

What You Might Confront on Campus: A Letter to My Son
Rosh HaShanah 5778, Community Synagogue of Rye
Rabbi Daniel Gropper

Dear Elijah,

As you begin the next chapter of your life as a college freshman, I thought I'd write to share some concerns and advice. I hope you are able to hear that this letter comes to you from a place of love. If it comes across as being a little preachy, please forgive me. These are the High Holidays after all and as much as I try not to preach, it can be an occupational hazard. I write to you because being Jewish on college is so different today from how it was 30 years ago. In some ways it is much better. Hillel is stronger and even cool. Birthright exists and has become a right of passage. Jewish studies and Hebrew classes abound. These are vast improvements from when I went to college. At the same time, you may confront things on campus that neither I, nor your grandparents ever confronted, at least not as they are today. Truth be told, there are parts of this letter that I never thought I'd be writing to you. Who would have thought that in 2017, you may confront rallies led by white supremacists carrying tiki torches and chanting, "You will not replace us. Jews will not replace us?" Who would have thought that a fourth-year Jewish student at UVA -- whose dorm room opens to the main campus lawn where the hate groups marched -- would remove her mezuzah because she was scared they would come back and target her? Who would have ever predicted that the societal norms that kept Nazis and White Supremacists off in the corner may be fraying¹

When I was younger anti-semitism wasn't an issue, at least not overtly. Sure, there were clubs we couldn't join and I know in Rye, parts of town you couldn't buy a home in. But that never stopped me or my friends. I felt as home on college campus as a Canadian AND as a Jew. In fact, when it came time for Rush I was as attracted to Beta Theta Pi and Phi Gamma Delta as I was to A.E.Pi. I joined the latter after your grandfather asked, "who do you think you'll have longer lasting friendships with?" I may never have told you this but I can only recall one moment of experiencing overt anti-semitism. It was on the way home from school when some older boys threw snowballs at us and said, "dirty Jew," but beyond that, anti-semitism - or, if we call it what it really is, Jew Hatred - is something that happened over there, to them. It was part of the Holocaust Narrative, it was something that still existed in parts of Europe, even Western Europe but it wasn't part of my experience.

I grew up with a rabbi who viewed antisemitism as a real and pernicious threat. Stories of being beat up as a kid - in Toronto of all places - seemed to permeate his sermons and his stories. Your great-grandfather, as you know, was born in Poland and immigrated to Canada in 1926. He always felt that there was a cossack around every corner. But that wasn't my story. My Judaism was born out of that of Max Nordau, a Zionist ideologue and contemporary of Theodor Herzl, who wrote about the need for "Muskeljuden," Jew who would put victimhood behind them. I was proud of being Jewish because my Jewish story was one that celebrated all we had accomplished. The Israeli flag was my flag as much as the Canadian one and at Young Judea summer camp I sang Hatikvah as loudly as O Canada. When I entered the rabbinate I knew that I wanted pride, not fear to dominate how I communicated about Judaism.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/21/upshot/the-showdown-over-how-we-define-fringe-views-in-america.html>

I wanted to be able to proudly wear my kipa on the street, to rally for specific Jewish causes and those causes that reflected the values found in the depths of our tradition. I wanted people to love Torah because of the wisdom, meaning and guidance inherent in it. I wanted people to love Israel, not as a place to run to, but as a place to feel a deep sense of national pride, to tell others and the world, “We too can have an air force, trash collectors, petty thieves, and the greatest high tech inventions in the world.” I wanted people to love Jewish tradition, not because it harkened back to the way it tasted in the shtetl, but because living a Jewish life, surrounded by the sights, smells and sounds of our people could bring a real sense of meaning, purpose and identity. I wanted and I still want people to celebrate being Jewish. That was how I approached the rabbinate when I entered it 25 years ago. Was I wrong? Should I have not been so naive as to think that Jew Hatred in this country was a thing of the past? Maybe. It’s just that with two Supreme Court Justices, a minyan in the Senate, and a proud Israeli playing Wonder Woman this summer, Jew Hatred, at least beyond the small asinine comments, the odd insensitivity or the occasional spray painted swastika felt like a thing of the past. It wasn’t. It was lying there, underground, dormant, just waiting for the right time to rise up, and now it has. The question for you and your peers, as it is for us, is this, how will you respond?.

There is no debate - or there should be no debate, at least not in Jewish circles - that the vitriol we saw in Charlottesville last month or what is promulgated on the internet is hate, pure and simple. There is no room for it. This is not political. This is not partisan. There is no moral equivalency. Hate speech, whether targeted at blacks or gays or women or Jews or any minority or marginalized group that has a history of being persecuted is wrong. Period. And it must be resisted, peacefully. But Elijah, my concern for you and your generation is whether you are equipped to confront the vile hatred that you may confront in college. If you don’t have the tools and resources, then we, your parents and grandparents are culpable. *Al Chet Shechatani* - for the sin we have committed in not ensuring a strong Jewish identity for our children.

