

Antisemitism

Shanah tovah!

Over the past 13 years of leading High Holy Day services for this congregation, I've delivered around 52 sermons. That's a lot of sermons and a lot of time listening to me. God willing, I'll be fortunate to share 52 more. It is truly an honor to share my Torah with you, and even more meaningful when you share yours with me.

When I look back, I realize I've spoken about kindness, happiness, anger, grief, regret, end-of-life, Israel, Zionism, gender, guns, teshuvah, and more. But one topic has never made it into my High Holy Day sermons: antisemitism. And that surprised me. Perhaps I wanted to believe it wasn't urgent enough to demand our focus here. But this year, it is unavoidable. It is on my mind, on your minds, and everywhere in the news. So this morning, I want to talk about it—honestly, directly, but also with hope.

Charles Dickens' famous line from *A Tale of Two Cities* has echoed in my head since I started thinking of this topic: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." That tension describes Jewish life in America today. This morning, I am going to reverse Dickens' order. First, the worst of times: the rise of antisemitism in our day. Then, the best of times: why, despite everything, Jewish life in America is strong and thriving.

First, what do we mean by antisemitism? The word itself is clumsy. No one refers to Jews as "Semites," even though technically we are—Hebrew, our sacred and ancestral language, is a Semitic language. But so are Arabic and Amharic. The only time the word "Semite" seems to get used is on a "Yo-Semite" T-shirt. (Get it—Yosemite?) A more direct and unambiguous phrase is simply "Jew-hatred." Still, "antisemitism" has become the accepted broad term, as sanitized and confusing as the word may be.

The other challenge is that there is no single, agreed-upon definition of antisemitism. To me, this is even more frustrating than the awkwardness of

the word itself. If each of us here were given a few minutes to write our own definition, I suspect we'd come up with slightly different answers. What one Jew might see as clearly antisemitic might not even register for another. Take, for example, the question of anti-Zionism. For some people, it means denying that a Jewish state should exist at all, or rejecting the very legitimacy of Jewish self-determination. For others, including many Jews, anti-Zionism doesn't automatically equal antisemitism. They understand it instead as political critique—whether of Israel's founding or of its current policies— without hostility toward Jews as a people. This shows just how complicated and contested the boundaries of antisemitism really are.

For a long time, I believed antisemitism was something you couldn't always define but you knew when you saw it, or when you felt it. And while that feeling still matters, it isn't enough. We cannot rely solely on instinct. Institutions need guidance to know how to respond, and communities need shared language to know when a line has been crossed. Right now, dozens of organizations around the world have produced definitions of antisemitism. While many share common threads, each contains differences of emphasis or phrasing. That very multiplicity both reflects the complexity of the issue and makes consensus elusive.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum keeps it simple: "Antisemitism means prejudice against or hatred of Jews."¹ Straightforward, and to the point.

The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, or IHRA, offers a broader framing: "Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and their property, toward Jewish community institutions and

¹ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "What Is Antisemitism?" *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, <https://www.ushmm.org/antisemitism/what-is-antisemitism>

religious facilities.”² This is the definition formally adopted by the United States Department of State, which means it carries weight in policy and diplomacy.

And lastly, the Southern Poverty Law Center highlights the conspiratorial nature of antisemitism. Their definition calls it “a set of dehumanizing and hostile beliefs and behaviors that target Jews because of their identity. A central feature of antisemitism is its conspiratorial nature, where myths offer a blueprint for blaming Jews for various world events.”³

The multiplicity of definitions is frustrating. It is no wonder that even Jews can't be in agreement about what does or does not constitute antisemitism. Yet, two contemporary Jewish thinkers capture it best for me. Haviv Rettig Gur, a journalist and analyst for the Times of Israel, argues that antisemitism is not simply dislike of Jews. It is an ancient conspiracy theory: the belief that Jews stand in the way of a perfect world, secretly manipulating society.⁴ Dara Horn, in her book *People Love Dead Jews*, puts it bluntly: “The through line of antisemitism for thousands of years has been the denial of truth and the promotion of lies. These lies range from conspiracy theories to Holocaust denial to the blood libel. At its core is the foundational big lie: that antisemitism itself is righteous resistance against evil, because Jews are collectively evil and have no right to exist.”⁵

In a recent article written for the Henry Jackson School of International Studies at the University of Washington, titled, “Why the Most Educated

² International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, *Working Definition of Antisemitism* (non-legally binding), adopted May 26, 2016, <https://holocaustremembrance.com/resources/working-definition-antisemitism>

³ Southern Poverty Law Center, *Antisemitism Discussion Resource*, <https://www.splcenter.org/resources/extremist-files/antisemitism>

⁴ This is not a direct quote from Haviv Rettig Gur, but my takeaway from listening to many hours of him talk on this subject.

