

# TEMPLE EMANU-EL

“The Power of the Tongue: Thoughts on Today’s Rising Antisemitism”

Shabbat Sermon by Rabbi Sara Sapadin

October 29, 2022

4 Cheshvan 5783

*Parashat Noah*

It has been said that the Jewish people have survived over thousands of years, and through countless eras of oppression and persecution, not on account of our power, or our position, or our prosperity, but on account of our words. The words of our Torah, the teachings of our heritage, the stories of our people, these are the ballast that have kept us afloat, ferrying us from one generation to the next, with wisdom, morality, and faith. Our ancient words sustained us when we had little else to hold onto: They gave us purpose, they gave us dignity, and they gave us hope.

Time and again, our Torah reminds us of the power of language. As we read last week, God does not bring the world into being with magic or sorcery, but with words, declaring, “Let there be light,” and there was light.<sup>1</sup> Through language, God conceives our earthly design; through words, God manifests this astonishing world in which we live. Words have unbounded power to shift and transform land and sea, beast and human.

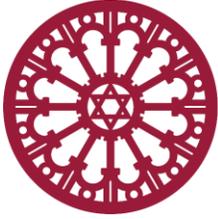
This power is also embedded in our speech. We know that words can lift up the most anguished of spirits but so, too, words can puncture the heart in the most potent of ways. A harsh word can concuss without physically striking; it can suffocate without tangibly strangling. It can knock us down with no more than a breath. As we read in Proverbs, מִוֶּתֶן וְחַיִּים בְּיַד-לְשׁוֹן “Death and life are in the power of the tongue.”<sup>2</sup>

Yes, words can inspire, they can influence, and they can indoctrinate. In her 1938 book, *School for Barbarians: Education Under the Nazis*, Erika Mann writes about the various modes of indoctrination in Nazi Germany, stating:

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 1:3

<sup>2</sup> Proverbs 18:21



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“Every child says ‘Heil Hitler!’ from 50 to 150 times a day, immeasurably more often than the old neutral greetings. The formula is required by law; if you meet a friend on the way to school, you say it; study periods are opened and closed with [it]...and if [those are not] your parents’ first words when you come home for lunch...they have been guilty of a punishable offense and can be denounced...Your evening prayers must close with [it, too] if you take your devotions seriously.”<sup>3</sup> Words, we see, when used for evil, can poison – a mind, or a school, or a nation. And, if the platform is large enough, the venom will spread, infecting masses far and wide.

Over these past weeks, we’ve watched as the artist formerly known as Kanye West spread his brand of antisemitic vitriol on television and across his various social platforms, to an estimated 31 million followers.<sup>4</sup> The hate-filled garbage he spewed reeked of time-worn conspiracy theories about Jews and money, Jews and media, and Jews and power, all myths designed to malign and isolate Jews at various points in our history. While Kanye has been widely disavowed, fired by his reps and cast out by his sponsors, his brazenly unapologetic rants remind us that:

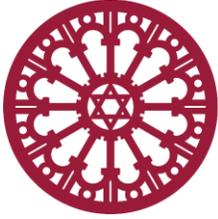
- 1) Jew-hatred is alive and well in our country – in every echelon of society.
- 2) Jew-hatred is not merely “a personal prejudice” against Jews. As Yair Rosenberg, a writer for *The Atlantic*, explains, “It’s also a [conspiracy theory](#) about how the entire world works, blaming shadowy Jewish figures for countless societal problems...”<sup>5</sup>
- 3) It is becoming more and more common to hear such vile Jew-hatred in the public sphere, or among “polite company,” as one might say. Kanye didn’t post these thoughts on the dark web or in some hidden corner of the internet. He posted them on Instagram and Twitter, and then he

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<sup>3</sup> [“Heil Hitler!”: Lessons of Daily Life](#). Facing History and Ourselves. Updated April 28, 2022

<sup>4</sup> [Unpacking the Origins of Kanye’s Antisemitism](#). People of the Pod (AJC). October 14, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> [What Kanye Can Teach Us About Antisemitism](#) by Yair Rosenberg, *The Atlantic*. October 9, 2022.



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went on national TV and offered the very same rubbish, for all of America to consume, just as they might consume their daily news or fashion advice.

Erika Mann, the previously quoted author of the 1938's *School for Barbarians*, describes how this kind of normalized hatred eases people into the role of perpetrator. Of Nazi Germany, she writes, "There are more placards as you continue past hotels, restaurants, indoor swimming pools, to school. They read "No Jews allowed;" "Jews not desired here" ...And what do you feel? Agreement? Pleasure? Disgust? Opposition? You don't feel any of these. You don't feel anything, you've seen these placards for almost five years. This is a habit, it is all perfectly natural, of course Jews aren't allowed here."<sup>6</sup>

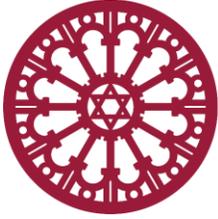
While many might argue that antisemitism has not yet become habituated here in the States, it has certainly seen a resurgence. And, as we mark the fourth anniversary of the Tree of Life Shooting massacre in Pittsburgh, the deadliest assault on Jewish people in the United States, we must acknowledge the distressing rise of antisemitism right here, among us. According to the ADL, antisemitic incidents reached an all-time high in the United States in 2021, with a total of 2,717 incidents of assault, harassment and vandalism. This represents the highest number of incidents on record since ADL began tracking antisemitic incidents in 1979 – an average of more than seven incidents per day and a 34 percent increase year over year.

