

Rabbi Herschel Schacter was the first US Army Chaplain to enter the Buchenwald Concentration Camp on April 11, 1945, barely an hour after George Patton's troops had liberated it. Shortly after entering the liberated concentration camp, Rabbi Schacter detected a young boy hiding behind a heap of corpses. In tears, he picked up the young boy, asking him his age. The boy did not know. He then asked the boy his name: instead of answering with his name, the boy shared the numbers tattooed on his arm.

After gentle inquiry, the boy finally said, "My name is Yisrael Meir Lau." Schacter asked, "Are you related to Rabbi Moshe Chaim Lau?" The boy answered, "Yes, I am the son of Rabbi Moshe Chaim Lau." Schacter held this young boy tightly and cried.

The army chaplain knew something the boy did not: the boy's father, Moshe Chaim Lau, the last Chief Rabbi of a notable Polish town, was murdered in the Treblinka extermination camp.

Schacter would remain for months at Buchenwald, tending to survivors and leading religious services. You can see a picture today of Rabbi Schacter leading Shavuot services in Buchenwald in a room packed to the brim with American troops and Buchenwald survivors—the Americans in their Army fatigues and the survivors in their striped clothing. Sitting in the front row on a bench, squished between two soldiers, is that little boy Schacter held tightly.

How do I know this story? While attending a conference, I heard it directly from the young boy who had grown up to be the Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of the State of Israel, Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau.

The two rabbis' stories intertwined bitterness and sweetness. The classical Jewish historical trope of suffering, oppression, and death was combated by bravery and sacrifice. Their story, and our Jewish story, was/is miraculous but always tempered by terrible anguish.

We, as Jews, have witnessed the horrors of antisemitism and the ramifications of the proliferation of what is called the world's oldest hatred. We sometimes lose sight of the fact that antisemitism was and is not an exclusively German or European phenomenon. Instead, this hatred has permeated societies dating back thousands of years.

"The initial indication of a negative attitude toward Jews is found at the beginning of the third century BCE in the writings of an Egyptian priest called Manetho. This Greek-speaking Egyptian devotes a large section of his main work, which deals with the history of Egypt, to the Exodus of the Israelites."¹

Manetho wrote extensively about the Jewish community and what made them abhorrent. According to Manetho, the Jewish people celebrated an entire holiday commemorating the destruction of the Egyptian people, during which they sacrificed animals sacred to the Egyptians. The Egyptian priest, also called the Jews lepers and shepherds, historically led by their anti-Egyptian leader, who would eventually be known as Moses, helped the Israelites to set fire to villages and homes.

¹ <https://jcpa.org/article/the-egyptian-beginning-of-anti-semitism%E2%80%99s-long-history/>

According to Prof. Pieter van der Horst,² “As far as we know, Alexandria in Egypt was the birthplace of anti-Semitism’s ideology.”³ The ideology Manetho promoted made the Jew the symbol of Egyptian defeat and destruction and the symbol of religious desecration through their sacrifice of sacred animals.⁴

Thousands of years later and a continent away, antisemitism raged on in the voice and actions of Reverend Charles E. Coughlin (1891–1979), a Canadian-born Roman Catholic priest and radio celebrity based in the Detroit suburb of Royal Oak, Michigan. Coughlin’s radio show throughout the 1930s aired on Sundays, often featuring anti-Communist and antisemitic claims, and was heard by as many as forty million devoted weekly listeners. He was so popular that his town in Michigan had to open a second post office to process the letters sent to the Reverend daily.

Coughlin linked Jews to the creation and spread of communism, an ideology he hated. He also frequently utilized literary and religious references to spread antisemitic stereotypes. In a November 30, 1930 radio broadcast, Coughlin argued “that modern Shylocks [an antisemitic slur derived from a character in Shakespeare’s play *The Merchant of Venice*] have grown fat and wealthy, praised and deified, because they have perpetuated the ancient crime of usury under a modern racket of statesmanship.” Throughout his career, he told listeners that Jews manipulated the economy, railing against the “international bankers” and “money changers” of the world.⁵

The ideology Coughlin promoted made the Jew the symbol of communism and the symbol of usury and economic manipulation, which Coughlin found most evil.