⁵ Horn, Dara. *People Love Dead Jews: Reports from a Haunted Present*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2021.

People In America Fall For Anti-Semitic Lies,”⁶ Dara Horn paraphrases historian David Nirenberg, whose monumental book *Anti-Judaism* argues that Western cultures have often defined themselves through opposition to Judaism. She writes, “If piety was a given society’s ideal, Jews were impious blasphemers; if secularism was the ideal, Jews were backward pietists. If capitalism was evil, Jews were capitalists; if communism was evil, Jews were communists. If nationalism was glorified, Jews were rootless cosmopolitans; if nationalism was vilified, Jews were chauvinistic nationalists. ‘Anti-Judaism’ thus becomes a righteous fight to promote justice.”⁷ Time and again, Judaism is cast as the embodiment of whatever evil society wanted to overcome. This shape-shifting quality is what makes antisemitism so enduring and so dangerous. To me, this is all much more nefarious than just the discrimination or hatred of Jewish people.

After studying many interpretations of the word, it has become clear to me that antisemitism is the activation of harmful responses to lies and distortions about the Jewish people. This may sound simple, but it captures a lot. It covers prejudice, discrimination, and violence. It includes conspiracy theories, snide comments, and stereotypes. It reminds us that antisemitism is never about truth. It is always about lies. Lies that are repeated, recycled, and reignited in each generation, taking new forms but doing the same old damage.

That’s why I find the insights of Haviv Rettig Gur and Dara Horn especially powerful. They remind us that antisemitism is not just dislike, prejudice, or even a swastika scrawled on a desk. It is something deeper and more insidious: a persistent conspiracy, a web of lies that casts Jews as the very obstacle to the world’s redemption. And the frightening truth is that antisemitism works like an implicit bias, buried deep in the human imagination, where it can be awakened by family influences, peer pressure, or the messages of the culture around us. It is less a fleeting opinion and

⁶ Dara Horn, “*Why the Most Educated People in America Fall for Anti-Semitic Lies: At Harvard and Elsewhere, an Old Falsehood Is Capturing New Minds*,” (Seattle: University of Washington, Jackson School of International Studies, February 15, 2024), <https://jsis.washington.edu/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Dara-Horn.pdf>

⁷ *ibid.*

more a reflex that societies have carried for centuries, resurfacing whenever fear or crisis calls it forth.

Each of us carries our own experiences, anxieties, and even scars connected to antisemitism. My goal is not to leave us in despair, but to speak honestly about the challenges we face today so that we can also recognize the resilience and vitality of Jewish life, and why, even in difficult times, I still believe we are living in the best of times to be Jews.

Since October 7, antisemitism has exploded in ways that feel both familiar and frighteningly new. Last year I spoke about how challenging college campuses have been for many Jewish students. Hillel International tracked 2,334 incidents of campus antisemitism in the 2024-2025 academic year—nearly ten times more than two years earlier.⁸

The hostility has not been confined to campuses. Public rallies in support of Israel have also been disrupted, sometimes violently. In Boulder this past June, Molotov cocktails were hurled into a solidarity walk for the hostages. 15 people were injured, including a Holocaust survivor, and one elderly Jewish woman later died of her wounds.

Our synagogues and community institutions have not been spared. In 2024 alone, hundreds of bomb threats were reported against synagogues nationwide. Graffiti and vandalism remain common, and increasingly the hostility has spilled into everyday spaces. It is hard to recall a time when synagogues and JCC's did not have security personnel posted outside, a stark reminder of how normalized the threat has become.

Antisemitic incidents in commercial settings—workplaces, restaurants, and shops—also rose significantly last year. This tells us something important: antisemitism is not just an attack on our religious life or our schools. It is creeping into the ordinary places where we live and work, making Jewish participation in economic and civic life feel less secure. There are dozens of Jewish owned businesses that have had swastikas spray painted on

⁸ Hillel International, *Antisemitic Incidents on Campus at Record High in Past School Year*, July 17, 2025, <https://www.hillel.org/antisemitic-incidents-on-campus-at-record-high-in-past-school-year>

their buildings. In New York City, Effi's Café, a kosher restaurant, was vandalized with red paint and graffiti that read: "Form line here to support genocide." Even the most routine activities, like sitting down to eat a meal, are no longer immune from this disease.

