

White Nationalism, Antisemitism and the Scapegoat

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Nobel Laureate Sinclair Lewis wrote, “There is no greater compliment to the Jews than the fact that the degree of their unpopularity is always the scientific measure of the cruelty and silliness of the regime under which they live” (p. 242). The line comes from the book, *It Can't Happen Here*, Lewis' dystopian novel about the rise of American Fascism. But unlike Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America*, Lewis is writing in 1935. It features an elected demagogue with populist appeal to white nationalism, an aversion to blacks and a widespread national sentiment that includes the scapegoating of Jews. The protagonist, a newspaper editor, finds himself attacked by the new administration and eventually sent to a New England concentration camp. The Red Scare of the late 40's and 50's is yet to come. At the time of Lewis' writing, there was widespread fear that the world was tipping toward fascism. Here in Baltimore, H.L. Mencken was covering the Crime of the Century while Charles Lindbergh fled the paparazzi for Europe. Five years later Lindbergh, back in the US, helped to found the America First Committee whose supporters included known antisemites like Walt Disney and Lindbergh himself but also, an array of politicians, intelligentsia, artists and authors, right and left wing adherents – including one Sinclair Lewis.

It's so much easier when the bad guys line up with bad ideas and bad policies, isn't it? What do we do when someone supports laws or approaches that seem to conflict with their own values or even their own self-interest? How do we understand black cops who disproportionately target black youth? Or women and immigrants that support a sexist and isolationist president? Or the son of Israel's Prime Minister, Yair Netanyahu, posting antisemitic memes found on Daily Stormer? There's a teaching that suggests Yom Kippur, Yom Kippurim as the Torah says it, is called that because it's a day “like Purim, *Yom K'Purim*.” It's a rich and complex teaching, but the simplest explanation is that each involves drawing lots. Haman, the archetypal antisemite, the first character in our story to call for the wholesale annihilation of our people, wasn't just cruel but capricious – he left the Jewish people's fate up to chance. But the ancient ritual associated with Yom Kippur also involves drawing lots.

וַיָּתֵן אֶהָרֹן עַל־שְׁנֵי הַשְּׂעִירִים גִּרְלוֹת גִּרְלֹת גִּרְלֹת אֶהָדָר לָהּ וְגִרְלֹת אֶהָדָר לְעִזָּאזֵל

“And Aaron shall place lots upon the two goats, one for God and one for Azazel.”

The Mishnah (*Yoma*) explains this means the two goats should be identical in appearance, in color, in size and monetary value and should be acquired in the same transaction. What's going on here? The contemporary Breslover chasid, Rabbi Ya'akov Meir Schechter (*Leket Amarim*), explains the reason the two goats look identical is to remind us of “the thin dividing line that separates the holy and profane....it is very difficult to discern who is indeed for God and who is for the scapegoat.”

Today I want to talk about antisemitism, but I do so with an eye toward understanding why this hatred of us is so insidious. It would be easier to paint with a broad brush, to lump everyone into categories of us and them, or the antisemites and the philosemites. The problem is that while hatred is pretty straightforward, haters are complex. There is Jew-hatred among liberals and

conservatives, men and women, queer and straight, white, brown and black. And, yes, there are Jews who hate us too. In some cases they overtly hate us, but don't identify with us – think Karl Marx. At times they hate us because they are us, and feel ashamed. Sometimes they love us and still feel ashamed and, some would argue, act like they hate us – think some BDS supporters. And sometimes, I would say most often when Jews hate Jews, they do so because, in their minds there are “us” Jews and “them” Jews.

Two years before Sinclair Lewis penned his ironically titled *It Can't Happen Here*, Adolf Hitler was appointed Chancellor of the German Weimar Republic. By July, 1933, Hitler had neutered the Reichstag and banned all except the Nazi Party from elections. In October of that year, a group of Orthodox rabbis, leaders of the Jewish community in Berlin, Halberstadt and Frankfurt am Main sent the following letter: “To the Herr Reich Chancellor: The undersigned Orthodox Jewish organizations, representing that section of German Jewry which considers the Jewish religion as the sole ground and justification of the historical existence of the Jewish people, feel compelled, Herr Reich Chancellor, to set forth openly and honestly their attitude to the Jewish question.”