Both the Egyptian Preist Methanos in Alexandria and Coughlin in the US 2,000 years later made the Jew a symbol of what they found most abhorrent. Which is precisely what antisemitism is. According to Yossi Klein Halevi: “[Antisemitism is] the symbolization of the Jew, turning the Jew into a symbol for whatever a given society or civilization regards as its most objectionable qualities. Under Christianity, there was nothing more loathsome than being blamed for the death of Jesus. [Therefore, Jews were called “Christ Killers.”]. Under Islam, Jews were popularly called “killers of prophets.” Under Nazism, the Jew was the ultimate race polluter.”⁶ Under communism, Jews were capitalists.

Whatever is sinister or threatening becomes the defining characteristic of the Jew. We are Made out to be the symbol of all that is most evil in the world.

Even the word “antisemitism” itself speaks to the anti-Jewish conspiracy. A German activist and journalist, Wilhelm Marr, popularized the term in his 1879 pamphlet “The Victory of Judaism over Germandom.” The word that had previously been used to describe anti-Jewish sentiment was *Judenhass*,

² Prof. Pieter van der Horst studied classical philology and literature. In 1978 he received his PhD in theology from Utrecht University. After his studies he taught there, among other things as professor of Jewish studies. Van der Horst is a member of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences.

³ <https://jcpa.org/article/the-egyptian-beginning-of-anti-semitism%E2%80%99s-long-history/>

⁴ See also, ETHNIC CLEANSING IN ROMAN ALEXANDRIA IN 38, John Atkinson, *Acta Classica* Vol. 49 (2006), pp. 31-54 (24 pages)

⁵ <https://exhibitions.ushmm.org/americans-and-the-holocaust/personal-story/charles-coughlin>

⁶ For Heaven’s Sake Podcast, Aug 21, 2024 , Israel at War-Antisemitism, Anti-Zionism, and Anti-Zionist Jews.

or “Jew-hatred.” Yet, Marr wanted a word that sounded more academic and scientific, thereby assigning the Jewish people as a race. He chose *Antisemitismus*. He relished in society successfully adopting this word to describe the ultimate enemy, the Jew.

That word remains the primary term to connote hatred of Jews. That hatred is on the rise, especially here in the United States.

According to the ADL’s Audit of Antisemitic Incidents 2023:

- In 2023, ADL tabulated a 140% increase from the antisemitic incidents recorded in 2022, the highest number on record since ADL began tracking antisemitic incidents in 1979. In fact, ADL tracked more incidents in 2023 than in the previous three years combined.
- Incidents increased in all major Audit categories. Assault incidents increased by 45%, vandalism increased by 69%, and harassment increased by 184%.
- The dramatic increase in incidents took place primarily in the period following the October 7 terrorist attacks in Israel. Between October 7 and the end of 2023, ADL tabulated 5,204 incidents -- more than the incident total for the whole of 2022.⁷
- According to the ADL, 73% of Jewish college students surveyed have experienced or witnessed some form of antisemitism since the beginning of the 2023-2024 school year alone.

According to the FBI 2022 Hate Crime Statistics:

- In 2022, there were 2,042 reported incidents based on religion. More than half of these (1,122) were driven by anti-Jewish bias. Incidents involving anti-Muslim (158) and anti-Sikh (181).⁸ Which is an increase of more than thirty-seven percent.

It is essential to account for the uptick in antisemitic incidents because it provides empirical evidence, but that’s not what should drive us. As Deborah Lipstadt writes: “What should alarm us is that human beings continue to believe in a conspiracy that demonizes Jews and sees them as responsible for evil.”⁹

What has become so clear since October 7 is that antisemitism is an issue that emerges from every corner of the world. Here in the US, this hatred is not limited to the far-right or the far-left; antisemitism is open to all. Antisemitism within political movements is like a horseshoe.

Think about this: two sides [the right and left] stand diametrically opposed to one another in almost every way. Yet, they come together at one point, hating the Jew. For both sides, we are a people apart, arrayed against their interests.