We have also seen deadly violence. Outside the Capital Jewish Museum in Washington, DC, two Israeli Embassy staffers, Yaron Lischinsky and Sarah Milgrim were murdered in cold blood.

Wherever you look, the signs are unmistakable. Antisemitism is alive, mutating, and on the rise. Even here, in Washington state, antisemitic incidents are increasing year over year.⁹ Thankfully, we have not had many in Bellingham.

The Anti-Defamation League reported 9,354 antisemitic incidents in the U.S. in 2024, the highest ever recorded. This is a nearly 900% increase over a decade. I know what some might be thinking: *Rabbi, you can't trust the ADL's statistics. They inflate numbers. They conflate antisemitism with anti-Zionism. They have questionable motivations.* The bottom line is this: even if you don't fully trust the ADL's methods, you don't need their numbers to know what we already feel in our bones. Antisemitism is surging, and it is touching more corners of our lives than it has in decades.

The American Jewish Committee's "State of Antisemitism in America 2024"¹⁰ report found that "One-third (33%) of American Jews say they have been the personal target of antisemitism, in person or virtually, at least once over the last year." And 77% of American Jews say they feel less safe as a Jewish person in the U.S. from years past.

Antisemitism today is not only expressed in acts of harassment, violence, or bigoted comments. It also mutates into conspiracy theories, stories that

⁹ Anti-Defamation League, *Audit of Antisemitic Incidents 2024*, <https://www.adl.org/resources/report/audit-antisemitic-incidents-2024>

¹⁰ American Jewish Committee, *State of Antisemitism in America 2024*, <https://www.ajc.org/AntisemitismReport2024>

may not always name Jews outright, but that draw on dog whistles and centuries-old antisemitic tropes.

One of the most common today is the portrayal of George Soros as a puppet master. This idea has deep roots, stretching back to the notorious *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* from the late 19th century. It paints Jews as a secret cabal controlling governments and economies. In modern times, Soros, a Jewish philanthropist who has supported democratic causes, has become the figure onto whom this myth is projected. He is accused of engineering elections, migration, even wars. To someone unfamiliar with the history, it might sound like criticism of a wealthy donor. But in fact, it is simply the old antisemitic lie, recycled again: Jews pulling the strings of the world.

Closely related is the language of “globalists.” It may sound harmless, but in certain contexts it is simply shorthand for Jewish influence—Jews cast as cosmopolitan elites who undermine nations, erode traditions, and profit from destabilization. The trope is identical: Jews imagined as both rootless and all-powerful.

The so-called “Great Replacement” theory is another deadly lie. It claims that Jews are orchestrating the replacement of white Christian populations with immigrants and minorities. This conspiracy helped fuel the chants in Charlottesville—“Jews will not replace us”—and inspired the massacre at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh.

Then there is the myth of pedophile cabals. Some of you may have heard this conspiracy movement that alleges secret Jewish elites are running child-trafficking rings. This is not new. It echoes medieval blood libels that accused Jews of murdering Christian children. Today, Jews aren’t always named explicitly, but the imagery and logic are painfully familiar: Jews cast as corruptors of innocence, accused of monstrous crimes with no evidence whatsoever.

And these lies don’t just live in dark corners of the internet. They are broadcast on popular podcasts, amplified on social media, and shared with millions, giving old antisemitic tropes a sleek, modern platform.

Antisemitism does not only demean Jews, it inflates us into villains, imagined as all-powerful manipulators of world affairs. And that combination of fear and fantasy is what makes antisemitism uniquely dangerous because it invites people to believe that hurting Jews is a form of saving the world.

If you focus only on these stories, and there are too many to mention, it's easy to conclude we are living in the worst of times. The weight of these stories is heavy. But the truth of Jewish life cannot be measured only by fear. It must also be measured by what we have built, by the spirit and steadfastness that have carried us forward. Even in this moment, Jewish life in America is flourishing in ways our ancestors could never have dreamed.

Since the 1960s, Jews have enjoyed unparalleled freedom and opportunity in the United States. Jews serve on the Supreme Court, in Congress, as Nobel laureates, and CEOs of Fortune 500 companies. There are countless Jews who are award winning artists, scientists and physicians, headmasters of academic institutions, and cultural leaders. Our influence in American society is not hidden but celebrated. Jewish organizations, schools, and non-profits thrive. Many of us grew up with opportunities our grandparents could never have imagined.

