

A Tribute to the Victims of the Pittsburgh Synagogue Shooting

Editor's note: On Saturday, October 27, 2018, eleven people were killed and seven were injured when Robert Gregory Bowers opened fire at the Tree of Life – Or L'Simcha Congregation during Shabbat morning services in the Squirrel Hill neighbourhood of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. This tribute to the victims of the shooting is slightly revised and expanded from one that was originally published online by CFIC in December, 2018.

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The Centre for Inquiry Canada (CFIC) asked me to comment on the following topic: A number of atheists and humanists wonder about how to respond to the massacre in Pittsburgh, during which the shooter said, “All Jews must die.” How does a humanist and atheist explain how such an abomination is even possible at all?

These are my personal thoughts.

What’s to “wonder”? Atheists and humanists by definition are the very last to wonder and the very first to denounce and oppose such a primeval xenophobic mentality¹ and crime against humanity. This is not about a religious schism but about violent tribal *intolerance*, blind homicidal hatred simply because someone is *different*; it is about the prehistoric ‘cave mentality’ of *us versus them*. It is at the very core of hatreds such as antisemitism and of inhuman events such as the devastating, centuries-long religious wars and the unending Sunni-Shia bloodbaths.

Historically, antisemitism was based on fear, hence the hatred of the Church for Judaism as a competing mass religion. Jews were made by the Church to look inherently evil and to be perennial scapegoats conveniently responsible for any natural or social calamity. Hilberg (1961) explains how antisemitism dramatically evolved over the centuries:

Since the fourth century after Christ there have been three anti-Jewish policies: conversion, expulsion, and annihilation... The Nazi destruction process did not come out of a void... The missionaries of Christianity had said in effect: You have no right to live among us as Jews [conversion]. The secular rulers who followed had proclaimed: You have no right to live among us [expulsion]. The Nazis at last decreed: You have no right to live [annihilation].

Next came the eighteenth-century theological conceptualization that automatically associated everything Jewish with everything evil; and finally, the rise in the nineteenth century of racial ideas that transformed the anti-Jewish concept from a theological to a biological one, opening the gates for pogroms, mass executions and the “final solution” of the Holocaust. “Justification” by the fundamentalist normative religion was then complete – right up to the incineration ovens. “*All Jews must die!*” – the rallying cry of the Pittsburgh shooter – was its inescapable malignant outgrowth. In the words of Niall Ferguson:

Anti-Jewish propaganda in the twentieth century spared nothing to demonize the Jews with “...lurid allegations that Jews played a leading part in the organization of [the slave trade], prostitution...the seduction of women...the spread of degenerative diseases,” and on, and on...

It is no wonder that such relentless anti-Jewish propaganda has been a nearly unbearable burden on the collective psyche of Jews: a sense of burning injustice that all Jews have had to carry throughout their lifetime, a perennial nightmarish fear of persecution, exile, and violent non-acceptance merely for daring to be non-conformist, *different*. And a sense that Israel is the only tiny place where those uniquely vulnerable people have found a safe home, a sense magnified by many orders every time there is another unprovoked attack like the Pittsburgh massacre. Consider a sampling of the chilling newspaper headlines one week later.

“The Pittsburgh shooter didn’t hate ‘religion,’ he hated Jews” and “American Jews always believed the U.S. was exceptional. We were wrong” said the *Washington Post* on November 4th, while on November 2nd Robert Fulford editorialized in the *National Post*, “We thought anti-Semitism was finished. We were wrong.” Mitchell Bard commented: “Over the course of 48 hours on November 9-10, 1938 – now known as Kristallnacht – 96 Jews were killed, 1,300 synagogues and 7,500 businesses were destroyed, and 30,000 Jews were sent to concentration camps. And now, almost exactly 80 years later, even Jews in America are not safe...”

It is not surprising that the beast of antisemitism should be changing its spots again in the 21st century. It is now increasingly common to hear “I’m not anti-Jewish, I’m anti-Israel,” which does not make it any less hateful. Israel is far from infallible and it is fair, even necessary, to criticize it, but that applies as much (or even more) to Russia with regard to the Ukraine and Crimea, to China with Tibet, and to other countries also. But have you ever heard anyone proudly claiming, “I’m anti-China” or “I’m anti-Russia,” meaning that those countries have no right to exist? It sounds absurd: a country’s rulers come and go; a ruler is not the country. But hateful political propaganda has made “I’m anti-Israel” (not “anti-Netanyahu”) acceptable and, in some circles, even commendable. Why this stark difference? It’s called the double standard. A teacher cited in Fulford’s article is quoted as saying: “Antisemitic incidents rose 57%

in 2017 with 1,986 documented events, and many of these increases were seen in high schools and college campuses. There is Jew-hatred, Israel hatred, boycotts and bashing of Israel. Students are afraid to identify themselves as Jews. There are open shouts and web posts calling for the killing of Jews.”

