

Every year, the 92nd Street Y in New York holds what it calls a “State of World Jewry” address. This past year, they invited the journalist Bret Stephens. And Stephens offered some provocative remarks.

With the head of the Anti-Defamation League sitting right in front of him, Stephens said that the Jewish community spends too much time, too much money, and too much emotional energy combating antisemitism. “The fight against antisemitism,” he argued, is “well-intentioned, but often ineffective.”

You can imagine how that went over.

For generations, Jewish organizations have devoted enormous resources to monitoring, exposing, educating about, and lobbying against antisemitism.

But Stephens was essentially saying: Enough already. Stop making the fight against antisemitism the central project of American Jewish life.

I listened to his address and thought: That would make an interesting sermon for the High Holy Days.

And then came Friday, July 24th.

That was the day we discovered that our beautiful new mural, at our PJTC campus, was vandalized with antisemitic graffiti.

A mural devoted to peace. To resilience. To rebuilding, not only for our own community, but also for our neighbors and fellow institutions throughout Altadena.

And what made it especially painful was that this mural had itself been created in response to antisemitic graffiti defacing our synagogue earlier in the year.

And suddenly Bret Stephens' argument did not feel theoretical anymore.

I remember looking at the mural and thinking: How depraved, how monstrous must someone be to desecrate an image of hope and solidarity with vile words and symbols of hate?

What is happening to our society?

Towards the end of *The Odyssey*, Christopher Nolan's summer blockbuster, Odysseus finally returns to Ithaca, in disguise, and can barely comprehend the scene in front of him. Greed, gluttony, and immorality have pervaded his palace; the norms he had established before he set off for Troy are gone. He walks around dazed and disoriented; the place he called home for so long has descended into chaos and depravity.

I think this is a metaphor for how many of us are feeling right now. Our American home, where for most of our lives we have felt safe, empowered, and blessed with opportunity, now feels alien, inhospitable, and riven with hatred. The world we knew and loved, for us as for Odysseus, has become unrecognizable.

So how should we respond to this moment? How much of our Jewish life should focus on fighting antisemitism? How much attention should we give those who hate us?

One of the most talked about Jewish books this past year was Sarah Hurwitz's *As A Jew*. [hold it up] Hurwitz, a self-described secular, cultural,

social-justice oriented Jew, who previously served as a speechwriter for Michelle Obama, began studying Judaism intensively in her 30s. And she discovered something that she found unsettling.

She writes: “I soon realized that there was nothing freely chosen about my former Jewish identity. It was, in many ways, the product of 2000 years of antisemitism, and 200 years of efforts by Jews to erase parts of ourselves and our tradition in the hope of being accepted and safe.”

Hurwitz starts by discussing how anti-Jewish religious hatred began during the early days of Christianity. While Judaism had always seen itself as a particular approach between God and the Jewish people, it never sought to impose that approach on others.

Christians, however, adopted a path of universalism, the belief that there was only one way, one truth, one approved relationship with God. That meant that non-Christian beliefs like Judaism were a threat and had to be discredited. Early Christian leaders did so through replacement theology and the doctrine of Jewish witness—that Jews were evil for rejecting Jesus and should be forced to live in a subjugated and subservient condition as proof that God favored Christians. The Roman Empire soon normalized this vision of Jews as inferior and debased throughout the Western world, a vision that remained entrenched until the modern era.

Hurwitz identifies three themes that emerge from early and medieval Christian thought about Jews: 1) Jews as powerful; 2) Jews as greedy, depraved, and evil incarnate; and 3) Jews as conspiratorial.

The result was a vicious cycle spanning more than a millenia in which public hatred toward the Jews would boil over, fake charges or blood libels would start flying around, and Jews would be massacred and forced to flee.

And yet, paradoxically, Jewish identity remained remarkably strong. Jewish communities were highly insular, self-governed, and interconnected with Jews in other parts of the world. “The premodern Jew, Hurwitz writes, “was a member of a nation, a people—one with its own laws, culture, languages, holidays, history, and spiritual practices. To be a Jew was your 24/7 existence.” Judaism was the framework through which life was understood.

Then came the Enlightenment and the rise of the nation-state. Europe began transforming from societies organized around monarchies and the Church into modern states organized around citizenship. Through a process called Emancipation, Jews eventually were granted citizenship as well. But it came with a cost—Jews had to renounce any association with Jewish peoplehood or distinctiveness as the price for entry into equality and citizenship; to privatize Judaism into a religion no different from their Protestant or Catholic peers.

As Hurwitz puts it, “Pre-Enlightenment France stated that Jews had to accept Jesus to be saved; post-Enlightenment France said Jews had to accept Frenchness to be saved.”