And what was their attitude? “The German National Socialist party claims that the Jewish race is pernicious and inferior. We would be going too far were we to question the evidence and results of scientific race theory....” So if they didn't question the pseudo-science of Hitler's eugenicists, what was their argument against scapegoating Jews? You guessed it: you're scapegoating the wrong Jews! “When we are reproached with the fact that Jewish hyper-intellectualism... injects a dangerous germ of decay into the German essence, when the attempt is made to represent this as a natural taint of Jewish blood, and when, in support of this claim, the work of modern Jewish writers and scientists, journalists and artists is cited, then we rightly contend that all these people are products of modern rationalist spirit. The true Jewish blood,” these Jews write to Hitler, “the true Jewish race, as it has been shaped... over three thousand years, is represented by no one less than it is by deracinated Jews, people whose intellectual outlook stamps them as twentieth-century Europeans, not as Jews.” Did you catch the move? *Those* Jews, those assimilated Jews in the academy, journalism and the sciences, the Freud's and Einstein's, the Mendelsohn's and Herzl's, they are no Jews at all. The reason for German hatred of the Jewish people is that too many Jews have dared to act German. “The true Jewish people,” these rabbinic leaders wrote, “...guided by their traditional religion, are a virtuous and helpful nation pursuing their path through life with calmness and modesty.”

That was '33. And here is the text of my cousin's sworn affidavit about a pogrom that occurred five years later. *I, the undersigned, Ilse Jacoby, declare under oath, that on November 10, 1938, the following destruction took place in the house of my grandparents, Lazarus and Delphine Burg, Idar-Oberstein 2, Main Street 100. Several doors were broken into by the Nazis, including the kitchen windows. All the porcelain in the kitchen, as well as glassware and furniture were destroyed. A new Singer sewing machine that folded down into its cabinet was made unusable. In addition I would like to add that out of fear I jumped out of a window to protect myself from being personally attacked.*” This was Kristallnacht, in my great-grandparents home. My Grandfather, Montrose Burg fled that home and left for America as a refugee in 1939.

Hitler's Nazi party was elected not to a majority but a plurality of seats, 37%. But three years prior it had only been 18. The ultra-nationalist Alternative for Deutschland Party (AfD), after elections this week, won just south of 13%, but it is now the third largest party in the Bundestag. This isn't France or Hungary, Austria or Poland. This is Germany, not only the country Grandpa Montrose fled but also the country that, by most accounts, has done real *teshuvah*, that teaches the dangers of fascism and antisemitism in its schools, that eschews overt signs of nationalism, that honors its Holocaust memorials. And while the Anti-Defamation League and the German Jewish community's own leaders are fearful about the movement's antisemitic and anti-immigrant rhetoric, their isolationism and the way they've minimized, whitewashed or sometimes expressed pride in the Holocaust, the AfD strangely claims strong support for the State of Israel.

There are two things we need to understand about White Nationalists in Europe and in the US: they have a fundamentally racist ideology, the America Richard Spencer professes to love doesn't look like the America you and I live in. That's one. Two, they do not necessarily believe those of other "inferior" races should disappear, at least not in the short term; it's just that everyone should stay in their lane, in their place. This is how the AfD in Germany or the Unite the Right in the US have adherents who purport to be Zionists. For what it's worth, how sincere they are in their Zionism is suspect, to say the least. *Tablet's* Yair Rosenberg brought Jean-Paul Sartre's 1946 *Anti-Semite and Jew* in a recent talk at the AJC. Sartre wrote: "Never believe that antisemites are completely unaware of the absurdity of their replies. They know that their remarks are frivolous, open to challenge. But they are amusing themselves, for it is their adversary who is obliged to use words responsibly, since he believes in words."

So enough about Germany for now. Let's talk about America, the America our current president is making great again by making it first among the nations. The America where a shul in St. Louis that opens its doors to black lives matter protestors sparks the hashtag "#gasthesynagogue." The America where prominent Jewish journalists are trolled by alt-right sympathizers with meme's of concentration camps. The America where Jewish cemeteries are vandalized and where Nazis and the KKK march through the streets with torches shouting "Jews will not replace us."

