



SHALOM HARTMAN מכון  
INSTITUTE שלום הרטמן

# Together & Apart: The Future of Jewish Peoplehood

## Session Six: Antisemitism as a Divisive Force

*with Rabbi Lauren Berkun*

### I. Antisemitism and Collective Jewish Identity

#### 1. Joseph Soloveitchik, *Kol Dodi Dofek*

This special, incomprehensible reality of the individual clinging to the community and feeling alienated from the foreign, outside world became crystalized in Egypt. It was there that the Israelites raised themselves up to the rank of a people, peoplehood signifying both togetherness (the Hebrew word for "people" 'am', is related to the Hebrew word 'im' meaning "with") and the uniqueness that derives from togetherness. This consciousness of a covenant of fate in all of its manifestations is an integral part of our historical-metaphysical being...

The consciousness of a shared fate manifests itself as a consciousness of shared circumstances. We all find ourselves in the reality of a common fate which binds together all of the people's different strata, its various units and groups, a fate which does not discriminate between one group and another group or between one person and his fellow. Our fate does not distinguish between aristocrats and common folk, between rich and poor, between a prince garbed in the royal purple and a pauper begging from door to door, between a pietist and an assimilationist...

Has the dispersion of the Jewish people throughout the lands of its exile and its taking root in its various surroundings resulted in its spiritual and psychic dissolution? Or has the unity of the people not been abrogated, despite the fact that it expresses itself in a multitude of languages and cultures, in differing customs and varying practices? In short: **Is the Jewish diaspora a unity or not?...**

**The answer to the question of the unity of the Jewish people is... that as long as there is shared suffering, there is unity. If the Jew upon whom divine providence has shed a beneficent light, and who consequently believes that, at least with respect to himself, the venom of hate and rejection has been expunged from his surroundings, still feels the troubles of the people and the burden of a fate-laden existence, then his link with the people has not been broken.**

## 2. Joseph Telushkin, *The Case for Jewish Peoplehood*, p. viii

One of the more unusual texts in Jewish religious literature concerns a case of an infant born with two heads. A Talmudic commentary to *Menachot 37a* raises the question of whether such a child is entitled to one or two shares of his father's inheritance and notes that a similar case had been raised before Solomon (long renowned as Israel's wisest king) who had ruled: "Let them pour boiling water on the head of one child and see if the other one screams. If he does, then it means that the children are not regarded as twins, but as one. However, if the second child does not feel the suffering of the first, then they are to be regarded as separate individuals."

One hopes that this case was hypothetical, certainly for the sake of the child destined to have boiling water poured on its head. Nonetheless, the late Rabbi Joseph Baer Soloveitchik, of blessed memory, argued that the implications of this case are not hypothetical at all. In his essay *Kol Dodi Dofek* ("My Beloved's Voice Calls to Me"), he writes: "If boiling water is poured on the head of a Moroccan Jew, the prim and proper Jew in Paris and London must scream. And by feeling the pain, he is loyal to the nation."

## 3. Passover Haggadah, "Four Sons" – The Wicked Child

The wicked one, what does he say? What is this service to you?! He says to *you* - but not to *him*! By thus excluding himself from the community he is a heretic in the essence. You, therefore, blunt his teeth and say to him: It is because of this that the Lord did for me when I left Egypt - for *me* - but not for *him*! If he had been there, he would not have been redeemed!

רשע מה הוא אומר. "מה העבודה הזאת לכם" - לכם ולא לו. ולפי שהוציא את עצמו מן הכלל כפר בעיקר.

## 4. Passover Haggadah, Magid: V'Hi She'Amdah

And it is this that has stood for our ancestors and for us, since it is not [only] one [person or nation] that has stood [against] us to destroy us, but rather in each generation, they stand [against] us to destroy us, but the Holy One, blessed be He, rescues us from their hand.

וְהִיא שְׁעֵמָדָה לְאַבוֹתֵינוּ וְלָנוּ. שְׁלֹא אֶחָד בְּלֶבֶד עָמַד עֲלֵינוּ לְכַלּוֹתֵנוּ, אֶלָּא שְׁבָכָל דּוֹר וְדוֹר עוֹמְדִים עֲלֵינוּ לְכַלּוֹתֵנוּ, וְהַקְדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא מְצִילֵנוּ מִיָּדָם.