We don't have to look only at the national picture to see the vibrancy of Jewish life. Just look at us here in Bellingham. In a city far from the large Jewish centers of Seattle, Los Angeles, or New York, we have built a community that is not only surviving but thriving. Beth Israel is growing by leaps and bounds: families are joining, our classrooms are full of children learning and laughing, and volunteers step forward in every corner of congregational life. Jewish life here is diverse and vibrant. We pray in different styles, from Reform to Renewal to Conservative, and we gather with creativity and openness for all. We celebrate holidays, lift each other in times of sorrow, and share in life's simchas. Against the odds of geography and numbers, we are living Jewishly in freedom and with much pride right here in Bellingham. That, too, is the best of times.

Yes, there are dips—moments of fear, surges of hatred. But think of Jewish life as a stock chart in a bull market. Zoom in too closely and you'll see a downturn. Zoom out, and you see an unmistakable upward trajectory. The question becomes, how do we live in this dip with faith in the larger arc?

We learn our history. Knowledge is our defense against the distortions of the world. But not all sources are created equal. If we leave our learning to internet hacks, podcasts, or influencers with no grounding in Jewish life, we risk absorbing distortions, half-truths, and recycled antisemitic tropes. That is why it matters to seek out trusted teachers, to study from our texts and traditions, and to anchor ourselves in the wisdom of our people's story. When we learn Jewish history in its fullness—the triumphs, the tragedies, the resilience of our ancestors—we gain a deeper sense of who we are and the strength to face whatever comes next.

We wear our Judaism proudly. That might mean a Star of David necklace worn on the outside of our shirt or finally putting that mezuzah on the door. These symbols are not trivial. They are acts of courage and affirmation, declaring that Jewish identity is something to cherish and display, not to hide.

We show up. We gather in synagogue, celebrate at each other's simchas, and stand together in moments of sorrow. Simply being present is one of the most powerful statements we can make: that we belong here, and that our presence matters. Community is our anchor. Additionally, when we bring Jewish life into our homes and invite friends and neighbors to share in it we not only show them the beauty of our tradition, we also give them the tools to stand with us when it matters most.

We teach our children. When we share stories, light candles together, explain rituals, and model perseverance, we give them the tools to carry our tradition forward with confidence. Around the dinner table, or even in conversations with a college-aged child, our words matter. If all they hear about Judaism is tied to fear or conflict, they inherit a burden. But when we speak of the beauty, the hope, and the meaning we find in Jewish life, we give them a legacy that balances realism with pride.

We support Israel—with honesty, with nuance, and always with love. Supporting Israel is not just about waving a flag. It's about staying engaged, even when it is complicated, even when it is painful. Israel conversations are hard right now in America but still central to Jewish identity. Israel is part of who we are as Jews. Israel's story is bound up with our story. To turn away would be to turn away from ourselves.

And finally, we embrace both fear and resolve. They are not opposites but companions. We can be afraid and still stand firm. We can grieve and still hope. Holding those emotions together is what makes us human and what makes us Jewish.

But living Jewishly today also calls us to collective action, not just individual practice. Another action we must take is to speak up. Too often Jews remain silent when we experience antisemitism because we don't want to draw attention to ourselves or make a scene. But silence can be misinterpreted as acceptance. We need to find the courage to name antisemitism when it happens to us or to others. Speaking up can be uncomfortable, but it is one of the most important ways to push back.

Right now, at Beth Israel we are taking real steps to confront antisemitism in our community. We are in the process of establishing an antisemitism committee whose purpose is to forge relationships through outreach to community leaders and organizations, to educate and inform about the lived Jewish experience in Northwest Washington. Its role will be to advocate for Jewish civil rights, to educate, and to be a sounding board for people within CBI and the broader community. This is our way of not only protecting ourselves, but of modeling proactive, constructive leadership for the wider world.

This year, let us not be defined by fear. Let us be defined by resilience, commitment, and gratitude. Our ancestors faced down empires, inquisitions, pogroms, and genocide, and still they found ways to celebrate, to teach, to laugh, and to love. We are their heirs, carrying forward the enduring legacy they left us.

And so we remember: even when the world feels broken, *hayom harat olam*—today the world is born. And so are we. May this year be one of courage, one of dignity, and one of renewal for our people.

Shanah tovah.