Yom Kippur introduces us to the concept of the Scapegoat. The people take their sins and place them on a goat, and this goat is then sent into the wilderness, or perhaps pushed off a cliff. The people's catharsis is predicated on the immolation of some lesser creature. How is it the president of the United States can equivocate on Charlottesville in the wake of an innocent woman's murder? How can that same president not simply rebuke, but call for the firing of athletes for exercising peaceful civil disobedience, a hallmark of our constitution? Should it surprise us at this point to learn that the media consultant who helped the AfD win nearly 13% of Germany's popular vote last week also helped Trump win last year by creating anti-Muslim propaganda videos? And to complicate matters further, that same guy also helped the Netanyahu campaign in 2015. Remember what *Leket Amarim* said: "...it is very difficult to discern who is indeed for God and who is for the scapegoat." For those whose principle worldview includes the toxic cocktail of their own moral superiority and a scapegoat for every problem, allegiances become complex, contradictory and often self-defeating.

The fact of the matter is this: America was built not just with the understanding that some will thrive while others will falter, that's capitalism. No, built into the very architecture of our nation is the notion that some deserve to struggle while others merit success. When the balance is off, when the hierarchy is inverted, when members of the underclass become too successful while those in the privileged class suffer – with unemployment, opioid addiction, poverty and more – these people whom James Baldwin said “think they are white,” they act out.

People are asking, why did all this spring up with Trump? Why have incidents of antisemitism increased so dramatically in the past 18 months? You may have asked yourself that very question. The answer is it isn't new at all. It was there, lurking, bubbling beneath the surface. I said on Rosh Hashanah Trump didn't create the culture of BS in America, he's a product of that culture. He also didn't create Islamophobia, nativism, transphobia, misogyny, racism, or the other facets of hate he's been able to weaponize so effectively.

But let's stay with antisemitism for now. As we know, it's nothing new; in fact it's been called the “longest hatred.” But its current iteration as expressed through Alt-Right style White nationalism, isn't simply an outgrowth of that movement, it's at the very center. Eric K. Ward, a senior fellow at the Southern Poverty Law Center, has said “antisemitism forms the theoretical core of White nationalism.” If you haven't yet read his essay “Skin in the Game: How Antisemitism Animates White Nationalism,” I highly recommend it.

Ward began his career studying hate groups by infiltrating them. As a black man in 1995 he attended the Preparedness Expo, a Seattle gathering for the anti-government militia movement, just months after the most notorious attack to grow out of that movement, the Oklahoma City Bombing. Ward passed himself off as a black militant and was, in a sense, warmly embraced by a group called Police Against the New World Order. The group was organized by an ex-Phoenix cop who argued for forging temporary alliances with “the Blacks, the Mexicans, the Orientals” against the real enemy, the federal government controlled by an international conspiracy. He didn't have to say who ran this conspiracy, explains Ward, “because it was obvious to all in attendance.”

Here are the two most important points Ward makes about the relationship between antisemitism and White nationalism. I'm going to quote him at length because he makes the case better than I ever could:

“To recognize that antisemitism is not a sideshow to racism within White nationalist thought is important for at least two reasons. First, it allows us to identify the fuel that White nationalist ideology uses to power its anti-Black racism, its contempt for other people of color, and its xenophobia— as well as the misogyny and other forms of hatred it holds dear.... The successes of the civil rights movement created a terrible problem for White supremacist ideology. White supremacy— inscribed de jure by the Jim Crow regime and upheld de facto outside the South— had been the law of the land, and a Black-led social movement had toppled the political regime that supported it. How could a race of inferiors have unseated this power structure through organizing alone? For that matter, how could feminists and LGBTQ people have upended traditional gender relations, leftists mounted a challenge to global capitalism, Muslims won billions of converts to Islam? How do you explain the boundary-crossing allure of hip hop?”

The election of a Black president? Some secret cabal, some mythological power, must be manipulating the social order behind the scenes. This diabolical evil must control television, banking, entertainment, education, and even Washington, D.C. It must be brainwashing White people, rendering them racially unconscious.” That’s his first point, the invisible hand of the Jew.

