

THE LAST BULWARK AGAINST AUTHORITARIANISM

The Purim story reminds us that the real danger is when overt meets latent antisemitism. And in a culture steeped in antisemitism, literally no one is safe. The bulwark against authoritarianism is a multiracial, multifaith coalition, and that coalition is broken today, and risks being fractured beyond repair. We must sound the alarm.

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Last month, violent threats were made to the Hillel at Brown University, directed toward the director and assistant director and their families. Ultimately, no bombs or weapons were found. But I was struck by the particular gut-punch of threats *to a Hillel*—the center of Jewish life on campus—in these times.

What used to be a gathering place for some light shabbat programming and an occasional guest speaker or Talmud shiur, has become, in many universities, a refuge from the toxicity of campus, where the discourse has become increasingly hostile, and even violent. Many Jewish students say they study now in the Hillel building, rather than in the library, to avoid harassment. The campus has shrunk... and now even their safe spaces are targets.

Meanwhile, my kid's university is facing to multiple litigations alleging that it has repeatedly failed to create an environment safe for Jewish students. One recent piece of evidence: a Nazi-style poster around campus called "Who Rules [the University]? a Power MAP." And you may not be surprised to see that at the top of that map—controlling it all!—are two nefarious forces: "*the AJC and other Zionist cultural orgs,*" and "*Israeli Occupation Forces.*" It's a stunner.

It turns out it's not all in our heads, friends.

I spent time with a colleague in another city a couple of weeks ago, a brilliant rabbi and justice leader. He told me that he called his city's multifaith clergy team days after Oct. 7—the group that had stood together for a decade fighting all kinds of racism, antisemitism, Islamophobia... and said, "Hey friends, this moment is so fragile. Let's stand together and show the people that even in this painful moment, we can affirm each other's humanity." No way, he was told by one faith leader he had worked with for years. "I cannot be seen in public *with a Jew.*"

This past week, *Guernica*, a prominent literary magazine, published an essay written by a left-wing British-Israeli Jew. She wrote about her work in peacemaking before October 7th, the pain of the last five months, and her efforts to remain connected to her Palestinian friends and partners, even in the midst of the terrible war. Amid protests, the piece was removed from the site with a note from the literary magazine: "*Guernica regrets having published this piece, and has retracted it.*" Even still, at least 10 staffers resigned from the magazine in protest that the

piece had been posted in the first place. It seems that no Israeli Jewish voice passes the bar of acceptability. Even the lefties, the dissidents, the peacemakers.

It was November when I was first de-platformed—not for my position on the war, not for my connection to Israel, nor for my criticism of Israel. Not for any words I had said or not said, or any regrettable late-night posts, but because “I just can’t platform a prominent JEW right now. I’ll lose half my listeners. I’m so sorry—I hope you understand.”

It happened again this past week. My short, sweet Passover offering for a prominent TV morning show, a couple of months in the making, was summarily cut. No matter that my message is about the plague of darkness and the biological and spiritual need for sacred accompaniment through our darkest hours, “It’s just not the right time for a Jewish message. We’ll get killed if you talk about Gaza. And we’ll get killed if you don’t talk about Gaza. So, we’ll just go with the Cardinal giving an Easter message.”

When I expressed my concern about of a growing national trend of squeezing reasonable Jewish voices from public discourse, I was assured: “This is not a deplatforming! It’s just that it’s a Christian country anyway—it doesn’t make sense to do programming for the Jews, less than 3% of the population.” So there will be no Passover message this year.

We all have our own heartbreaking stories to share from the past few months. And at the same time as it feels like the public space Jews live in is both increasingly narrow and increasingly hostile, it’s getting harder and harder to talk about it. “Antisemitism,” like so many words today, seems to have lost its meaning.

And uttering that increasingly meaningless word seems to elicit rage and fury in some circles. Many argue that claims of antisemitism are exaggerated, fueled by wealthy Jewish donors throwing their weight around. But isn’t it a little bit antisemitic to suggest that pointing out antisemitism is only evidence of how much power Jews have? As Moshe Kasher writes: “That’s gaslighting you never quite get used to...”

