

# Concerns Of Rising anti-Semitism

*Professor of Jewish Studies concerned yet hopeful for America's future*

By LAWRENCE H. SCHIFFMAN

While we are all focused on the horrendous tragedy that took place in Pittsburgh at the Tree of Life Synagogue and on the anti-

## OPINION

Semitic motivations of the murderer, there is an amazing side to this sad event that needs to be pointed out. The support that the Jewish community has received from virtually the entire American population, its government and institutional structures, and even its sports teams, says a lot about the character of the country in which we live. This is true despite some of the terrible rhetoric being used in the discussion of immigration, both legal and illegal. The reality is that support for anti-Semitic violence no doubt lurks in some corners of the dark Internet and in some white supremacist cells, but the neighbors with whom we live truly support and want to protect the Jewish people. All over America memorial services and solidarity programs are being held, in synagogues with non-Jews in attendance, in churches, in government, and in schools. The simple fact is that this Jewish tragedy has touched the entire nation.

community and to mourn its loss. So how can one understand this in a context in which statistics of anti-

Just take a look at the statistics compiled by the ADL and you will see that America is experiencing

ever, the somewhat similar, but in many ways different, nature of the situation in the U.S. came up

sites incubate extreme and vicious anti-Jewish slanders and conspiracy theories. These, in turn, are often the basis for anti-Semitic acts. In fact, because of our concept of freedom of speech, American websites provide much of the hate to those parts of the world, especially the EU countries, in which maintaining such sites violates strict anti-hate legislation.

Further, certain forms of anti-Semitism are encouraged by forces arrayed against Israel and in favor of BDS. While some of these groups may truly be politically motivated, others clearly cross the line into anti-Semitic motifs, symbols and even conspiracy theories.

There is no question that the political discourse of our time is one that provides a context for hateful and prejudiced elements to come to the surface. The tone of the last presidential campaign and the conduct of the administration in office certainly do not teach citizens the importance of love and tolerance for others. Often, the boundary is crossed between a discussion of policy and what is effectively incitement against certain groups. Jews always benefit from living in a society in which middle-of-the-road policies are followed and in which discourse is respectful and refined. However, we now live in an environment of unrestricted speech and rhetoric that accuses certain groups of people of seeking to destroy or seriously alter the values of our Republic. This kind of situation certainly encourages anti-Semites to feel at home.

Finally, we cannot forget the importance of what can be called cultural memory. By this we mean the reality that until



**A woman stands before the memorials of the victims of the Tree of Life Massacre outside the Tree of Life Synagogue to mourn the departed. A picture of Robert Bowers' mugshot in the upper right corner, the man responsible for slaying 11**

Semitic events have been increasing in our country and in which anti-Israel and/or BDS supporters often make ample use of anti-Semitic stereotypes, not to mention some political candidates in parts of the country with few Jewish voters? What's the real

an increase in anti-Semitism year after year. I've actually been dealing with this set of issues for a few years now. Some readers may know that I was involved as one of the co-organizers of a conference held in February, 2018 in Vienna entitled "An End to Antisemitism!" cosponsored by New York University, the University of Vienna, Tel Aviv University and the European Jewish Congress. Over 1000 people attended and 150 presentations were heard. Since the conference, we have begun the process of publication of the multi-volume proceedings that will be available on an open access web platform, besides in traditional books. But perhaps more relevant to what we are talking about here, we spent the months since the conference in compiling both conceptual explanations and specific recommendations from the conference to fight against anti-Semitism. I also was privileged to speak, with my colleagues Armin Lange of the University of Vienna and Dina Porat of Tel Aviv University and Yad Vashem, at the May meeting of the Sixth Global Forum for Combating Anti-Semitism held by the Foreign Ministry of Israel. Much of the discussion was about Europe, specifically the EU countries, where the Holocaust looms large in any discussion of anti-Semitism. How-

repeatedly. In our country, virtually all significant elements of government and civil society oppose anti-Semitism and will do so publicly. Yet no matter what these many agencies and the Jewish community do, anti-Semitism continues to be a rising phenomenon. What we see now is only the worst case ever but it is not the first.

Let me set forth a few factors that are contributing to the situation:

Since the general attitude of the country is tolerant and respectful, elements of white supremacist and anti-Semitic radicals have generally been pushed to the extreme margins of society. Yet, like Islamists,

**What's the real America? Are we living in an unprecedented environment or is it the same old story? What really is the Jewish situation in the United States? Are we safe or is it just one big hopeful delusion?**

they have found their place on the Internet where they connect with and encourage one another. While many of these haters would not themselves engage in such violent attacks, exposing themselves to imprisonment or even death, such

Christian groups started turning away from such views, supersessionism (the idea that Christianity replaced Judaism as the true Israel) and the collective blaming of Jews for the death of Jesus were a reg-

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**NHL honors victims of the Tree of Life Synagogue, presents unifying message "Stronger Than Hate" before New York Islanders game**

We can go on to speak of sports teams putting Jewish stars on their scoreboards, wearing patches on their uniforms and helmets, coming to funerals of people they had never met; all to support the Jewish

America? Are we living in an unprecedented environment or is it the same old story? What really is the Jewish situation in the United States? Are we safe or is it just one big hopeful delusion?