In August 2017, the torch-carrying marchers at Charlottesville chanted, “Jews will not replace us,” as they rallied to protect Confederate iconography, regurgitating many of the oldest antisemitic tropes, including Jewish people conspired to replace white people with Jews and other minorities, thereby taking the white

⁷ <https://www.adl.org/resources/report/audit-antisemitic-incidents-2023>

⁸ <https://www.justice.gov/crs/highlights/2022-hate-crime-statistics>

⁹ Lipstadt page X

people's god-given rights to their jobs and homes. Following their march from the Confederate statue, armed individuals dressed in fatigues menaced a local synagogue, yelling the Nazi salute as they passed by.

In October 2018, we saw the deadliest mass killing of Jews in American history: the assault on the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, which claimed 11 Jewish lives. The far-right shooter believed that Jews were responsible for mass nonwhite immigration and wanted to kill as many as he could find in retaliation.

In April 2019, another far-right shooter preoccupied with fears of a Jewish-perpetrated "white genocide" attacked the Chabad synagogue in Poway, California, killing one and injuring three.¹⁰

According to the far-right, Jews are "non-white" conspiring to steal what is rightfully theirs. On the far-left, the Jew is considered "white" as a way to deny them the ability to claim victimhood.

There was a student at a leading liberal arts college who recently took a class about the Holocaust. The discussion turned to writer and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, a classmate called Wiesel "privileged." Why? Because he "was a white, able-bodied man."

Bari Weiss clearly identifies the substantial challenges the Jewish community faces when she writes in her outstanding work *How to Fight Anti-Semitism*:

"Neo-Nazis, in a way, are easy. We know they wish us dead. Anti-Semites with PhDs, the ones who defend their bigotry as enlightened thinking, are harder to fight. And so American Jews are confronting two fears at the same time, one from without and one from within: Being shot by white supremacists. And being made out to be white supremacists."

The left demonizes Israel, the Jew among the nations, as the last bastion of white, racist colonialism, denying Jewish peoplehood and our right to self-determination. This is all cloaked in the language of progressive values and standing up against the greatest sins of racism and colonialism. Never mind that the majority of Jews in Israel identify as Sephardi or Mizrahi, also ignoring the two million non-Jewish citizens who are subject to the same threats and violence.

We have seen the most extreme examples of this hatred on campuses across the country. At universities across the country, anti-Israel protests were flowing like a rushing torrent, overwhelming the schools, their student population, leadership, and our Jewish and Zionist students of all faiths. There were and are numerous reports about our Jewish students feeling unsafe to the furthest extent possible, and as we read the headlines, it is no mystery as to why that is.

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<https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/22889932/beth-israel-synagogue-hostage-attack-terrorism-antisemitism>

Violence and chants that I would never repeat - especially from the Bimah - have left college campuses in dire straights for our students. Last semester, a rabbi at Columbia University encouraged Jewish students not to return until calm and safety were restored on campus. For their safety, they should not go to school.

What should be a place where they grow and learn at a high level. Where students make such substantial financial investments into their educational experience, not to mention the countless hours they dedicate to thriving in these environments, these are now potentially unsafe surroundings.

There was an article in the Atlantic about the Jewish students' experience in Berkeley, California, at their high school.¹¹ The article described an anti-Israel walkout in solidarity with the October 7 atrocities that left Jewish students petrified, alone in classrooms with a few teachers. Many of the teachers may not have been a source of comfort for these Jewish students because their classrooms also became a bastion for anti-Zionism and anti-Jewish language and lessons. That's right, math classes became a forum to discuss what these teachers described as the oppression inherent in Zionism.

What needs to be made crystal clear is that physically assaulting a Jewish student wearing a Star of David necklace in Pittsburgh or attacking a Hillel is not a form of pro-Palestinian protest; it is antisemitic.

We need to be especially careful of being inclined to see the antisemitism of the "other side " rather than in our midst. It is essential to call out the antisemitism of both the right and the left. This leaves us with the critical question: What can we do to combat antisemitism?

We can begin with the phrase that has been a part of American society for over 20 years, "if you see something, say something." As difficult as it may be, call it out. We should criticize the antisemitic language and ideas we encounter. When someone says: "I hired a Jewish accountant because they really know how to get money," that is called antisemitism and is dangerous, too. We cannot allow this prejudice and hatred to continue when it is one-on-one or in a public setting. How we speak to the antisemite is up to each one of us, most often determined by the type of relationship we have with them. How we call out a client differs from how we call out another dinner guest, but it is essential to do so even when it is hard.