## 5. Babylonian Talmud Yevamot 47a

תנו רבנן: גר שבא להתגייר בזמן הזה, אומרים לו: מה ראית שבאת להתגייר? אי אתה יודע שישראל בזמן הזה דוויים, דחופים, סחופים ומטורפין, ויסורין באין עליהם? אם אומר: יודע אני ואיני כדאי, מקבלין אותו מיד...

Our Rabbis taught: If at the present time a person desires to become a convert, he is to be addressed as follows: What reason have you for desiring to become a convert; do you not know that Israel at the present time are persecuted and oppressed, despised, harassed and overcome by afflictions? If he replies, "I know and yet am unworthy," he is accepted immediately...

## 6. Exodus 1:6–22

<sup>6</sup>Joseph died, and all his brothers, and all that generation. <sup>7</sup>But the Israelites were fertile and prolific; they multiplied and increased very greatly, so that the land was filled with them. <sup>8</sup>A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. <sup>9</sup>And he said to his people, "Look, the **Israelite people** are much too numerous for us. <sup>10</sup>Let us deal shrewdly with them, so that they may not increase; otherwise in the event of war they may join our enemies in fighting against us and rise from the ground." <sup>11</sup>So they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor; and they built garrison cities for Pharaoh: Pithom and Raamses. <sup>12</sup>But the more they were oppressed, the more they increased and spread out, so that the [Egyptians] came to dread the Israelites. <sup>13</sup>The Egyptians ruthlessly imposed upon the Israelites <sup>14</sup>the various labors that they made them perform. Ruthlessly they made life bitter for them with harsh labor at mortar and bricks and with all sorts of tasks in the field. <sup>15</sup>The king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, <sup>16</sup>saying, "When you deliver the Hebrew women, look at the birthstool: if it is a boy, kill him; if it is a girl, let her live." <sup>17</sup>The midwives, fearing God, did not do as the king of Egypt had told them; they let the boys live. <sup>18</sup>So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this thing, letting the boys live?" <sup>19</sup>The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women: they are vigorous. Before the midwife can come to them, they have given birth." <sup>20</sup>And God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and increased greatly. <sup>21</sup>And because the midwives feared God, He established households for them. <sup>22</sup>Then Pharaoh charged all his people, saying, "Every boy that is born you shall throw into the Nile, but let every girl live."

ח וַיָּקָם מֶלֶךְ-חָדָשׁ, עַל-מִצְרָיִם, אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יָדַע, אֶת-יֹסֵף ט וַיֹּאמֶר, אֶל-עַמּוֹ:  
הִנֵּה, עַם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל--רַב וְעָצוּם, מִמֶּנּוּ

7. Numbers 23:9–10

<sup>9</sup>As I see them from the mountain tops,  
Gaze on them from the heights,  
There is **a people that dwells apart**,  
Not reckoned among the nations,  
<sup>10</sup>Who can count the dust of Jacob,  
Number the dust-cloud of Israel?  
May I die the death of the upright,  
May my fate be like theirs!

הָ-עַם לְבַדָּד יִשְׁכֹּן, וּבְגוֹיִם לֹא יִתְחַשֵּׁב.

8. Esther 3:5–15

<sup>5</sup>When Haman saw that Mordecai would not kneel or bow low to him, Haman was filled with rage. <sup>6</sup>But he disdained to lay hands on Mordecai alone; having been told who **Mordecai’s people** were, Haman plotted to do away with all the Jews, Mordecai’s people, throughout the kingdom of Ahasuerus. <sup>7</sup>In the first month, that is, the month of Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, *pur*—which means “the lot”—was cast before Haman concerning every day and every month, [until it fell on] the twelfth month, that is, the month of Adar. <sup>8</sup>Haman then said to King Ahasuerus, “**There is a certain people, scattered and dispersed among the other peoples** in all the provinces of your realm, whose laws are different from those of any other people and who do not obey the king’s laws; and it is not in Your Majesty’s interest to tolerate them. <sup>9</sup>If it please Your Majesty, let an edict be drawn for their destruction, and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver to the stewards for deposit in the royal treasury.”

