

Both Parties Must Fight Anti-Semitism in their Ranks

Too many on the right criticize anti-Jewish discrimination only when it occurs on the left, and vice versa.

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It's everybody's problem.

The following is an adaptation of a speech delivered at the UJA-Federation of New York's Wall Street Dinner on Dec. 6, 2021:

Over the past few years, we have seen a rise in anti-Semitic violence that is deeply unsettling.

Across the country, we have seen Jews harassed, beaten and killed for their faith. We have seen synagogues vandalized, even set on fire. And we have seen Nazis openly marching by torchlight — something many of us never thought we would see, except on old black-and-white newsreels.

Both here at home and around the world, new technologies are making it easier to spread ancient hatreds. As that has happened, inhibitions against anti-Semitism have weakened.

We can see it in the rise of violence, and we can hear it in the vitriol that is spewed on social media, often anonymously — because for every person who openly carries a torch, there are many more who quietly promote hatred. And for every person who shouts, "Jews will not replace us," there are many more who speak in coded language about Jews controlling the media, finance, government — and the latest crazy conspiracy, Covid vaccines.

When faced with these kinds of attacks, we like to imagine that our community will naturally put aside its differences and stand together in solidarity. Yet history records that the opposite is often the case. The Talmud teaches that the Second Temple was destroyed in part because of baseless hatred — one Jew against another.

Today is the last day of Hanukkah — a holiday that marks a miracle. But it began with a civil conflict among Jews, torn apart by the pressure of living under Greek rule.

Now, there have always been political differences among Jews. But in the past, on core matters of religious freedom and social equality, we have always found ways to come

together and unite in common cause, like the old couple who lived through the Holocaust reading the newspaper through the lens of “Is it good or bad for the Jews?”

Today, though, too many people read the news — and scroll through Twitter — asking instead, “Is it good for the Republicans or good for the Democrats?” For them, partisan affiliation has become a religion, and their new tribe is their political identity. The problem is that partisanship can be blinding. And it blinds us to shameful wrongs in our own party that we would be outraged by if the other party committed them.

Unfortunately, that is true even of anti-Semitism.

The fact is that too many on the right seem only concerned about anti-Semitism when it occurs on the left — and vice versa. When anti-Semitism appears in their own ranks, they try to ignore it. Or, they will say, in effect, “Well, the anti-Semites in your party are far worse than the ones in mine.” It’s a perverse form of whataboutism, and we must reject it.

Make no mistake: This is a tactic designed to keep Jews in both parties quiet and force us to tolerate what they deem to be an “acceptable” level of anti-Semitism.

Well, we need to make clear that there is no acceptable level of anti-Semitism — just as there is no acceptable form of racism, or ethnic hatred, or religious intolerance toward any group. We need to call out all discrimination without fear or favor, whether it comes from the right or the left. Because we are not truly defending — or representing — our community if we are turning a blind eye to anti-Semitism any place it appears.

And sadly, both parties have increasingly been coddling anti-Semites, rather than condemning them. On the right, we have heard conspiracy theories about the Covid vaccine being a Jewish plot — and about Jewish space lasers starting the wildfires out West.

It would be funny if it weren’t so dangerous. Because when we hear wild conspiracy theories — whether they’re about vaccines and wildfires, the election and QAnon, or anything else — we must remember that anti-Semitism is the original conspiracy theory. And a world in which Americans routinely traffic in conspiracy theories is a world in which Jews are not safe.

But it’s not just right-wing conspiracies where anti-Semitism lurks. In some circles on the left — and on many college campuses — there are those who use the political situation in Israel to spread lies and prejudices. They assert that American support for Israel is about nothing more than Jewish money controlling politicians — and Jewish people acting as oppressors.

Now, criticism of Israel — or any country — is fair game. In America, free speech must always be sacred. But we should not allow anyone to use criticism as a cover for language that employs old tropes and stereotypes. When that happens, we should demand that all members of our parties denounce it forcefully and unequivocally. And we should treat those who traffic in anti-Semitism the same way we treat those who traffic in any form of bigotry — as extremists who are a danger to our country, who are unfit for public office, and who should be relegated to the fringes as political pariahs.

I realize that standing up to your friends is not easy — and that's especially true for young people. They have their antenna up against injustice, and that's great to see. But on campuses across the country, if they want to be involved in social justice issues, they often feel forced to make a terrible choice. They can either defend their Zionism and be excluded from groups that claim to be progressive, or they can join these groups and turn a blind eye to them when they single out for attack the only democratic country in the Middle East and the only Jewish state in the world.

That is wrong.

We cannot allow a new generation of Jews to be intimidated from supporting the very existence of Israel — or to feel shame about their heritage, rather than pride.

So to everyone here, whatever your party, I hope you will recognize that as a people — and as a country — we cannot afford to let prejudice live within partisanship. We must call it out wherever it exists, and no matter who is involved — whether we hear it from Marjorie Taylor Greene or Rashida Tlaib or anyone else.

And as we do this, we should remind our allies of something Rabbi Jonathan Sacks of Great Britain once said: “The hate that starts with the Jews never ends there.” And of course, as the quotation on the wall of the Holocaust Museum reminds us, the hate that starts with others can end with us.