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ular part of Christian teaching. While mainstream groups and most Christians have come to understand their religion in a way that does not involve such anti-Semitic ideas, we have to remember that some traditionalists have been resistant to change and still maintain anti-Semitic views. The same goes for Islam, where to some extent because of traditional religious views and to some extent because of the Arab-Israeli conflict, many adherents have been raised with distinctly anti-Jewish, anti-Semitic views.

These are some but not all the factors that contribute to the present situation. Should we give up hope? The reality is that the life of Jews in the United States is generally one of safety and security and the Jewish religion and the State of Israel are generally respected. Further, much has been accomplished in the general media, in specific museums and memorial sites, and by

Christian organizations to spread the word of the evil of anti-Semitism.

expressed both in times of difficulty and in times of comfort. Nor should we feel alone, as if we are

we do so, with the help of many non-Jewish friends and neighbors and many non-Jewish institutions,

had the same kind of friends in the dark days of the Holocaust. Imagine what would have happened if every football team would have flashed



President Donald Trump, First Lady Melania Trump, Ivanka Trump and Jared Kushner meet with Israeli Ambassador Ron Dermer and the Rabbi of the Tree of Life Synagogue following the shooting of the Tree of Life Synagogue

The upshot is that the reality is a mixed one. Jews enjoy an unprecedented level of respect, tolerance, and appreciation in this country. We should never forget the profound friendship for the Jewish people and support of Israel

surrounded by enemies who hate us. Those who value the Jewish contribution to America certainly enormously outnumber the hate-mongers. But on the other hand, we must continue the fight with every possible means at our disposal. As

let us remember that we really do have friends. We need to respect and value them, and we need to tell them how much we appreciate their help.

Just think how different things would have been if we would have

Jewish stars on its scoreboard, and if hockey teams would have worn them on their uniforms!

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person can act on their hate with such unchecked devastation

“Yes,” the rabbi continued, “we must first grieve and, yes, we must first heal; no one is debating these

many of us, it took this heinous act to force us to pay attention to what is happening in our world. But it is essential that we not pay attention just to the threats around us, but also to the opportunities for healing and bridge-building. Not just to the dangers, and the hatred, and the evil, but also to pay attention to

people, all seats were taken. Many people stood along the sides of the synagogue, many in the hall outside and others in the synagogue’s basement, who watched the vigil on television. There were 800 or more people there.

“Wow,” said Rabbi Franklin about the attendance. He said he was “quite blown away” by the turnout. “The world is much smaller than we think, and I think that’s why we’re all here,” Rabbi Franklin said. “Being here, we get to see the beauty of community.”

East Hampton Mayor Paul Rickenbach, Jr. then spoke, telling of how “eleven lives were snuffed out because of bigotry....This has to change, and it’s going to take each and every one of us.”

“East Hampton stands in solidarity with the Jewish community,” declared the mayor, a Christian and former police officer.

There were other public officials at the vigil, including New York State Assemblyman Fred W. Thiele, Jr. of Sag Harbor and candidates for public office, including Perry Gershon, the Democratic nominee for Congress from eastern Long Island and a member of Temple Adas Israel.

Cantor/Rabbi Debra Stein of the Jewish Center of the Hamptons led the singing of “Let There Be Love.”

Rabbi Franklin then spoke of how what happened in Pittsburgh “could happen to any of us. “Jews

have a long history of being hated, persecuted,” said Rabbi Franklin.

He asked whether anti-Semitism “is the new normal once again.” The answer, he said, is “no—look around the room, this is the new normal”—Jews along with people of other faiths “coming together...supporting one another. This

Rabbi Franklin said, “We must make sure that anti-Semitism and racism of all kinds stay on the margins.”

Then there was the lighting of candles for the eleven Jews murdered in Pittsburgh. Christian ministers lit the candles. And then East Hampton Village Police



A Police Officer who was injured during the shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue is visited by community members showing support and gratitude.

necessities. Indeed, this is the primary reason we have gathered here tonight. But our tradition does not allow us to grieve forever. And when we eventually rise up from the floor, remove our sackcloth and dust off the ashes, we must be prepared to combat the evil that is growing right under our noses. If we do not, it is a question of when, not if, another attack will come. And that is simply unacceptable.”

“Sadly,” Rabbi Geffen said, “for

the outpouring of love and support in the wake of this tragedy—exemplified by our gathering here tonight.”

The vigil on November 1st was sponsored by the Jewish Center of the Hamptons, Temple Adas Israel and the Conservative Synagogue of the Hamptons.

It opened with a welcome from Rabbi Joshua Franklin of the Jewish Center of the Hamptons. The sanctuary was packed with



The Southold Anti-Bias Task Force, joined by an inter-faith group of mourners, holds a Vigil in Greenport's Mitchell Park in remembrance of the Tree of Life attack

is our new normal,” said Rabbi Franklin.

But, he said, anti-Semitism is afoot, “loud and extreme” in the United States. Acts of anti-Semitism in the U.S. rose 57 percent in 2017, he noted. He spoke of the “neo-Nazi group” that marched last year in a torchlight parade in Charlottesville, Virginia, chanting “Jews will not replace us.”

“It reminded us,” he said, “of Nazi Germany.

Chief Michael Tracey lit a candle for the six Pittsburgh police officers shot and wounded by the Pittsburgh killer, a Nazi sympathizer.

The vigil ended with the Mourner’s Kaddish and many wet eyes.

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