Students from Iran or Saudi Arabia, for example, have never been ostracized on US campuses just because there are valid reasons to oppose the Iranian ayatollahs and be disgusted by the murder of Khashoggi. We don’t blame the students. Why then is it OK to ostracize Jewish students because we are against Netanyahu? Were we “anti-Chile” during the time of Pinochet? Are we anti-North Koreans? This is a classical case of the abysmal double standard. It would be just plain racist to be against Iranian, Saudi, and Sudanese students, but then why is it acceptable to be against Jews? Because being “anti-Israel” is just new makeup for the same old dehumanizing, demonizing, millennia-long genocidal antisemitism.

Some say, “Unfortunately, the State of Israel is rapidly becoming a racist theocracy and is a threat to peace.” How about admitting that “Unfortunately, Russia [or Hungary, Italy, Poland, Brazil, China, Zimbabwe... take your pick] is rapidly becoming a populist totalitarian autocracy and is a threat to peace.” Let alone, “Unfortunately, Pakistan [Saudi Arabia, Iran, Afghanistan, Libya, Sudan, ...] HAS become a tribal, backward infidel-beheading theocracy, a haven for Islamists like ISIS, for misogynists like the proponents of FGM, of honour killings, of women’s self-immolation... and is a threat to peace”? And then there’s North Korea. But neither the press, social media, or the United Nations express much (if any) concern about all those OTHER countries as “racist theocracies.”

Why is it always Israel and only Israel (yes, warts and all) that is the focus of non-stop and merciless attention? Consider, for example, the innumerable anti-Israel UN resolutions, and compare them with the single-digit number or complete absence of resolutions against any other country. Yes, imagine that, there are no resolutions against Iran or Saudi Arabia despite

their ‘stellar’ human rights records! Because it is exactly like it was in the US of the past: any number of lynchings were never considered to merit public attention while a single (unproven) case of a white woman assaulted by a black man was enough for their entire press to rant and rave about what a danger the primitive sub-humans, the Blacks (all of them!) had always been. Or as it was in the USSR during the time of antisemitism unleashed by Stalin after WWII (‘Cosmopolitanism,’ the Doctors’ affair, etc.): suddenly all negative activities disclosed in the press (someone exposed as a bribe-taker, a thief of public money, a drunken debaucher, or a deadbeat dad) seemed to have been perpetrated exclusively by persons with unmistakably Jewish surnames. And nobody else. What a strange ‘coincidence’!

Exactly the same slanderous technique is being applied to Israel, the same despicable double standard. But when Jews say, “But that’s hateful,” they are accused of “squelching legitimate debate.” You don’t have a legitimate debate with someone who wants to drown your family in the sea, to make you the whipping boy of the world; they are not debaters but mere antisemites.

Therefore there is no contradiction whatsoever in being an atheist or humanist and “feeling a personal connection to this event (Pittsburgh massacre).” On the contrary: secular humanism is incompatible with antisemitism, racism or any homophobic intolerance and inequality, it is neither divisive nor exclusive; the role of humanism is paramount in fighting them all.

My late husband Boris and I thought that our self-identification as Jews was based entirely on our eternal, absolute, and all-consuming solidarity against the abysmal injustice of antisemitism. This, not the religion of Judaism, was the unbreakable bond, the glue that sealed our Jewish identity. Otherwise, we felt cosmopolitan. “Do not misunderstand me: I feel totally Jewish all right,” Boris would say grinning. “Is my solidarity with Jews not based on unconditional compassion, empathy to those who have groundlessly suffered most and longest? Was it not same bond of empathy that Jesus proclaimed with the disadvantaged – his ultimate call for

love? Is it then not the same recognizably Jewish genetic trait in us both – Jesus and me – or what?” and we laughed. As Quora member Elke Weiss said, “If you think Israel is a reason to be antisemitic, you’re the reason why Jews like me are willing to die for that country.”•

Endnote

1. The primeval xenophobic rejection of anything different and therefore alien (like a foreign bacterial protein) has been retained in evolution as a survival tool from early unicellular organisms. Our white blood cells defend us via the same mechanisms that amoebas evolved to defend themselves. But to exhibit it in our social behaviour is unthinkable; we are not amoebas, after all, but members of the ‘proud’ species *Homo sapiens*.

References

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Born in Russia, Sophie Dulesh obtained her medical degrees (MD, PhD, Dr Sci) at Moscow University Medical School and the Academy of Sciences of the USSR. She worked for 27 years as a pathologist and medical researcher at the Academy before immigrating to Canada with her family in 1980, where she worked as a pathologist for another 23 years. Sophie is a secular humanist and is interested in philosophy and the history of religion. She is the author of two books and many articles on medical research in Russian, and has also written short stories and non-fiction books in English, including The Trouble with Religion and My Red Russia.