Attacks against Jewish institutions, including JCCs and synagogues, were up by 61 percent, incidents at K-12 schools increased 106 percent, and incidents on college campuses rose 21 percent. Assaults increased 167 percent, incidents of harassment were up 43 percent, and acts of antisemitic vandalism rose by 14 percent.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> ["Heil Hitler!": Lessons of Daily Life](#). Facing History and Ourselves. Updated April 28, 2022

<sup>7</sup> [ADL Audit Finds Antisemitic Incidents in United States Reached All-Time High in 2021](#). ADL. April 25, 2022.



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One need not dig too deep to find disturbing examples of antisemitism right in our backyard. On Thursday, individuals associated with the Goyim Defense League dropped a banner from the Bronx River Parkway that read, "Kanye is Right About the Jews!" The group did the same in LA last weekend, while giving Nazi salutes. And, a few days ago, in Brooklyn, a group of teenagers attacked three Jewish yeshiva students, pelting the students with eggs and punching one of them, yelling "Free Palestine." And, two weeks prior, on the heels of Kanye's first rants, the Holocaust Museum in Los Angeles was overwhelmed with hateful messages on its social media platforms.<sup>8</sup> In response, CEO Beth Kean stated, "[Kanye]... needs to use his words to inspire and not incite."<sup>9</sup>

This week, we read in *Parashat* Noah the story of Babel, a story that is rooted in the power of language and words. This tale about a people being scattered across the world, with no common language to speak of, begins: "Everyone on earth had the same language and the same words." This verse, which might seem innocuous at first, is actually the root of great turmoil in this week's portion. In our commentaries, we read that having the same language could be interpreted as everyone thinking the same or having "the same intentions."<sup>10</sup> Commentator David Kimhi noted – these intentions were NOT good.

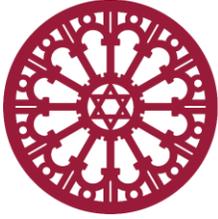
We see, then, that "everyone having the same language and same words" represents a real sign of danger in this developing world of our Torah, a sign that God's creation tilts towards conformity, and that people often prefer homogeneity over diversity. God recognizes the peril here, and ultimately responds by scattering the people and confounding their language, doing this after they build the Tower of Babel.

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<sup>8</sup> [ADL Tracker of Antisemitic Incidents](#)

<sup>9</sup> [Holocaust Museum of LA flooded with antisemitic messages after offering Kanye West a private tour](#). CBS News LA. October 24, 2022.

<sup>10</sup> HaAmeq HaDavar on 11:1 and David Kimhi on 11:1



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God does so, in part, to restore balance to this place that has prioritized, or perhaps demanded, sameness. For surely, there were unnamed others who DIDN'T speak the same language or have the same words. What became of them? The story of Babel, then, can be interpreted as a tale of how one group came to dominance through the use of words and language and exclusion.

So much about the propagation of antisemitism and hate in general, comes down to words and language and exclusion. The emphasis on exclusion, or difference, is of utmost importance in the propaganda of antisemitism. Hence, the all-too-common demonization of Jews, frequently called "children of the devil," and very often portrayed as less than human, with horns and bulging eyes. This insistence on our differences has had surprising staying power, even in this "sophisticated" age in which we live.<sup>11</sup>

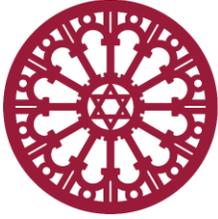
Difference is still intolerable to so many. Therefore, as it was in the time of Noah, it still is now; people still aspire to sameness, and they still desire to create worlds in which everyone has the same language, and the same words, and the same beliefs, and the same thoughts. Sameness breeds security; difference undermines that. Sameness creates comfort; difference destabilizes that. Sameness establishes predictability; difference thwarts that.

As for us, we Jews will never be exactly the same as the prevailing cultures in which we live – with the exception, perhaps, of Israel. Even if we speak the same language and have the same words, our Judaism sets us apart. Jews have been "distinct" for generations: We have followed our own sacred texts; we have pursued our own sacred times; we have lived by our own sacred rhythms. But our distinctness is our PRIDE.

At this fraught moment, when antisemitism is rearing its vicious head once again, when words of hate are infusing our airwaves and schools and places of worship; when we feel pushed to the margins out of worry or fear, may we remind ourselves that we are not alone, that, today, we have allies who care deeply about our safety and our well-being. We are surrounded by so many

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<sup>11</sup> [Fact Sheet on the Elements of Anti-Semitic Discourse](#) by Kenneth L. Marcus, President & General Counsel, The Louis D. Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law.



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who want justice for us and for our children. And we are buoyed by those who want to share their love and support and righteous fury with each of us. We will not fight this hatred on our own; we will stand strong and speak out and teach out amongst friends.

But, more important than looking out at this moment, let us look inwards: may we find strength and courage and meaning in our differences, that we may rise up on our own two feet to combat this longest standing hate; may we find joy and passion in our unique identities, that we may celebrate, unabashedly, even amidst our troubles; and may we find power and purpose in the sacred words that we carry, for these are the words that have carried us and inspired us, and emboldened us over space and time, in joy and in sorrow, from generation to generation. Girded by our tradition, our heritage and our communities, we will continue this fight against antisemitism in dignity, in strength, in determination, in courage, and in love. *Ken Y'hi Ratzon.*