Next, it is crucial to educate ourselves and learn. After all, how can we combat this hatred if we are not entirely sure who we are and that for which we are fighting? We can learn more about our Jewish identity and the historical narrative that leads us. Visit the Illinois Holocaust Museum. Attend our education classes, especially when we teach about antisemitism. And for our youth, we offer programs like the ADL's Words to Action program, where our high school students can explore their Jewish identities and prepare to encounter antisemitism potentially. Please lean on us at BHBE as support, resources, and partners in this fight against hatred. Your clergy is here for you; your leadership is here for you; your community is here for you.

The generations before us fought back against antisemitism, discrimination, quotas, and other oppressions to emerge as leaders in the intellectual, professional, medical, and entertainment worlds, in addition to

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https://docs.google.com/document/d/1E5EMkooR044lcE9_wUsl49umo7vilaq7/edit?usp=sharing&oid=117016302643494510206&rtpof=true&sd=true

many different areas of life. We are those who benefit from their tireless work in establishing institutions and communities that support Jews today. So we must continue their efforts, which are now more critical than ever, and support Jewish organizations, including our synagogue community.

Here in the synagogue, our youth can sing Hatikvah as loudly and proudly as they want. They can pray for the release of the hostages. And our youth can process and prepare for the hatred they may encounter. Students are afraid to claim their Zionist identities in public settings. Still, here, we create Jewish experiences that help them unleash their pride and confidence in a safe and positive setting. This is true for Jewish summer camps, Hillels, youth groups like USY, and Jewish educational institutions, all of which could benefit significantly from our time, talent, and resources.

Please know we are not alone. We have outstanding partners in the fight against antisemitism. For example, the Winnetka Covenant Community Church, under the leadership of Reverend Peter Hawkinson and his fellow clergy, sent us a letter shortly after October 7th, in which they wrote:

“We want you to know that our hearts break along with yours for the lives lost as a result of the horrific terrorist attack in Israel on October 7, 2023. Please know that we are holding the nation of Israel, the worldwide Jewish community, and your congregants in our prayers. We are mindful that your community likely feels less safe these days in light of the increased anti-Semitic and violent threats against Jewish individuals and communities. We want you to know that we are your neighbors, that we love you and support the Jewish people, your communities, and Israel's right to exist.”

This beautiful message helped to build the foundational relationship between the Pastor and me, which led to an exceptional program this last summer when our two communities joined together for a social action project with over 100 attendees. The church members concluded our program by singing to us the Priestly Benediction, which deeply moved many of us.

Recently, a nurse our family knows who identifies as an Evangelical Christian visited us and asked this question: “Are you okay? I know how much antisemitism there is right now, and I am concerned for you.” She then told us that her church is offering a program to teach the members how to combat antisemitism, and she was the first to sign up.

We are not alone.

Columbia alumnus Ze'ev Maghen wrote “How to Fight Anti-Semitism” in the early 1990s as a response to an antisemitic speaker invited to Columbia. Maghen wrote: “Jewish learning, Jewish observance, Jewish strength, and Jewish achievement—such are those who bring our people survival, salvation, and future.”

We must defy the hatred and cannot allow it to define us. Every time we light Shabbat candles. Every time we sing, dance, and celebrate together, we defy the hatred. This leads me to my final item we can do to combat antisemitism.

Love being Jewish.

So much beauty, diversity, love, and community are intertwined in our tradition and Jewish identities. Judaism has breathtaking power: wisdom, righteous deeds, and redemptive hope. After all, every Shabbat, we conclude our services by singing Hatikvah, our prayer for hope. Let us appreciate this great gift we have received or chosen.

The depth of our prayers for emotional and physical safety and security is virtually indescribable. We must meet those prayers with action.

Our modern story echoes Chief Ashkenazi Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau's story, a young boy stripped of the life he was supposed to live by the hatred of the most evil in the world. That evil did not end with the conclusion of the Holocaust; it lives on today in the hearts of millions across the globe, many of whom have never met a Jew. We must stand up and say, "Never again." We will not let hatred defeat us or define us. We will forever endure and shout loudly and proudly, "Am Yisrael Chai," the people of Israel live.

L'Shanah Tovah and Am Yisrael Chai.