

A story is told about a Jewish man driving up to the Catskills to join his family for Shabbat. The Catskills were where many New York Jews had holiday homes. He saw a man stranded by the roadside, his car immobilized by a flat tire. The man was wearing a kippah. Naturally the driver assumed that he too was heading for the Catskills and was concerned that he might not be able to change the wheel in time to reach his destination before the Sabbath began. He stopped, and helped the man change the tire. As he was parting, the owner of the other car removed his kippah and put it in his pocket. 'Why are you doing that?' said the first man. 'Don't you wear it all the time?'

'Oh no', said the other, "You see, I'm not Jewish.'

'Then why were you wearing a kippah?'

'Simple', he replied. 'I know that if someone is in trouble and is wearing a yarmulka, a Jew will stop to help him.'

I share this story because it illustrates the sadness of how much our reality has changed. There was a time when one might have imagined that symbols of Judaism were admired. That a kippah would ensure safety and security, aid for those in distress. Today, we live in a world in which wearing a kippah on a lonely, deserted stretch of highway might not feel safe. We live in a world in which publicly identifying oneself as Jewish feels like it carries as much risk as reward.

The Secure Communities Network is an organization created by the Jewish Federations of North America, supplementing the Anti-Defamation League as a main point of contact for Jewish security needs. Each day, both they and the ADL send out email highlighting several attacks or threats against Jews. So every day I read about threats, vandalism, and attacks against Jewish institutions or individuals in the form of graffiti, flyers, and physical and verbal harassment. Each day I am reminded that those who dress in a way that marks them as Jewish are placing themselves at risk.

I have largely been spared from being targeted in negative ways. I've found people in our area to be remarkably supportive. The synagogue regularly gets phone calls from people just wanting to let us know that they pray for Israel and have our backs. People come up to me in public places to let me know how important Israel is to them. I don't ask questions about the details of their theology. I just thank them for their kind words of support.

For reasons that I spoke about in yesterday's sermon, Israel is central to our lives as Jews. If we experience love and support of Israel, we need to acknowledge that with gratitude. But if we experience anti-Israel hatred in our daily lives, we need to speak out against it. If we are the subject of antisemitism, we need to think about how to respond in positive ways.

Yesterday, I spoke about how Zionism is an essential part of Jewish identity. For the majority of American Jews, Zionism is a manifestation of their cultural or religious identity – reflecting the deep historical connection of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel. While anti-Zionist Jews claim that Zionism is separate from their Jewish identity, there are countless examples contrary to this opinion. Zion is synonymous with Jerusalem and the Land of Israel and is mentioned 157 times in the Tanakh (Hebrew Bible). Jews longed to return to their ancestral homeland for 2,000 years. This includes singing, "Next year in Jerusalem," at the end of the annual Passover Seder and praying facing Israel. Jerusalem and Zionism are integral components of Jewish identity.

Let's be clear that anti-Zionism is antisemitic. It's not antisemitic to oppose certain policies of the government of a country and it's not antisemitic to oppose war, but to be anti-Zionist is to paint with a much broader brush. It is to express opposition to the existence of a state of Israel,

rendering Jews less worthy of self-determination than every other people. The expressions of anti-Zionism running rampant on college campuses demonize Jews. Just a few weeks ago, a student was assaulted on the Michigan campus because he answered ‘yes’ to the question, ‘Are you Jewish?’ The Jewish Voice for Peace chapter at the University of Michigan stated “death to Israel” is not just a threat, “it’s a moral imperative and the only acceptable solution. May the entire colony burn to the ground....”

Anti-Zionism might disguise itself as a political view, but it frequently crosses the line into outright antisemitism. The U.S. House recognized this last year, passing a resolution equating anti-Zionism with antisemitism. There are many similarities between the two related forms of hatred, including attacks against synagogues, and blood libels in which claims that Israelis harvested Palestinian organs parallel medieval claims that Jews killed Christian children to use their blood to bake matzah and contemporary Saudi claims that Jews use the blood of Moslem children to bake Hamentaschen. October 7 prompted waves of Holocaust denials and Jewish conspiracy theories, and resulted in violence against Jews worldwide. Anti-Zionists – often under the facade of pro-Palestinian activism – deny Jewish people the right to self-determination, falsely vilify Israel and spread disinformation about the Jewish state.