Ward’s second point, though, cuts to the quick – because in some ways it’s even more unsettling. As you know, Jews of Ashkenazi decent in America have been largely seen as White Folks since the 1950’s or 60’s. If you examine structures of oppression in this country, it’s surely not the Jews who suffer most. Jews, as a class, are among the most highly educated, most successful and most affluent. That’s why I involve myself with issues like police accountability, education reform and immigration policy. That’s why we hosted events here at Beth Am this year to resist Trump’s travel ban. Our (past experience) of oppression should sensitize us to present day injustice visited upon others. But Ward suggests while we’ve been busy doing our Jewish duty, protecting the outcast and the disenfranchised, we’ve taken for granted the extent to which we ourselves are actually enfranchised. The way White nationalists see it, our supposed whiteness is “the greatest trick the devil ever played.” He says it’s no coincidence that during the period since the Shoah, as Jews have become more comfortable, more assimilated, and more successful that “antisemitism has become integral to the architecture of American racism.... Modern antisemitic ideology,” he writes, “traffics in fantasies of invisible power, it thrives precisely when its target would seem to be least vulnerable. Thus, in places where Jews were most assimilated— France at the time of the Dreyfus affair, Germany before Hitler came to power—they have functioned as a magic bullet to account for unaccountable contradictions at moments of national crisis.”

What is White nationalism? Who are the folks Trump called “fine people” after Charlottesville. It’s a reactionary movement, fueled by the world’s oldest hatred, with ample themes to draw on – material that has become exponentially easier to disseminate in the internet age. This movement is rooted in the erosion of white supremacy since the civil rights era. Its adherents are angry, fundamentally anti-government, increasing in number, emboldened by Trump’s rise to power, and – fetishizing the 2nd Amendment – they are armed.

Sinclair Lewis’ *It Can’t Happen Here* begs the question, can it? I’ll say it: Yes. It can. As long as human beings who crave and utilize scapegoats have power, there is always a chance that the grand and fledgling experiment of American democracy will give way to a more sinister and ancient form of governance. A dear congregant said to me in the months after Trump’s inauguration: “The elasticity of our democracy is about to be tested.”

So where do we go from here? The first thing we do is remember this is a society of laws. Yes, inequity is baked into the system, so we must advocate, protest and legislate to right old wrongs and establish greater balance of opportunity for all Americans. The second piece is harder, because identity is so difficult to comprehend. But we need a better, more comprehensive way of embodying and expressing our Jewishness. Spinoza’s notion that Judaism is first and foremost a religion has permeated the Jewish psyche since the Enlightenment, but in many ways it’s a problematic assertion. That’s one of the reasons I’m anticipating Yehuda Kurtzer and Marc Steiner’s event at AVAM on October 22nd. Yehuda’s talk, “What is a Jew?” will help us

examine the multi-faceted nature of Jewish identity. One aspect of that in America is whiteness. Many believe we are white. Others, like neo-Nazis, hold we are wolves in sheep's clothing. What do we think? When White nationalists target us, troll us, harass us, intimidate us, or God-forbid harm us, we owe it to ourselves to know who and what we are.

Which brings me to my final point. Jews love to argue. It's central to our way of being. Someone recently told me they thought to be Jewish is to have a disproportionate tendency toward micro-aggressions. I've spoken with you before about sacred argumentation, *makhloket l'shem Shamayaim*. We don't have to agree on kashrut, on Shabbos, on Israel policy. We are an irascible bunch, a stiff-necked people. Ok, but folks, we have to stop scapegoating one another. There cannot be "us" Jews and "them" Jews. When the state of Israel established its law of return, it set as the criterion for citizenship having one Jewish grandparent. Do you know why? Those were the Nuremberg Laws. The theory was and is, if you were Jewish enough for Hitler, you're Jewish enough for us.

Elie Wiesel was once asked, why do you march? Don't you know you'll never change them? His response: I march to keep them from changing me" (*Words from a Witness* p. 48). The haters are not going away. Their loathing for us is real and raw. Whether Trump lasts a year or eight years in office, this genie is not going back in the bottle. We'd better be ready and we'd better be united. We must rediscover our sense of *klal yisrael*. This year marks 50 years since Chaim Potok's *The Chosen*, the story of two young men in New York, during and just after the Shoah, from different Jewish backgrounds, who managed to transcend the vitriol of their warring communities and forge a lasting friendship. The Talmud says *kol yisrael aravim zeh bazeh*, all Jews are responsible for one-another. We'd better be, because if 5777 taught us anything, it's that you never know who you can really count on, who is for God, who is for themselves and who is looking for the next scapegoat.