactive map, you can look at the anti-Semitic incidents by location. Santa Rosa, specifically, is listed on that map. We are having an outbreak.

Antisemitism is in our backyard and it is also growing rapidly around the world. This year, I was privileged to visit Germany with other rabbis as a guest of the German Consulate. I experienced a starkly different Germany than the one I visited in 2008. Every official from the Jewish community, the media, the government and the organization that took me in 2008 all agreed that antisemitism was on the rise and was a scary problem for Germany as well as the rest of the world. Society is experiencing anti-Semitic outbreaks everywhere; its dormant days are over.

You could walk away from this sermon depressed. After all – I told you that we have an incurable disease in our society that will flare up every so often. But we underestimate our power and our ability to help shove it back beneath the surface where it belongs. This disease can lay dormant for a lifetime.

We can manage this disease. Throwing up our hands, lamenting the state of the world, is not a useful response. We may not be able to prevent every outbreak – but if we assume we are powerless, it will become a self-fulfilling prophecy. We see what is happening. We are not powerless!

So what can we do about it? Now that we are “woke” from the *Shofar* blast, and the anti-Semitic incidents around the world are ringing in our ears, what can we do?

A start would be to stop joking. The clueless antisemite is sometimes actually a Jew... being clueless. We need to stop poking fun at ourselves. Often times, the jokes we start or perpetuate – the ones about being cheap, having a lot of money, or being a JAP, a Jewish American Princess – “get away from us.” They ultimately take on a new life and infiltrate a culture that can breed antisemitism.

Most importantly, we can build bridges. We must build bridges across political, racial, religious, ethnic and cultural divides. We can make sure our streets, synagogues, boardrooms and courtrooms do not allow hate or prejudice. If we allow prejudice of any kind, it will absolutely and ultimately lead to a “hospitable condition” for antisemitism to breed and spread. In order to build these bridges, we must show up for others, show up to interfaith services and commemorations, show up to protest at borders and detention centers, show up for others who are being persecuted in any way. It takes our time and attention. We want to not only rail against hate for our own sake, but because we know too well that hate fosters hate...

So we can call out antisemitism wherever we see it. For four years, I was silent about the SS tattoo... This year I had the courage to speak to the principal. We all need to have that courage, to speak up. We need to condemn hate of any kind.

We can also continue to educate the next generation. Yes, we need to make sure the next generation understands the Holocaust, what can happen if we are not paying attention, but we also want to ensure the next generation of Jews has a strong sense of Judaism and a love for Jewish culture and life. Bari Weiss, in her *NY Times* article, argues that, "The long arc of Jewish history makes it clear that the only way to fight (antisemitism) is by waging an affirmative battle for who we are. By entering the fray for our values, for our ideas, for our ancestors, for our families, and for the generations that will come after us. ... In these trying times, our best strategy is to build, without shame, a Judaism and a Jewish people and a Jewish state that are not only safe and resilient but also generative, humane, joyful and life-affirming. A Judaism capable of lighting a fire in every Jewish soul - and in the souls of everyone who throws in his or her lot with ours." This is the Judaism we want.

This is the Judaism we build here at *Shomrei Torah*. We are stronger and braver and more passionate when we come together as one community.

This year, let us face our world with even more determination and hope, Let us live loud and proud and tell the world Judaism is here to stay. ²

² I am using the spelling for 'antisemitism' preferred by Professor Deborah Lipstadt. Lipstadt removes the hyphen because "semites" on the right of a hyphen presumes there is such a thing as a "semitic" people and there is not. The word as it has been used for the last 150 years means 'hatred of Jews' and not hatred of a nonexistent thing called "semitism." Lipstadt does not capitalize it as a statement: "It doesn't deserve the dignity of capitalization, which in English is reserved for proper names."