At the same time, it’s clear that political forces are cynically using antisemitism as a weapon to advance a political agenda that truly has nothing to do with keeping Jews safe. Their efforts are fueled instead by a desire to delegitimize labor unions and to handicap efforts to build a more just and inclusive America. This is the weaponization of our community’s pain, and we must not feed that beast.

And so we must strive, as we navigate this conversation, to remain careful and thoughtful, honest and clear-headed. We must fight not to be alarmist, even as we sound the alarm.

When it came to building our community, we recognized that the driving force for our Jewish community for decades had been fortification against antisemitism—and we sought to cast a new mold. We would strive to organize not around fear, but around love.

So it was 13 years into our existence, after hundreds of joyous, raucous, shabbatot and holidays, after years of learning and organizing and marching and serving, that I gave my *first* sermon on antisemitism. It was 2017. Rosh Hashanah was only a couple of months after white nationalists marched in Charlottesville. I explained why it had taken me so long:

It's not that it wasn't a problem before Charlottesville: it's that there were always bigger, graver, more urgent problems. As Jews in an America facing moral crisis, plagued by racism and white supremacy, poverty, inequality and climate denial, I didn't want us to focus primarily on our own victimization. Instead, I wanted to draw our attention to the ways in which Jews were called to engage as a fairly privileged segment of a broader culture.

I still believe all of that, but this year [we must recognize that antisemitism is] taking dangerous new shape in America... Very simply: the way that the Jewish community addresses antisemitism today matters.

I addressed, that morning, our relatively new understanding of antisemitism as—in Eric Ward's words—the *beating heart, the fuel that moves the engine of White Nationalism*. I warned that antisemitism, described by James Carroll as “the bug in the software of the West,” was insidious, ever-present illness that excludes Jews from moral concern and allows for heinous acts of violence against us.

It was and is clear to me that 2017 was a moment of great significance in Jewish history. It marked the transition of America from a place, like so many, with an undercurrent of antisemitism, to a place in which antisemitism was overt, unrepentant, and condoned by the state. I warned that we not shield ourselves from the reality of what was metastasizing before our eyes.

At that time—to the consternation of some—it was very important to me to differentiate between right- and left-wing antisemitism. I proclaimed again and again that antisemitism on the left hurt our hearts, but on the right threatened our bodies. We need to differentiate between being unsafe and being uncomfortable, I said.

But at some point in the ensuing years, it became clear to me that that approach was no longer sufficient.

In fact, it was Megillat Esther that helped me realize this, five years ago.

There's one part of the story of Purim, from Megillat Esther, that I bumped into that year, in the way you accidentally walk into a wall one day that has always been in your home, but you realize you'd never really noticed it before. I walked into that wall of narrative years ago, and it changed me. It awakened me. And I've thought about ever since.

Here's the context: Haman is full of rage toward Mordechai, whom he feels has disrespected him by refusing to degrade himself, bowing down to him. And Haman does what antisemites, and actually all racists, do: he decided it would be insufficient to punish only Mordecai, the Jew who insulted him, but instead he would:

לְהַשְׁמִיד אֶת־כָּל־הַיְּהוּדִים אֲשֶׁר בְּכָל־מְלָכוֹת אַחַשְׁוֶרֶשׁ עִם מָרְדֳּכָי

He would wipe out *every last Jew in the entire kingdom, Mordecai's people*. (Esther 3:6)

Haman is slighted by one Jew, and turns his animus toward *all* Jews.

And he's so feverish in his determination to kill every last one of them that he approaches the king with an offer the king can't refuse: I want permission to kill all of your Jews, he says. They're different from the rest of us. It's no longer in our best interest to keep them alive. And I want this so badly, king, he says, so badly that *I'll pay you for the right*. 10,000 talents of silver—a direct deposit into the royal treasury (Esther 3:8-9).

It's a bold offer. 10,000 talents of silver was not nothing. According to some internet sleuthing, that's roughly equivalent to \$226,291,702.50 today. Or, I'm told, the monetary equivalent of 60 million days of labor.

This payment, the rabbis suggest, was more than just an incentive for the king to agree. Haman recognized that the elimination of the Jews would mean a significant loss of revenue to the kingdom—as dead Jews cannot pay taxes. So his donation was a kind of compensatory payment, a way of making the king, and the treasury, whole. It's really quite thoughtful.