ה וַיֵּרָא הָמָן--כִּי אִין מְרַדְּכַי, כָּרַע וּמִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לוֹ; וַיִּמְלֵא הָמָן, חֲמָה ו וַיִּבֹז בְּעֵינָיו, לְשַׁלַּח יָד בְּמְרַדְּכַי לְבַדּוֹ--כִּי הִגִּידוּ לוֹ, **אֶת-עַם מְרַדְּכַי**; וַיִּבְקֶשׂ הָמָן, לְהַשְׁמִיד אֶת-כָּל-הַיְהוּדִים אֲשֶׁר בְּכָל-מְלָכוֹת אַחַשְׁוֵרוּשׁ--עַם מְרַדְּכַי ז בַּחֲדָשׁ הָרִאשׁוֹן, הוּא-חֲדָשׁ נִיסָן, בְּשָׁנַת שְׁתַּיִם עֶשְׂרֵה, לְמַלְכֻד אַחַשְׁוֵרוּשׁ: הַפִּיל פּוֹר הוּא הַגּוֹרֵל לִפְנֵי הָמָן, מִיּוֹם לַיּוֹם וּמִחֲדָשׁ לְחֲדָשׁ שָׁנִים עֶשְׂרֵה--הוּא-חֲדָשׁ אֲדָר ח וַיֹּאמֶר הָמָן, לְמַלְכֻד אַחַשְׁוֵרוּשׁ--**יִשְׁנֹו עַם-אֶחָד מִפְּזָר וּמִפְּרֹד בֵּין הָעַמִּים**, **בְּכָל מְדִינֹות מְלָכוֹתֶיךָ**; וְדַתִּיהֶם שְׁנוֹת מִכָּל-עַם, וְאֶת-דַּתִּי הַמְּלָכֻד אֵינִם עֹשִׂים, וְלְמַלְכֻד אִין-שְׁנָה, לְהַנִּיחֶם ט אִם-עַל-הַמְּלָכֻד טוֹב, יִכְתֹּב לְאַבְדָּם; וְעִשְׂרַת אֲלָפִים כֶּכֶר-כֶּסֶף, אֲשֶׁקּוּל עַל-יָדֵי עֹשֵׂי הַמְּלָאכָה, לְהַבִּיא, אֶל-גִּנְזֵי הַמְּלָכֻד

## II. Antisemitism as an Eternal, Transnational Phenomenon

### 9. Deborah Lipstadt, Interview with *JTA*, November 13, 2018

I compare anti-Semitism to herpes. For most of the time we've had herpes, it couldn't be cured. And if you were suddenly under stress, boom, up would come a herpes infection. Anti-Semitism is like herpes. When a society is under stress, it appears...

### 10. Alana Newhouse, "American Yearzeit," *Tablet Magazine*, October 29, 2018

...Many well-intentioned Americans, including many Jews, appear to have difficulty believing that anti-Semitism is unique and entirely unrelated to who Jews are or what they do. But it is. And to explain Bowers' motives as anything other than the purest expression of the thought-virus he carried—as a political act, or an exercise in some other kind of applied reason—is to participate in the killer's own sickness.

The widespread dismissal, on both the right and left, of the reality of anti-Semitism often shows a profound misunderstanding of what anti-Semitism is and how it operates. There are reasons for this misunderstanding, of course. There is the nature of anti-Semitism itself, which doesn't fit easily into a contemporary conversation about prejudice rooted in American ideas about race, gender, and sexual orientation. There is political opportunism. There is fear. There is the widespread American ignorance of history, which comes from the belief that we, as Americans, exist outside of history, or are in the process of transcending history, in order to achieve a more perfect union with whatever form of the divine.

Among American Jews, there is also the fact that we are conditioned both by the American mythos and by our own history to think of anti-Semitism as something that happens there, rather than here...

People who argue that powerful people who consort with anti-Semites don't mean it, or can't be held responsible for their actions or alliances, are not our friends—whether they claim to represent the right or the left. They are the friends of people who want to kill us. Those who argue—from the right or the left—that anti-Semitism should be tolerated as part of a larger struggle against some much bigger force of darkness, those people are arguing for the tolerance of anti-Semitism, against the interests of our community...

**11. Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt, "On Ilhan Omar," *Times of Israel*, March 20, 2019**

On Purim we read, in the Megillah, "There is a certain people, scattered and dispersed among other peoples throughout the land, whose laws are different and who do not obey the laws of the king. It is not in your majesty's interest to tolerate them." A month later we tell the story of our liberation from Egyptian bondage. We were enslaved because as the Pharaoh tells his people and advisers, "Behold, this people is too numerous for us. Let us deal shrewdly with them, so that they may not increase. Otherwise in the event of war, they may join our enemies and fight against us."