Many Jews eagerly embraced this trade-off, privileging safety and opportunity over particularity. After centuries of exclusion, who wouldn't want entry into universities, professions, neighborhoods, politics, culture? The Reform Movement was created in Germany to concretize this new

approach of Judaism as a religion, borrowing stylistically from its Protestant neighbors.

But this bargain of giving up part of their Jewish identity in order to be accepted by society didn't last long. Beginning in the 20th CE, antisemitism mutated from a religion-based to a race-based orientation. As social science focused on eugenics, Jews were viewed as an inferior race that was a threat to the genetic superiority of whites.

Unlike the mob-based anti-Jewish hatred of the Middle Ages, racial antisemitism originated from influential scholars, in salons and universities, making antisemitism respectable. Despite efforts to fit in, to do what they were told in order to belong, Jews could not escape the conflagration of race-based antisemitism. The Nazis rose to power, and through the Holocaust, slaughtered Jews regardless of their religious, secular, or political orientations.

The horrors of the Holocaust were so extreme that, subsequently, overt antisemitism became anathema in most elements of society.

Today, antisemitism has mutated once again. The author Dara Horn offers a useful framing to describe this latest variant: the demand that Jews surrender whichever part of Jewish identity the surrounding culture currently finds objectionable. As she puts it, "It requires not dead Jews but cool Jews."

The scholar Yael Silverstein defines this current phenomenon as ambient antisemitism. "[T]he silences, omissions, and unequal responses [through

which mainstream culture and institutions signal that] our identities are devalued or unwanted.” Ambient antisemitism, Yael writes, “creates a logic of conditional acceptance, operating through a quiet tradeoff between authenticity and belonging. It signals to Jews that they may belong, but only if they make others comfortable with their belonging.”

What’s the current issue that culture finds objectionable? What are Jews being asked to surrender this time in order to fit in? Zionism. Support for the existence of Israel as our Jewish national homeland.

Antizionism didn’t emerge from the ether on October 7th, 2023. Its origins have nothing to do with the Gaza War, West Bank settlers, or even Bibi Netanyahu. Antizionism actually was created by the former Soviet Union in the 1960s as a propaganda campaign to discredit Israel, after Israel defeated its proxies in the Six Day War of 1967. As the scholar Adam Louis-Stein writes, antizionism “adapted old libels into new contextual plausible forms. Its core accusations—colonizer, apartheid, and genocide—can all be understood as mutations of earlier anti-Jewish tropes.”

Just as race-based antisemitism flourished in universities and other elite institutions in early 20th century society, so too does antizionism today, as we have seen in campus takeovers, academic and cultural boycotts of Israel, and even Ed Sheeran concerts last week.

But because few Jews, let alone non-Jews, know about the origins and history of antizionism, we were caught off-guard after October 7th. As Prof. Stuart Kelner writes, we were so used to thinking about Jew-hatred solely

through the lens of the race-based antisemitism of the Holocaust, that we lacked a conceptual language for thinking about this new version of Jewish demonization. This has led to voluminous, vociferous, and, frankly, highly unproductive debates about whether antizionism is antisemitism or is some other form of animus.

Ultimately, as Hurwitz writes, “when Jews are assaulted, harassed, and ostracized because they refuse to renounce their connection to Israel, that is wrong, whatever we label it.”

Let me be clear: there is nothing antisemitic about criticizing a specific policy of the Israeli government. Jews have been arguing with each other about Israeli policies since, approximately, five minutes after Israel's founding.

But it's a completely different matter to be told that acceptance within decent society requires us to sever ourselves from Israel entirely. To denounce the miracle of our return to our ancestral homeland after 2000 years of exile, and to turn our backs on half of the world's Jewish population which actually lives in Israel.

It's reprehensible when belonging comes with a litmus test.

And a repeat of the same historical pattern we have lived with for millenia:

At 1st: You may remain among us, but only in a degraded religious position.

Then: You may join society, but only if you renounce your Jewish nationality.

And today: You may belong, but only if you reject core elements of your Jewish identity that make other people uncomfortable.

Different centuries. Different vocabulary. Same basic Faustian bargain:

You can be accepted, as long as you give up a part of yourself.

As if our humanity depends upon passing someone else's ideological entrance exam. As if we have to earn the right not to be hated.

Perhaps the most tragic and dangerous consequence of this bargain is that, eventually, we begin policing ourselves.

Psychologists call it “image management”: when people whose belonging feels conditional learn to cover that which might make them stand out. We learn which parts of ourselves make other people uncomfortable, and we begin hiding them.