Here’s a troubling statistic. A recent Brandies University study found that 20% of Jews aged 18-29 did not feel at all connected to Israel, compared to 13% of Jews aged 45-59 and just 7% of those above 60. This suggests a declining connection. We are losing our children. And it’s not just about Israel. It’s about Judaism writ large. How many of your peers stopped their Jewish involvement after they became Bar or Bat Mitzvah? How can you have a love of Israel or a deep connection if your Jewish learning and Jewish questioning stopped at age 13? Your mom and I made a commitment to raise you and Shai and Noa with a strong Jewish identity. We sent you to Jewish summer camp. We took you to Israel with us. We built a sukkah every year, lit candles, planted trees, ensured that Shabbat was always celebrated in our home and made tzedakah a regular conversation around the dinner table. Being involved in the synagogue after you became Bar Mitzvah was non-negotiable. This is perhaps why it filled me with pride when you told me how, when you walked up to the Hillel table and when they asked, “are you Jewish?” you said, “Very.” But I wonder, will it be the same for others of your generation? And what will they say or do when they are confronted with Jew Hatred from the alt-right and from the left on college campuses?

Yes, Eli, you read that correctly, Jew Hatred from the left. Hatred, intolerance and bigotry from the right is easy. It’s clear. It’s obvious. But hatred from the left?

Take for example the Chicago Dyke Walk this summer, who expelled individuals from its march for waving gay flags emblazoned with a Jewish star. Or former front man for Pink Floyd, Roger Waters who appears on stage wearing a Nazi-looking uniform and floats a balloon in the shape of a pig with an image of a Jewish star alongside a swastika on it. Where is

the national condemnation of him as being as hateful as members of the alt-right? Neither is ok and neither should be tolerated.

Eli, it might not be at the University of Arizona but at college campuses across America, ostensibly liberal groups are excluding Jewish students and Jewish students are increasingly feeling threatened.

A recent study by Tel Aviv University researchers found that while violent attacks against Jews has dropped in the last ten years, college campuses in the U.S. have become a “hotbed of anti-Semitism.” Hiding behind the mantra of “anti-Zionism” these self-styled liberals are getting away with covert and even overt acts of anti-Semitism. And unlike the racists in Charlottesville, their words and actions are becoming increasingly acceptable.

According to Jewish law, for an animal to be kosher, it must have split hooves and chew its cud. The Midrash expounds on this and teaches that the pig symbolizes deceit because when it lies down and extends its feet it shows the passerby its split hooves as if to say, “I’m kosher,” when it is not. Because Nazis and white supremacists are not ashamed to say they hate Jews - and black people and anyone else not deemed “white enough” -, they at least do us the favor of letting us know they are the enemy. By contrast, the left-wing anti-semites profess tolerance and acceptance and pay lip service to political correctness but I wonder, how different are they from those who marched in Charlottesville?²

Today, you and your Jewish peers face a trying reality on college campuses. Universities have become the focal point of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanction Israel Movement (BDS) – the global effort to delegitimize Israel. As BDS groups lobby student governments to pass resolutions asking the universities to divest from Israeli companies, I am aware that Jewish students are often faced with a difficult choice - choosing between being a pro-Israel Jew or their progressive values. We raised you to love the stranger, to see each person as being made in the image of God, to care for the poor and powerless because as Jews, that’s our ethical imperative. We taught you that just as we were expelled from one country or another, we should help the refugees of the world, just as we are doing in this congregation with our Afghani family who arrived this summer, because doing so fulfills our religious mandate. But when you and your peers face the contemptible, sophisticated and well-oiled offensive by the BDS movement with their stories of how Israel is subjugating Palestinians and how Israel is the apartheid state of the 21st century, it may create an existential conflict within you. Jewish students who (still) love Israel and (still) feel close to it, are asking tough ethical questions that Israel has no answers for and the Jewish establishment forbid them to express – because they say that doing so aides the enemy. So what do your peers do when they find themselves living with the increasing tension between their liberal identities and the distorted image of Israel as an unjust oppressor and occupier promulgated by the BDS movement? Sadly, some come out against Israel, some are confused and many are simply indifferent.

Elijah, Israel and we, your people, need your engagement. Indifference to Israel, indifference to hate will not bode well for Israel and it will certainly not bode well for the Jewish people. Because here’s a reality: ultimately, the only people who can be fully trusted to safeguard the safety of the Jews are the Jews.

Eli, there’s a famous Midrash that I often read at baby namings. We may have read it at yours. It says that when Moses received the Torah on Mt Sinai God asked him who would guarantee that Judaism would continue from generation to

² <http://forward.com/opinion/380573/why-anti-semitism-on-the-left-is-more-dangerous-than-anti-semitism-on-the-r/>

generation? First Moses said that the memory of our ancestors would guarantee that Judaism would continue. God said that wouldn't be enough. Moses then suggested the Prophets and the leaders of the community would guarantee that Judaism would continue from generation to generation. God said that too wouldn't be enough. Moses then said the children would guarantee that Judaism would continue from generation to generation. And to this, God said.... yes.