Though separated by hundreds of years and the divide of different continents, countries and civilizations, both canards and conspiratorial theories about Jews and distrust of them attempt to rationalize evil intentions. Both level accusations of dual loyalty, and both were expressed in halls of power and government.

Although uttered thousands of years ago, the sentiments could have been lifted from today's papers. The spirit of contempt and distrust of Jews, the accusations of dual loyalty have been expressed, or more accurately, tweeted by people elected to serve in the United States Congress. Such hateful comments cannot be ignored, excused or rationalized.

**12. Deborah Lipstadt, "Jewish Myopia in a Perfect Storm of Antisemitism," *Times of Israel*, January 27, 2019**

So why is today's surge in Jew-hatred different – and particularly alarming? Generally, antisemitism has come from either the right or the left. But today, it comes from three different sides at the same time... To make all this worse, some Jews have politicized the fight against this torrent of hatred. Many are prone to see antisemitism only on the other side of the political transom, even as they fail to see it within their own camp.

### III. Antisemitism as a Contextual Phenomenon

#### 13. Passover Haggadah, B'chol Dor va'Dor

In each and every generation, a person is obligated to see himself as if he left Egypt.

בְּכָל־דּוֹר וָדוֹר חַיָּב אָדָם לִרְאוֹת אֶת־עַצְמוֹ כְּאִלּוּ הוּא יָצָא מִמִּצְרַיִם.

#### 14. Exodus 23:9

You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been gerim in the land of Egypt.

וְגֵר, לֹא תִלְחָץ; וְאַתֶּם, יְדַעְתֶּם אֶת־נֶפֶשׁ הַגֵּר--כִּי־גֵרִים הָיִיתֶם, בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם.

#### 15. Pastoral Letter to Shir Tikvah, March 7, 2019

Dear Shir Tikvah:

At the heart of the Megilah, our Purim story, is a question from Mordechai, who works with Esther to save the Jewish people: "Could it be we were created for a moment such as this?" But sometimes it is a word at the end of Megilat Esther that resonates even more deeply: *Vanafochu*, meaning "the world is upside down." Together, we wonder: Were we created to be present, to love one another fiercely, in a world that is upside down?

We write on the subject of recent tweets and statements from Representative Ilhan Omar, who represents Minnesota's Fifth Congressional District in Washington—and not just on the subject of her tweets and statements but on the responses, reactions, uses and mis-uses of her words. We recognize the diversity in our community and that parts of what we write below may deeply resonate for you and other parts may make you uncomfortable. We hope that you, our partners in this holy community, will lean in with curiosity and empathy now as always. We seek to foster a respectful dialogue as we discern the meaning of Rep. Omar's words and the reactions to them for us as a synagogue, for us as Jews, and for us as a broader community.

Congresswoman Ilhan Omar has used anti-Semitic tropes in her tweets and speeches over the past several months. Here is a link to a summary of the incidents. These centuries-old tropes of Jews and money and of Jews having dual loyalties are painful to hear. The comments were hurtful to many of us and left others confused and distressed. Congresswoman Omar apologized for the first tweets, but later committed to the "dual allegiance" trope in her response to fellow Congresswoman Nita Lowey.

This attention on Rep. Omar's tweets needs to be contextualized as part of a broader conversation about the use of anti-Semitism by political leaders. Several political leaders have engaged in antisemitism in recent years. Here are just a few examples: President Trump, who has condemned Rep. Omar in the same breath he conflated Jews and the political state of Israel, has also called the Nazis who marched past a synagogue in Charlottesville, Virginia, "very fine people." His final campaign ad of 2016 was undeniably anti-Semitic. Just this past fall, Minnesota Attorney General candidate Doug Wardlow and now-Congressman Jim Hagedorn used images of George Soros in political mailings that were deeply anti-Semitic and racist and while the chair of the Minnesota GOP has called out Rep. Omar, she said nothing about either Wardlow or Rep. Hagedorn. Those same images were tweeted out by House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, who later called for consequences for Rep. Omar. Just this week, Iowa Congressman Steve King again tweeted out support for a white supremacist. The media has paid virtually no attention to them. We must ask ourselves: Why?