...Which makes the king's response all the more astonishing:

וַיֹּסֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת־טַבַּעְתּוֹ מֵעַל יָדוֹ וַיִּתְּנָהּ לְהָמָן בֶּן־הַמִּדְיָתָא הָאֲגָגִי צֶרֶר הַיְּהוּדִים:
וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ לְהָמָן הַכֹּסֶף נָתַן לְךָ וְהָעָם לַעֲשׂוֹת בּוֹ כַּטּוֹב בְּעֵינֶיךָ:

Thereupon the king removed his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the foe of the Jews. And the king said, "The money and the people are yours to do with as you see fit." (Megillat Esther 3:10-11)

You have not only my permission, the king says. You have my blessing.

How can we make sense of this? Jews were hardly a hated minority under King Ahasverosh. In fact, they were fairly prosperous and well-integrated into Persian society. There were Jewish judges and officials... Mordecai himself was an official in the king's court—thought by scholars to be a fully assimilated Jew on account of his name, from *Marduk*, the Babylonian deity (Yeshayahu 39:1).

We have no reason to suspect that the king harbors any ill-will toward the Jews. If he does, we've never seen it. So his enthusiastic embrace of Haman's generous offer ought to give us pause. Thus come the Rabbis to explain:

The Talmud, in tractate Megillah 14a, tells the story of two neighbors. One has a giant mound of dirt just taking up space in his backyard, that he would love to get rid of. The other has a trench, a huge hole in *his* yard, which he would love to fill.

The two quietly mull over their predicament for some time. Until one day—for reasons we do not fully understand—the owner of the ditch finally turns to his neighbor and pointedly asks: would you be willing to sell me some of your dirt, so I can fill my hole? And the owner, *anxious to rid himself of the excess dirt on his property*, replies: *halavai!* are you kidding, brother? I'll give it to you for free!

Similarly, we are to understand, while it had not been obvious at the time, Ahasuerus himself also harbored the fantasy of the Jews' disappearance, albeit, a more subtle, latent fantasy than Haman's. Who, with a mound of dirt on their property, would not want it gone?

And yet, Ahashverosh was reluctant to initiate the conversation. It was not until Haman revealed his own aspirations and shared that he was willing to do the dirty work—literally to take the dirt off his hands—that King Ahashverosh's subterranean fantasy emerged to the light of day. That's why the king accepted no money from Haman—they were both doing the other a favor.

In other words, one man's hatred for Mordecai and the Jews alone was not sufficient to create the conditions for annihilation. It was only when Haman's hatred met up with the quieter hatred in the heart of the king that the Jews' lives were truly in danger.

Here the Megillah-- masquerading as a parody, a spoof, a silly story of feasts and fantasy-- reveals an timeless truth about the way antisemitism manifests in world.

The great danger is not one antisemitism or another... it is when the conditions of our society allow for a flourishing of antisemitism *from multiple quarters at once*.

Ever since I encountered this text, I have refused to engage the debate over what's worse—left or right. It's all worse. The fact of its ubiquitousness, its increasing normativity—this is the real danger.

It has been a few years, and I feel sometimes that I'm screaming into the wind. How can an anti-racism movement not interrogate its own antisemitism? How can people who dream of creating a liberated, multiracial, multifaith democracy, fail to understand that holding on to just this one itty bitty racism will cause the whole house of cards to crumble? How can we even make sense of a movement for justice that seems to have willingly succumbed to—and is now being brought to the brink—by entrenched racism against Jews?

Many of you read last month [Dara Horn's](#) synthesis of David Nirenberg's scholarship explaining this phenomenon. Throughout history:

If piety was a given society's ideal, Jews were impious blasphemers; if secularism was the ideal, Jews were backward pietists. If capitalism was evil, Jews were capitalists; if communism was evil, Jews were communists. If nationalism was glorified, Jews were rootless cosmopolitans; if nationalism was vilified, Jews were chauvinistic nationalists. "Anti-Judaism" thus becomes a righteous fight to promote justice.

[Antisemitism]... is a conspiracy theory: the big lie that Jews are supervillains manipulating others. The righteous fight for justice therefore does not require protecting Jews as a vulnerable minority. Instead it requires taking Jews down.