A Jewish student tucks in a Magen David necklace underneath a shirt. A Jewish organization quietly decides that perhaps this year is not a good year to display an Israeli flag.

A Jewish business owner takes down the mezuzah from her front door.

Now, safety matters. Context matters. Nobody is obligated to transform Jewish visibility into an act of personal danger. There are moments when caution is wisdom.

But there's a difference between protecting ourselves and erasing ourselves. And if we are not careful, self-protection can become self-suppression.

We can become so preoccupied with whether everybody else approves of our Judaism that we forget to ask a far more important question:

Do we approve of it? Do we love it? Does it give us meaning, joy, and purpose?

I believe Bret Stephens is right about at least this:

If antisemitism becomes the center of Jewish identity, then the antisemite has acquired the power to define our Judaism; to let hatred have the first and last word about Jewish identity. Judaism becomes primarily about what others have done to Jews rather than what we continue to do as Jews.

Our goal cannot simply be Jewish survival. Our reason for being Jewish must mean more than preventing Hitler from receiving some grotesque posthumous victory. We should aspire to a Judaism that thrives! I'll be speaking at length about some ideas for a thriving Judaism this YK.

Jewish confidence cannot depend upon outside validation. It must come from within. From ourselves, our families, our tradition, and our community.

That does not mean withdrawing from American society. I don't want us to circle the wagons. I believe deeply in civic engagement and interfaith partnership. I want us to participate in universities and cultural institutions and American democracy. To stand alongside other communities when they are threatened, and to expect others to stand alongside us.

We cannot bury our heads in the sand and hope that antisemitism simply disappears. We should fight antisemitism. We should call out hatred and demand accountability. But we cannot spend our lives begging to be liked.

Stephens distinguishes between two strategies: an ingratiation strategy and a respect strategy.

“Ingratiation is an ask,” he says. “Respect is a demand.”

Ingratiation says: Please accept us.

Look at everything we've contributed. Look at all the Nobel Prizes. Look at Einstein. Look at Steven Spielberg.

Adam Sandler's famous Hanukkah Song gave us updated lists of Jewish-American successes. The Hanukkah Song is fun. But it should not be our ideology.

We shouldn't need to beg for dignity because Scarlett Johansson happens to be Jewish. Or because our personal political views might align with the prevailing cultural winds.

Our dignity is not conditional.

That is the respect strategy. And it begins with us. With Jewish self-respect. Jewish self-esteem. Jewish pride.

Not arrogance. Not chauvinism. Not believing we are better than anybody else.

Jewish pride simply means believing that we do not need anybody's permission to be fully ourselves.

On Rosh Hashanah, we proclaim, over and over, Hayom harat olam.

Today the world is born anew.

Rosh Hashanah insists that the world is not finished. And neither are we.

Perhaps 5787 can be the year we resolve to meet this moment of fear, hostility, and antisemitism with pride, positivity, and joy in our Jewishness.

To wear a Magen David or Chai necklace in public.

To affix a mezuzah on our doors.

To dine out at Jewish restaurants.

To visit Israel.

To make Jewish identity something our children associate not primarily with security guards and memorial candles, but with music and friendship and food and wisdom and celebration and love.

And that brings me back to our response to the vandalism on July 24th.

After the attack, we had a choice to make. Someone else had tried to tell a story about us. A story written in ugly letters and hateful symbols. A story that said: You don't belong here. You should be afraid. You should hide.

And we had to decide: Would we accept their story? Or would we tell our own?

We chose to tell our PJTC story—one that expressed our character and our principles. To define ourselves as a proud synagogue that has been a beacon of engagement, spiritual vitality, resilience, and Jewish flourishing for more than 100 years. We welcomed elected officials, civic leaders, and interfaith clergy, not because we were victims in need of pity, but out of a sense of solidarity and partnership. We didn't apologize for who we were; we celebrated our values and upheld our dignity. And when we did so, others joined in with words of affirmation and endorsement. We showed

that when we have pride in ourselves, others will follow. May that be the lesson we carry into this new year.

Someone else may have written graffiti on our wall.

But they do not get to write our story. We do.

Rosh Hashanah reminds us that we retain something enormously powerful.

Agency. The ability to choose the story we tell about ourselves.

Hayom harat olam. Today the world is born.

May this be the year in which something is reborn within us as well. A Judaism that does not ask permission to be accepted.

A Judaism that does not apologize for its existence. A Judaism that is a source of meaning, inspiration, engagement, and pride.

And may we have the courage to say, together:

This is who we are.

This is our story.

And no one else gets to write it for us. Shanah tovah.