Eric Ward notes in his powerful article, "Skin in the Game" that there is a sinister force at work here. A significant part of the white nationalist "playbook," now used regularly by even those who would deny that description, is to seek to divide Jews from communities of color (and further alienate Jews of Color). We at Shir Tikvah are called to increased vigilance to the condemnation of Congresswoman Omar's words because of our commitment to racial justice and our relationship with our Muslim cousins. Let us remember that Rep. Omar is getting criticized for her remarks not just for their content but because of an insidious effort to split Jews and progressives and People of Color and because she is one of the first Muslim women to be elected to congress. She has received death threats simply for being elected. She has been the subject of an explicitly racist and Islamophobic poster hung up last week in the West Virginia statehouse. The attacks on Congresswoman Omar for who she is as a Muslim woman of color are absolutely and unequivocally unacceptable, immoral, and repugnant. We may or may not disagree with her political positions; we will not stand idly by as she is threatened for being who she is.

Yes, there is antisemitism in the world, and yes, Rep. Omar's remarks crossed a line. And yes, we struggle still more because while there was a first apology, there was another hurtful comment. The Rambam teaches us both to accept sincere apologies and, to make *teshuvah* (atonement) complete, to look for a change in behavior. We appreciate Rep. Omar's efforts to learn about antisemitism and the Jewish community and we hope they will continue. We look forward to her speaking about important issues in the future with great care and judiciousness. There is more work for her to do and your rabbis, Jewish Community Action, the Minnesota Rabbinical Association's rabbis, the Jewish Community Relations Council are working with her and her staff do to that work.



And there is substantial work for us to do as we seek to eradicate antisemitism, racism, sexism, Islamophobia and all the other ways we can divide each other. We are grateful every day to be your partners and rabbis in the holy work of building a community and a society of dignity and justice, where none need be afraid of who they are, what religion they practice, where they were born, or the color of their skin; a community who celebrates and protects all of who we are as brilliant, beautiful, complicated humans.

In this moment, our values are tested. As Shir Tikvah, we have never before shied away from the brokenness of the world. We must continue to sing our righteous, tender, loving song of hope. We resist the instinct to shut down when we feel discomfort. We know it is easy to “call out” people when they do something wrong or offend us. It is harder—but vital—to “call in” said people, particularly those who are our allies in so many areas, with love and genuine commitment to work through the mess and the mistakes, to seek every opportunity to change, grow, and heal, to build a world of love and justice.

Perhaps Queen Esther was right: The world is upside down *and* we were created for a moment such as this. May we be equal to the demands of this moment.

In hope,

Rabbis Michael Adam Latz, Arielle Lekach-Rosenberg, and Debra Rappaport

## IV. Strategies for Jewish Peoplehood

### 16. Donniel Hartman, “The Boundaries of Judaism”

#### Communal Structure of Difference:

| <u>Pluralism</u> | <u>Tolerance</u> | <u>Deviance</u><br>Tolerable / Intolerable |
|------------------|------------------|--------------------------------------------|
|                  |                  |                                            |

### 17. Minimalist - Yehuda Kurtzer, “On Friends and Farrakhan: A Plea to Progressives,” *Times of Israel*, March 7, 2018

There is a different way forward, and it is the most difficult. It requires us to articulate as clearly as we can what constitutes anti-Semitic behavior and to be vigilant about naming it — and not just when it is opportunistically convenient for advancing our own partisan agendas. It also demands that we evaluate ideas and actions by a reasonable and shared definition, which treats the phenomenon of anti-Semitism as a problem proportional to its reality. Then, we are not in the business of guessing at the hate that lies in the heart of the other or judging people by their friends.

### 18. Maximalist - Donniel Hartman, “Anti-Semitism and Anti-Zionism”

While we are indeed stuck with the disagreement regarding the application of anti-Semitism, we are not necessarily stuck with our current policy of tolerance of those who our political opponents classify as such. If we are to overcome and in fact survive this sectarian moment, we will do so not by blurring the boundary of anti-Semitism, but actually by reinforcing it and re-instituting it as a boundary in a new way. Precisely because we are a community of deep ideological difference, we need to express our loyalty by not merely implementing a zero-tolerance policy towards those whom we classify as supporting anti-Semitism, but also by a zero-tolerance policy towards those whom a significant number of our fellow members responsibly classify as supporters of anti-Semitism...The Jewish community knows how to be tolerant and inclusive towards others’ notions of God, Shabbat, Kashrut and even Intermarriage. Can we be tolerant and inclusive towards other’s conceptions of anti-Semitism as well? Can we allow their conceptions to obligate us even though we disagree?