It's a mind bender, right?

This helps explain the muted reaction to violence and violent threats against Jews. Antisemitism is not seen as an injustice, like other forms of racism. Don't you see? It's a yearning *for* justice that makes people turn on the Jews...

And once you understand that analysis, you start to understand how people who claim that they care about human rights and human dignity, about women's rights and bodily autonomy can downplay, deny, justify, or even celebrate atrocities committed against Israeli Jews.

And here's one more piece of the puzzle: in [Franklin Foer](#)'s words this past week:

Antisemitism is a deeply embedded mental habit... a tendency to fixate on the Jews, to place them at the center of the narrative, overstating their role in society and describing them as the root cause of any unwanted phenomena—a centrality that seems strange, given that Jews constitute about 0.2 percent of the global population.

Or, as the producer explained to me: less than 3% of the American population.

This helps us understand the flyer circulating on my kid's campus—Jews must control the university, because Jews are the center of the narrative. The root cause of all human suffering.

The composite picture here is chilling: taking down the Jew, a nefarious force, a fifth column striving for—or already holding—power and domination, is necessary to manifest a vision of a just world. Collective liberation never meant to include us.

I don't want to be alarmist. But I am sounding the alarm.

In 1948, just as the world was grappling with the extent of the devastation of the Jews of Europe, Simon Rawidowicz wrote an essay called "*Am Ha-Holekh Va-Met*—Israel: The Ever-Dying People." His argument, in essence: throughout Jewish history "there was hardly a generation... [that] did not consider itself the final link in Israel's chain. Each always saw before

it the abyss ready to swallow it up.... Often it seems as if the overwhelming majority of our people go about driven by the panic of being the last.”

This was an unlikely argument to emerge in the immediate aftermath of the Shoah. But perhaps it lifted Jews’ spirits to read that the pessimism many felt at that time was actually definitional to Jewish self-understanding and, in fact, a part of the Jewish psyche in every generation.

Amid cover stories today warning that “The Golden Age of American Jews is Ending,” we have to ask ourselves: is this just the latest iteration of eternal Jewish anxiety or is there something distinct about this moment, something that signals a true shift in Jewish consciousness and community?

I worry that this moment really is different. I say this not to scare us. I say it because the hour demands more than quiet expressions of concern. When overt meets latent antisemitism, we are not safe. We’ve seen too many statistics and stories of violent assaults on Jews, desecration of our sacred Jewish spaces, threats to our schools, synagogues and community centers to not sound the alarm.

But that’s not all.

Remember: it is never only Jews who are endangered by antisemitism. The vision of a just and loving society, an anti-racist society—is fundamentally incompatible with antisemitism. **In a culture steeped in antisemitism, literally no one is safe.**

Because the antisemitic lie endangers not only Jews, it endangers our very democracy. **The bulwark against authoritarianism is a multiracial, multifaith coalition.** That coalition is broken today, and risks being fractured beyond repair. Once again in history, the Jews are being used as the wedge to drive apart the only movement that can save us. This is a very precarious moment, only months before what promises to be an extremely contentious election.

Now, every prophetic reading that chant on Shabbat morning, every haftarah, ends with a *nehemta* – with some words of consolation. And every sermon ends with a message of hope. It's irresponsible to sound the alarm and then send people off to lunch.

I don't want to be trite or facile. I am not optimistic about where we are in this moment in history. But I will forever remain hopeful. Because hope is about imagination, hope is about dreaming of a better future, and then working to make that future a reality. I will never give up hope.

So here's where I may differ from some of the dominant voices on antisemitism today. I do not believe that antisemitism is an inevitability, or an eternal force in the natural world.

That same story from Megillah Esther that cries out its warning also plants the seed of hope. That story ends—*after too much violence, which we'll talk more about in the days ahead*—with the Jews prevailing.

In the very last line of the Megillah, we read that Mordecai assumed a position of honor back in the king's court—they must have reconciled!—and he was highly regarded... (listen to the language: by *most* people—not everyone, but *most*). He was *a constant seeker of good for his people, and an unwavering spokesperson for peace for all his descendants*.

The story *can* have a happy ending. I pray that it will for us, too.