

# What's Good for the Jews

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“It was the best of times and the worst of times,  
it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness,  
it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity,  
it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness,  
it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.”<sup>2</sup>

Charles Dickens was referring to the deep contrasts between two cities, Paris and London, during the French Revolution. His immortal words apply with surprising accuracy, and paradox, to Jewish life today in America. For Jews today it is the best of times: we are successful and powerful and privileged, and the worst of times: that same success, power, and privilege has made us vulnerable to the rising tide of antisemitism.<sup>3</sup>

The rising tide of antisemitism. Perhaps more accurately the storm surge of antisemitism. I neither need nor want to rehearse it all for you. We all read the headlines and listen to the news; we are on social media; we have armed security at the doors of our Jewish institutions. We know what is happening.

In a lecture at the Hartman Institute this past summer, Dr. Mijal Bitton explored why this is such a paradoxical time for American Jews.<sup>4</sup> She spoke of three historical phases of American Jewry in terms of how we have answered the question “What is good for the Jews?”

I must add a caveat here, and ask your forbearance: I am going to be speaking in broad generalities, which I recognize will not apply to all Jews at any given

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<sup>1</sup> This sermon was written collaboratively with Rabbi Sharon Stiefel

<sup>2</sup> Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities

<sup>3</sup> “The unhyphenated spelling of antisemitism is favored by many scholars and institutions in order to dispel the idea that there is an entity ‘Semitism’ which ‘anti-Semitism’ opposes. Antisemitism should be read as a unified term so that the meaning of the generic term for modern Jew-hatred is clear. At a time of increased violence and rhetoric aimed towards Jews, it is urgent that there is clarity and no room for confusion or obfuscation when dealing with antisemitism.” [www.holocaustremembrance.com](http://www.holocaustremembrance.com).

<sup>4</sup> Mijal Bitton: American Jewish Identity - Power and Vulnerability Community Leadership, Summer Retreat, Shalom Hartman Institute, Jerusalem, Israel. June 26, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K1xHHPc7j9o>

moment. We are, of course, not a monolithic community. Nonetheless, I believe the argument has merit, and at the very least, it will add to the conversation.

Three phases of “what is good for the Jews.”

In the first phase, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, American Jews advocated for all minority Americans because equal rights for all was good for the Jews. It was a time of mass immigration, and in response, rising nationalism. Immigrants were vulnerable. So, a combination of Jewish values and strategic thinking led us to work alongside other groups for the betterment of all.

We are all familiar with the words inscribed on the Statue of Liberty:<sup>5</sup> “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” Their author, Emma Lazarus was a Jewish activist working to bring Russian Jewish refugees to America. But her poem advocates for rights not just for her people, but for all immigrants.

In this first phase, we Jews believed in and strived for an America that was a Goldene Medina - a promised land - for all. If we advocated for everyone, Jews would benefit too. And, it must be said, it didn’t feel quite safe to proclaim our Jewishness. It was more comfortable to speak out for others, and benefit from the results. This strategy of working together for the betterment of all saw its peak, and ironically its undoing, in the civil rights movement of the 1960’s.

In the late ‘60s and early 70’s, the civil rights movement sparked the rise of identity politics, a new wave of particularistic activism based on racial, religious, ethnic, sexual, social, cultural or other identity. There was Women’s Lib, Black Power, Gay Pride. The Jewish community saw that if other groups could say “we are proud to be different,” maybe Jews could do the same.

So began the second phase in the history of “what is good for the Jews” and we began advocating for particularistic Jewish causes. We rallied for Soviet Jews. Jewish Feminism arose. Zionism was strong. With the rise of identity politics, came Jewish pride; we became comfortable advocating for our own interests, and began to prosper and edge our way into the American Dream.

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<sup>5</sup> Emma Lazarus, The New Colossus, November 2, 1883,  
<https://www.nps.gov/stli/learn/historyculture/colossus.htm>

In a 1970 report on college-age Jews, Education consultant Donald Feldstein wrote: “It is no longer embarrassing to belong to a group on campus with the word Jew in the title.” He noted literally scores of Jewish groups forming on college campuses across the country with “aggressively Jewish missions that imitated the spirit, the style, and the tactics of the New Left and black militants.”<sup>6</sup>

So, to review, in Phase One, we felt vulnerable, and so we joined forces with other minority communities to work for the betterment of all. In Phase Two, we felt proud, advocated for Jewish interests, and began to prosper. If you listen to Professor Bitton’s lecture on YouTube, you’ll see that as she transitions from Phase Two to Phase three and our current situation, she pauses, and heaves a deep sigh.

