

Rabbi Brett Krichiver –Anti-Semitism is Real

I remember visiting Prague years ago with several friends. Tami and I decided it would be meaningful to spend Shabbat there with the local community, rather than visit only the Jewish cemeteries and monuments to those lost to the Holocaust, including the famous attic which some argue still contains the dismantled remains of the Golem. The Golem, if you recall, was a man-made monster and protector of the Jewish people, whose strength grew out of control, and who was eventually captured and destroyed by his maker, the Maharal, a spiritual sage of the 1500's.

It took several wrong turns and some guess work to find services that evening. We were led through a non-descript lobby and up a set of stairs before being greeted by metal detectors and security guards. Only after we convinced them that we were actually visiting for services were we allowed to enter. The reason for the intense amount of security, even in the days before 9-11, was the same reason the Golem had been created from mud from the banks of the Vltava river in the modern day Czech Republic.

Judah Loew ben Bezalel, the late 16<sup>th</sup> century rabbi of Prague, created a figure out of clay and brought it to life through Hebrew incantations to defend the Prague Ghetto from anti-Semitic attacks and pogroms. Some say the Golem had the strength of 100 men. Some say he could turn himself invisible, or summon spirits from the dead. One modern day story tells of a Nazi guard who entered the attic in which the Golem's remains are said to have been stored, who never emerged alive.

Judaism has existed, for the last two thousand years and at every stage of its development, under the shadow of the phenomenon we call anti-Semitism. Certainly we are not the only Semitic people, but the hatred against us is arguably a unique hatred in the world. My colleague Rabbi Mark Miller suggests that early Christianity sought to differentiate itself from its Jewish roots, and in doing so created a political campaign of sorts to discredit the ancient rabbis. These tropes have found their way from country to country, shtetl to shtetl, from pogrom to pogrom, down the centuries. We have been accused of kidnapping, murder,

theft and corruption, at once manipulating the strings of the economy, including financial systems the world over, while also presenting as dirty, poor, and dejected.

It has never mattered that the stereotypes are inconsistent, or fly in the face of common sense or logic. The longer these stereotypes have survived, the more powerful they have become. Even tonight, as we gather here, we share not only the joy of community and a connection with Shabbat, but also the unease of security guards, the threat of violence against us.

We cannot afford to forget this backdrop of history, when we decide how we are going to think about recent news stories which suggest that certain phrases, attitudes, criticisms are fundamentally unacceptable, because they are anti-Semitic.

Yesterday I had coffee with a young woman frustrated that the Jewish community at her college campus refused to allow her to host even a discussion on settlements in Israel and the rights of Palestinians, accusing her of being a self-hating Jew. We freely use the term anti-Semite to define those whose opinion differs from our own, and by doing so, we become unable to recognize true hatred when we see it.

The Freshman Senator Ihan Omar has been in the press over the past several months for comments she has made, over and over again, reviving ancient anti-Semitic tropes. Last month, she tweeted that American political support for Israel is “all about the Benjamins”, and just last week she insinuated that pro-Israel lobbyists advocate “allegiance to a foreign country.”

Senator Omar apologized for the first comment, but doubled down on the second. She continues to argue that her comment about allegiance to a foreign country were a justifiable critique of American support of Israel, and the Democratic party has begun to seriously debate whether or not these comments should be taken seriously. Let us be very clear. This has been the goal of hate groups from fifty years ago, a hundred years ago, even a thousand years ago.

We cannot afford to confuse honest and loving criticism of Israel with the kind of hate speech that caused society, not so long ago, to spiral out of control.

Since the days of Napoleon Bonaparte, the question of dual loyalties has been the textbook example of accusations against the Jews. The question has been used to persecute, segment, and even to exterminate entire communities. It evokes the Biblical story of the

Israelites in Egypt. A new Pharaoh arises who does not remember Joseph, he becomes worried that the Israelites might not be completely loyal to him, seeing as they come from the Promised Land called Canaan. And Pharaoh plans for our destruction.

I have no problem with criticism of Israel. I believe it is obvious that we should not take American support for Israel for granted, and that a real and honest debate about the place of Israel in our sense of identity as American Jews, and the place of Israel in the middle East, should and can be welcomed. None of this is the reason why her comments were problematic.

Suggesting that the Israel lobby in Washington, and by extension our love for Israel is all about money ignores the affinity that many American Jews feel towards their spiritual homeland. It ignores the shared democratic values Israel shares with America, and the many ways in which Israel strengthens American interests and stability in the region. It ignores the history that showed Jews thrown out of every country in Europe, gathered together in their historical homeland to drain the swamps and bring forth vegetation out of the desert. Rather, she argues, it's only about the money. An ancient theme – Jewish money exaggerates Jewish influence on the world, on foreign policy, on Hollywood, on America itself. We must be ready to call out Senator Omar, regardless of her intentions, just as quickly and decisively as we called out Representative Steve King when he asked, “what’s so wrong with being a White Supremacist?”

Our sister congregation in Minneapolis, Temple Israel, which happens to be where Tami’s family is from, and also where Senator Omar is from, reached out to her and asked for a meeting, face to face. She agreed, and my colleague and mentor Rabbi Marcia Zimmerman met with the Senator to try to explain why the Jewish community – her neighbors, from her own state and her hometown city, were hurt by her words. According to those who were there, the Senator seemed open to listening, and seemed to understand the ancient wounds her words had opened. It remains to be seen how this chapter of American history, and Muslim Jewish dialogue, will be written. I am optimistic that as long as we can meet face to face to listen, there is always a path forward.

As safe, secure and successful as we are here in America, we also carry with us the legacy of a hundred generations of Jews who fought to help us get here. And for every place in

which Jews now feel accepted, embraced, welcomed, we know there other groups now feeling hatred turned against their communities in large and small ways. Let us recommit ourselves to the strength and healing born of interfaith dialogue, especially between Muslims, Evangelicals, Catholics and Protestant groups with whom we might well disagree about any number of things, including Israel. IHC has led the way in establishing these relationships and bringing congregations together to work for understanding, respect, and social justice, and to shut out the voices of hatred, ignorance, and anti-Semitism. I pray you will join me as together, we continue to strive for these important goals.