The ‘Globalize the Intifada’ campaign has deadly consequences. Supposedly in support of the Palestinians, it targets Jews and non-Jews around the world. The call for a violent uprising is not a mere political slogan – it is a global movement seeking to justify violence by using inciting rhetoric and creating an environment that normalizes crimes. The failed attempt to burn Jews alive inside a French synagogue and the deadly knife rampage against Christians in Germany prove that when anti-Israel activists vow to “Globalize the Intifada” violence is sure to follow. The Second Intifada against Israel included fiery bombings of buses, restaurants and malls. Make no mistake – ‘Intifada’ is not a path to a peaceful two state solution, it is a call for Islamic hegemony in the Middle East and beyond.

Hate has insidiously woven itself into the fabric of our daily lives, especially in schools where young minds are shaped. From biased curricula to normalized anti-Zionist rhetoric, this hate is becoming part of the educational environment from kindergartens to universities. It is not enough to quietly disapprove. We must call it out whenever and wherever it appears: a teacher presenting a skewed version of history, a student making inappropriate Holocaust jokes or school policies that limit Jewish participation. Speaking out also serves as an opportunity to educate others because silence only allows this bigotry to grow.

Today, I want to challenge you to challenge hate; to understand that anti-Zionism is antisemitism. To realize that the rhetoric of anti-Zionists on college campuses is directed towards all Jewish students. At a rally in 2021, the woman whose classmates selected her to give a virulently anti-Jewish commencement speech to the 2022 graduating class at City University of NY’s School of Law, stated: “I hope that pop-pop – the sound of bullets – is the last noise that some Zionists hear in their lifetime!” She founded a group dedicated to eradicating the Jewish state.

In the polarized world in which we live, confronting and challenging haters with words may not always be the best way to make a difference. The Torah says “Rebuke ...” but our tradition cautions, do not rebuke unless the person you are rebuking is capable of understanding and engaging with your words. In other words, if someone is not going to listen to you, don’t even try.

So what am I suggesting? I'm not risking my life to defend Israel by serving in the IDF. The least I can do, the least we can do, is to be proud of who we are and where our people come from, and defend Israel and Judaism from haters.

I've sat down with a man who expressed some bizarre religious ideas that were anti-Jewish, anti-Moslem, and anti-most Christian traditions as well. After extensive conversations, he asked me to take him to Israel and let him see Israel through my eyes, through Jewish eyes. I spent a week traveling around Israel with him. That may be a bit farther than most of you are willing to go, but if you have the chance to sit down and have a face-to-face conversation with someone about what Israel means to the Jewish people, embrace the opportunity.

Over the past two years, I've met with the superintendents of the 10 largest school districts in West Michigan and also those with a Jewish presence. I've spoken to them about antisemitism and anti-Zionism. I've asked them to track incidents of bias against Jewish students and others, and take proactive action to protect all students. But I need your help. Pay attention to what's happening in your school district, even if you don't have students there, and if you see or hear anything questionable, let me know so I can follow up with the superintendent.

Engage people who have not decided to become haters. Engage with people who are curious and open to having a conversation. Do this by showing your Jewish pride, by displaying an Israeli flag, and wearing symbols of Judaism. Let your presence, the Israeli flag, your appearance, be an invitation to a conversation. If you are going to put yourself on social media, be a Jewish, Israel-loving presence. Let people come to you with questions, and then be an educator.

Pay attention to what's going on at the campus of your alma mater. Use your alum power, especially if you are a donor to the alumni association. Write letters to the president, the board of directors, and support the Hillel Jewish presence on campus to help them support students and be an Israel-loving presence.

We have enough partisan sniping against candidates who are not sufficiently supportive of the current government of Israel. But Zionism, the struggle for the continued existence of Israel, transcends the current or any past government policies or actions. Look for ways to thank our politicians for any support of Israel. Cultivate and encourage that support.

This past year has been soul-crushing for the Jewish people. But we are resilient. Our faith has always carried us through hard times. We as a congregation, and our Jewish community of Grand Rapids, have taken and must continue to take a stand against antisemitism and anti-Zionism and in support of the State of Israel. Am Yisrael Chai! The people of Israel live as the nation of Israel thrives. Am Yisrael Chai!