Because Phase three, she says, is marked by disorientation and destabilization. The answer to “What is good for the Jews?” is the same as the answer to the issue of Israel/Palestine - big sigh -*It’s Complicated*. As I said, along with the pride and particularistic activism of phase two, came increased prosperity, acceptance, and a voice in the majority social structure and discourse. As Eric Goldstein puts it, we negotiated a white identity, and thereby gained white privilege.<sup>7</sup>

We can see the process reflected in books with titles like “Working Toward Whiteness: The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs”<sup>8</sup> and “How Jews Became White Folks.”<sup>9</sup> But even as we have succeeded in “negotiating whiteness” for ourselves, and have gained status in the majority social structures, we still hold on to the memory of oppression, marginality, and vulnerability. It is woven into the very fabric of our Jewishness. Every Shabbat, our prayers remind us that we were slaves in Egypt. At our Passover Seders we recite year after year -בְּכֹל דּוֹר וָדוֹר, עוֹמְדִים עָלֵינוּ לְכַלּוֹתֵנוּ- Not just once but in every generation, someone arises to try and destroy us.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> As quoted in Marc Dollinger, *Black Power, Jewish Politics: Reinventing the Alliance in the 1960s*, Brandeis University Press, 2018, page 112

<sup>7</sup> Goldstein, Eric L. *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> David R. Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White: The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs*, Basic Books; Reprint edition (December 4, 2018)

<sup>9</sup> Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America*, Rutgers University Press; None edition (October 1, 1998)

<sup>10</sup> וְהִיא שְׁעֵמֶדָה לְאַבוֹתֵינוּ וְלָנוּ. שְׁלֹא אָחַד בְּלִבְדּוֹ, עֹמֵד עָלֵינוּ לְכַלּוֹתֵנוּ. אֲלֵא שְׁבֹכֵל דּוֹר וָדוֹר, עוֹמְדִים עָלֵינוּ לְכַלּוֹתֵנוּ. *Vehi She’amda, La’avotainu Velanu Shelo Echad Bilvad, Amad Aleinu Lechaloteinu Ela Sheb’chol Dor VaDor Omdim Aleinu Lechaloteinu V’HaKadosh Baruch Hu Matzilenu Miyadam.*

And, of course, today's culture of hate and divisiveness reminds us that our hold on privilege is conditional, if not tenuous. So, we have a paradox, and confusion, and as Bitton says, disorientation and destabilization. We have made it. We are successful and prosperous, and we have access to power. Did you notice that in the last presidential election, both major candidates had Jewish sons-in-law?

And yet...we have security guards at our synagogues, every day another antisemitic trope hits our news feeds, and we hold our breaths until the next act of violence.

In 2016 Jewish historian Eric Goldstein said "Jewish identity in America is inherently paradoxical and contradictory . . . What you have is a group that was historically considered, and considered itself, an outsider group, a persecuted minority. In the space of two generations, they've become one of the most successful, integrated groups in American society – by many accounts, part of the establishment. And there's a lot of dissonance between those two positions."<sup>11</sup>

Behind the dissonance is the fact that the narrative of other minorities does not mirror our own, and instead tends toward a binary notion that you are either powerful or powerless, white or not-white. Either the American Dream works for you, or it has been built upon your back and works against you." It is an approach that tells us that we cannot have it both ways. We cannot enjoy the benefits of privilege, and yet maintain an identity of otherness and vulnerability.

This misalignment has contributed to the breakdown of relationship between the black community and the Jewish community: no longer are we seen as partners in the good fight. Add to the mix the inexorable complexity of the conflict between Israel and Palestine and increasingly folks on the activist left, formerly our allies, have come to see Jews as the Oppressor as well.

So here we are in 2019, on the eve of 5780. Blatant and violent antisemitism from white supremacists is rising and seems to have become acceptable in the public square, social media and even the hallowed halls of government. AND equally hostile if more subtle antisemitism is coming from the left, because both here and in Israel, we have entered the world of power and privilege.

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/12/are-jews-white/509453/>

Now, if ever, might be the time to send that classic Jewish telegram that reads “Start Worrying. Details to Follow.”

But that is not the message I want to send on this eve of the new year. I want to send a message of hope and promise which might move us towards a phase 4 of “What’s good for the Jews?”

First, in response to the critique from the left, Mijal Bitton tells us that we must face up to the reality of our paradoxical situation, and grapple with it honestly. The truth is that some of the same systems which enabled us to prosper did oppress others. On the other hand, we have experienced again and again that our prosperity is tenuous. We need to find ways to confidently embody the paradox in order to develop a credible voice that can push back against binary notion that you either hold all the power or are entirely powerless.

