

Vayera 2022

What a couple of weeks it has been for the Jews!

Last Thursday, my husband's congregation was sheltering in place for several hours because of a threat to New Jersey synagogues and Jews. Fortunately, the FBI worked quickly and by Friday they had a suspect in custody. Yesterday, we were told that this man was arrested.

Nationally, we have the constant drama with Kanye West and Kyrie Irving. Kanye, or "ye" as he now goes by, has been spewing hateful, antisemitic rhetoric everywhere from interviews to social media. Kanye is convinced that Jews run the world, including the entertainment industry, in his antisemitic tropes. I'm not going to quote him here because I don't want to give him any airtime and frankly, his words make me nauseous. Kyrie Irving, a basketball player, for the Brooklyn Nets was promoting an antisemitic movie and its ideas. According to the New York Times, "On October 27, Irving tweeted a link for 'Hebrew to Negroes: Wake Up Black America,' a 2018 film driven by antisemitic tropes about Jewish people lying about their origins. Among its false and outlandish claims is the assertion that the Holocaust never happened." When faced with suspension and loss of income from his sneakers, Kyrie apologized half-heartedly, in a very unconvincing way.

While all this was going on last week, on Friday night we commemorated Kristallnacht, the night of the broken glass. It was November 9, 1938, that this attack against the Jews in Germany and Austria occurred, marking the end of German and Austrian Jewish life and the beginning of the Holocaust.

Here is the bad news:

In 2021, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) tabulated 2,717 antisemitic incidents throughout the United States. This is a 34% increase from the 2,026 incidents tabulated in 2020. It is the highest number on record since ADL began tracking antisemitic incidents in 1979.

Jews represent only 2% of the population in this country, yet we are the highest percentage in religious based hate crimes.

According to Yair Rosenberg, a journalist who has written extensively on antisemitism, conspiracy theories are very attractive. They give people simple answers to complex questions and provide someone to blame. Instead of spending their energy on solving their problems, followers of conspiracy theories pour their energy into blaming Jews. Kanye West is a clear example of this: while

clearly struggling with mental health issues and going through a divorce, he blames Jews for all his personal problems and pain.

Hate groups have come out of the closet everywhere and have been given many places, especially on social media, to give voice to their conspiracy theories and hateful views. According to Rebecca Federman, the Community Security Initiative's threat intelligence analyst, since Elon Musk took over Twitter on November 1, 2022, the number of antisemitic tweets has skyrocketed.

That's the bad news. There is some good news.

Adidas and Nike pulled their business from Kanye and Kyrie at a huge financial loss to them. Nike's statement said, "At Nike, we believe there is no place for hate speech, and we condemn any form of antisemitism. We are deeply saddened and disappointed by the situation and its impact on everyone.

The FBI responded quickly to the threats to the Jewish community made in New Jersey last week. Governor Murphy and security professionals from the FBI and the State of New Jersey worked quickly to protect the Jewish community. My husband, who is the rabbi of a congregation in Tenafly, NJ were notified heard right away from the mayor of Tenafly and the Tenafly police, who could not have been more helpful and supportive.

Last night, my husband and I went to see an amazing play on Broadway, Leopoldstadt by Tom Stoppard. It is loosely based on the story of his Jewish family who lived in Vienna prior to WWII. The play begins in 1899, and later scenes take place in 1926, 1938 and the 1950's. The discussions and disagreements among this Jewish family living comfortably in Vienna were fascinating. Some felt that antisemitism was a thing of the past; the Jews of Europe were enlightened. The scene in 1938 takes place on Kristallnacht in an apartment where they were all forced to live together. Many family members expressed denial that things could get worse and were convinced that everything would "settle down" soon. Leaving was difficult as many safe countries, including the United States, would not take Jews. However, when a few of them had a chance to leave, only one small part of the family went to England.

So, what should we do?

I am not recommending that we all leave the country. I think that we are seeing hints of what happened in Europe, and we certainly cannot be complacent, but we also have many more allies in this country, and I am by no means ready to pack my bags yet. On Tuesday I was on a webinar run by our

New York Jewish Federation and one of the speakers gave the following advice that really resonated with me. He argued that what we need to do now is be open and proud Jews. Unlike the some of the Jews of Europe, we should not hide our Jewishness, or try to discard it altogether. We need to be publicly Jewish and send the message out into the world that we are proud to be Jews.

One of the reasons that I don't like talking about antisemitism is that we tend to get caught up in a "we can't let Hitler win" mentality. That is a really lousy, and un-compelling reason to be Jewish.

Let me say this really clearly: being Jewish is compelling, fulfilling, anchoring and so much more. Judaism speaks to our lives and grounds us in what is good. Basing our Jewish identity on resisting hate is a losing proposition that might kill Judaism before the antisemites do. So, we need to be proud and public with our Judaism.

We also need to use our purchasing power and social media voices to demand justice. Shop consciously. I just bought a new pair of sneakers from Adidas, in part because they did the right thing by cutting off Kanye West's business. Reward companies that do the right thing and punish companies that don't. Consider getting off Twitter. The ADL has asked advertisers to stop their spending on Twitter until it becomes clear that it is a safe place.

Last but certainly not least, we need to be vocal. Not just for ourselves, but vocal against any kind of hate in our country, in our city, in our communities. When someone says something hateful against anyone we must react clearly and unconditionally. A great Jewish educator, Seymour Rossel wrote a post on Facebook for Kristallnacht this year, writing:

"A massive evil event like the Holocaust begins with small "tests" by its perpetrators. A coordinated "test" like the Kristallnacht pogroms was designed to measure reactions – German and international. Evil grows if we stand by and do not demonstrate, protest, outcry, and struggle against its approach. No matter who is the intended victim, in the end we are all victims. Silence begins by endangering our souls but eventually endangers our belongings, our homes, our liberty, and our lives."

— ARJE Facebook, Wed. 11/9/2022.

This is a scary time, but it is not a time to let our fear guide us. We must be realistic, keep our eyes and ears open and not be afraid to speak out. Now is the time to be guided by our faith, our strength, and our deep love of Judaism and the Jewish community.