Eli, you and your generation are our guarantors. You will be the ones to face the alt-right and the BDS'ers on campus. And what you say and how you respond - or choose not to respond - will, I believe shape the future of Judaism in this country. How you choose to respond or not to respond may even shape the future of this country itself. So what can you do?

I think the first thing you can do is to get involved. Go to Hillel, not only for the free Shabbat dinners but also for the conversation. In darker times, being with like minded people can fill you with confidence and with hope.

Build relationships with student leaders who oppose hatred. Make friends with Democrats, Republicans, African American, LGBTQ and Hispanic leaders. These are the future leaders of our country. Don't let others sew seeds of doubt in their minds that may come to bloom decades from now. Tell them your story, your Jewish story. Listen to their story. Remind each other that this country was founded on certain fundamental values and principles.

What's more, take action to inoculate the campus against extremism before those who spew hatred appear on campus by raising awareness in the classroom and working with like minded people to create a community opposed to bigotry. And don't be afraid to reach out to groups like the ADL or the Southern Poverty Law Center for support. Look to their resources. This is why these organizations exist. That's a little of what you can do. The key is to do something. The key is not to be silent.

54 years ago, Rabbi Joachim Prinz spoke before the crowds gathered at the Lincoln memorial. His speech immediately preceded Martin Luther King's famous "I have a dream speech." Here is a little of what Rabbi Prinz said: "When I was the rabbi of the Jewish community in Berlin under the Hitler regime, I learned many things. The most important thing that I learned under those tragic circumstances was that bigotry and hatred are not the most urgent problem. The most urgent, the most disgraceful, the most shameful and the most tragic problem is silence." Eli, please do not be silent. We need your voice, and the voice of your generation, now, more than ever.

But Eli, know that it goes beyond what you can organize. It goes to how you act, to how your mom and I raised you. Every time you speak with decency, every time you acknowledge the worth of a human being who is different from you; every time you acknowledge your own biases and privileges and how they might shape your actions; every time you stand with others who stand for compassion and freedom from persecution; every time you recognize that this can't just be about language and scary symbols, but that we have to address core policy issues that deprive too many living in our borders of genuine liberty and opportunity; every time you reject apathy as the most pernicious of social diseases; every time you stand with pride as a Jew because it means to stand with pride as a creature of God bound in destiny and hope to all of God's creatures; then you are acting, believe it or not, in counter-protest.

Elijah, it is our responsibility to combat anti-Semitism - whether by the right or the left - by speaking out. Ecclesiastes was right "There is a time to remain silent and there also is a time to speak," lest silence be read as resignation or apathy or dismissiveness. Of course we also have to be vigilant about safety and security. But one of the responses that is most within our grasp and this is ultimately what I hope for you and your peers is to choose to lead a

proud and vibrant Jewish life, a life that clearly states: no matter the rhetoric, you know who you are and you know how to behave.

Here is a wonderful story in this regard, from the first months of anti-Semitism in 2017: It took place in Broward County, Florida, on Monday morning February 27. The Posnack Jewish Day School had received a bomb threat that morning, a bomb threat which came while the upper school students were in their Monday morning prayer service. So they did what they were supposed to do – they evacuated to the parking lot. But on the way out, one kid grabbed the Torah scroll and took it outside with him. And once in the parking lot, another kid took his tallis and spread it on the hood of car. And then the kid with the Torah scroll unrolled the Torah on the tallis, and the students of the Posnack Jewish Day School continued with the Torah service – with a Torah on a Tallis on the hood of a car in a parking lot to which they had been evacuated because of an anti-Semitic bomb threat.

That, my son, is the answer to anti-Semitism - a proud and vibrant Jewish life. Yes, sometimes the answer comes in added security, or greater vigilance at the door. But if you consider that the goal of the anti-Semites might not be an explosion, but might be the erosion of Jewish self-confidence; if you consider the long game, in which the kid who holds the traumatic memory of being evacuated from his Jewish preschool in 2017 grows up to become a dad who doesn't want to send his kid to a Jewish preschool because he doesn't want him to have a target on his back; if you consider that not only are you at university but this world of ours is a university, and Judaism more and more an elective which our you and your peers can opt into or out of at will; then inviting Jews of every age and every color and every language and every continent into a sense of Jewish depth, meaning, commitment, justice and joy might well go farther than a thousand guard houses. If you do that, then we can win, then we can beat those who peddle and march for hate. Then we can turn every tiki torch into a ner tamid, an eternal flame to burn brightly atop those Torah scrolls. That light Eli – of the deepest values of our tradition, of the highest standards for our own behavior, of the crazy chutzpadik confidence that we can make the world a better place – that is the light of holiness and hope, and it shines more brightly than any tiki torch ever can³.

Elijah, you are a light and a fire burns within you. Light your fire and may you be such a light to the world.

All my love

Abba

³ With thanks to Rabbi David Stern, Temple Emanuel, Dallas, TX for the story and imagery in his sermon given post Charlottesville, August 18, 2017