Two years ago, Rabbi Don Weber of Marlboro New Jersey gave a powerful, daring Yom Kippur sermon on antisemitism. It is online and I encourage you to listen to it.<sup>12</sup> He spends a good 10 minutes with a scary recounting of all the horrible antisemitism the Jewish community had seen that year, including Charlottesville from the right and the Chicago Dyke march from the left. He concludes with a simple charge: We must speak up, as Jews, to our own power bases. He says:

“As long as you and I have a vote, as long as you and I have a voice, as long as we make contributions, we have the ability to affect this conversation and affect our country. So, if you are a democrat... and you hear someone from the left wing talking like this about Jews, or if you are a Republican and you hear someone from the right saying antisemitic things, it's time to call them up or send an email and say... ‘I am an American, I am a voter, I am a contributor, and I am a proud Jew, and if you continue along this path you will lose my voice, you will lose my vote you will lose my support because this is not what America is supposed to be.’”<sup>13</sup>

My takeaway from Rabbi Weber and Professor Bitton is that we need to integrate the attitudes of phase one and two of “what’s good for the Jews,” and use our power to stand up, *with proud Jewish voices*, against hatred toward **any**

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<sup>12</sup> <https://trt.org/audio-collection/yom-kippur-september-30-2017/>

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. at 12:46

community, stand up *with proud Jewish voices* not just against antisemitism, but for social justice and civil rights **for all**.

Finally, one more scholar informs my view on what will be good for the Jews this year: Professor Deborah Lipstadt, whose most recent book is called *Antisemitism Here and Now*,<sup>14</sup> says we need to resist our natural pessimism - as my teacher David Ellenson once said “The Jews are a people who won’t take Yes for an answer.” Lipstadt encourages us to balance the oys of being Jewish with its joys.

She writes: “Jewish tradition in all its manifestations—religious, secular, intellectual, communal, artistic, and so much more—is far too valuable to be tossed aside and replaced with a singular concentration on the fight against hatred. This need for Jews to balance the “oy” with the “joy” is an exhortation that could well be shared with many other groups that have become the objects of discrimination and prejudice...Never stop fighting the good fight, even as you rejoice in who you are.”<sup>15</sup>

As we stand at the threshold of the new year, it is the best of times and the worst of times. 5780 won't be an **easy** year, to be sure. But by learning from the past, grappling with the present, and proudly working for a better future, all the while remembering to balance the Oys with the Joys, we *can* make it a Shanah **tovah** - a **good** year.

Ken Y’hi Ratzon -May God help us make it so.

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Anthem: *Al Kol Eleh*<sup>16</sup>

For the honey and the bee sting,  
For the bitter and the sweet,  
All the things which join as one  
to make our lives complete.

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<sup>14</sup> Lipstadt, Deborah E. (2019). *Antisemitism: Here and Now*. Schocken. ISBN 9780805243376.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p. 241-2

<sup>16</sup> Music and Hebrew Lyrics by Naomi Shemer. English lyrics by Danny Friedlander and myself.

For a moving performance of the Hebrew song see:

[https://israelforever.org/interact/multimedia/Music/the\\_bitter\\_and\\_sweet\\_song\\_of\\_prayer\\_and\\_promise\\_naomi\\_shemer/](https://israelforever.org/interact/multimedia/Music/the_bitter_and_sweet_song_of_prayer_and_promise_naomi_shemer/) and read about it here: <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/al-kol-eleh-for-all-these-things-thoughts-on-israels-70th-birthday/>

For the future of our children,  
For our prayers will never cease,  
For the hope that with tomorrow  
Comes a world of peace.

*Al kol eileh, al kol eileh  
Sh'mor na li Eili hatov  
Al had'vash v'al ha'oketz  
Al hamar v'hamatok*

For the sake of all these things, God,  
Let your mercy be complete  
Bless the sting and bless the honey  
Bless the bitter and the sweet.

Don't uproot what has been planted  
May our bounty still increase  
Let our dearest wish be granted:  
That we all can live in peace.

Hear our prayer, our call to you God  
As the year begins anew  
With our joys and with our troubles  
We return to You.

*Al kol eileh, al kol eileh  
Sh'mor na li Eili hatov  
Al had'vash v'al ha'oketz  
Al hamar v'hamatok*

For the sake of all these things, God,  
Let your mercy be complete  
Bless the sting and bless the honey  
Bless the bitter and the sweet.