WHATABOUTISM
Temple Sholom, Vancouver BC
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What about neo-Nazis? What about the Radical Left? What about the AIPAC? What about the Jewish Voice for Peace? What about the settlements in Israel? What about you call it Palestine? What about BDS? What about check points? What about missiles from Gaza? What about Anti-Semitism? What about Islamaphobia?

What about, what about, what about.

We've gotten very good at what-abouting.

The most cogent example, and this sermon is not about Trump, he's just a familiar example. Remember when President Trump blamed "both sides" for the violence in Charlottesville. "What about the 'alt-left' that came charging at the, as you say, the 'alt-right'?" the president said. "Do they have any semblance of guilt?"

For a nanosecond, especially to an uncritical listener, this stab at logic might seem interesting, even thought-provoking, and that's why it's a useful political tool.

Whataboutism appears to broaden context, to offer a counterpoint, when really it's diverting blame, muddying the waters and confusing the hell out of rational listeners.

Whataboutism refers to the practice of deflecting criticism by pointing to the misdeeds of others. Oxford Dictionaries defines it as "the technique or practice of responding to an accusation or difficult question by making a counter-accusation or raising a different issue."

Essentially, it's an appeal to hypocrisy — a logical fallacy also known as "tu quoque." Instead of proving that your opponent's claim is wrong on its face, whataboutism argues that it's hypocritical of the opponent to make that claim at all.

“Oh, you think anti-Semitism of the extreme right is bad, what about the anti-Semitism of the radical left?

“Not only does it help to deflect your original argument, but it also throws you off balance,” says Alexey Kovalev, a Russian journalist who wrote about this Cold War Era tactic of political misdirection first developed by the Kremlin, but now employed by just about everyone I have a debate with.

“You’re expecting to be in a civilized argument that doesn’t use cheap tricks like that. You are playing chess and your opponent — while making a lousy move — he just punches you on the nose.”

Whataboutism is a form of corrosive comparison in which nothing my tribe does is ever as bad as what your tribe did.

“My side did this thing, but the thing your side did was worse.”

Whataboutism is one of the logical fallacies people employ without realizing they don't actually prove anything. It even has a name, "the fallacy of relative privation." Whatever is being discussed is compared to the best or worst possible example.

If this sounds familiar, it’s because it has become our default political speak and its seeping into our relationships as well.

In an age where the internet provides limitless access to information where nothing is not known anymore makes it so easy to make a sloppy argument and a false comparison. Whataboutism has become how we talk to each other when we don’t care much about the other, because they are the other. It’s lazy. It’s infuriating and its everywhere.

Whataboutism is destroying friendships, it has broken up relationships and it is making debate at universities and in the public square impossible and sometimes violent. Its in all of

those places, and it is most assuredly in the current debate about the rise of anti-Semitism around the globe.

Instead of figuring out how to combat anti-Semitism we are focusing on who is more to blame for it, left or right, leftist liberals or right-wing radicals?

Excuse me but – Rome is burning – it really doesn't matter right now who lit the first match – we need to put out the fire.

The truth is, Anti-Semitism is prevalent on both the left and the right, but that does not make them equivalent. They are of a different character, they present different challenges, they need to be addressed in different ways. They are both dangerous, but that doesn't make them the same!

Left-wing anti-Semitism is better organized, is more widespread, has friends in higher places outside the US, is more socially acceptable, and is dangeriously ignored by the people

with the power to combat it. On the other hand, it rarely kills people, so there is that.

Right-wing anti-Semitism has friends in higher places in the US and Europe, is far more violent and murderous, and would be far more dangerous in the long term if it is not stopped early. On the other hand, it is far less organized, characterized by the behavior of individuals rather than groups, and cannot summon the power of the mob the way BDS so often does.

The tactics they use to attack us are different. The tactics that we must use to fight them are different. But their goal is the same: the destruction of the Jewish people, in one way or another. So to engage in an argument about anti-Semitism via the simplistic tactic of whataboutism is to completely miss the point. Its not about which is worse, its about what can we do about both?

To be clear, if you bring up left-wing anti-Semitism in order to avoid having to deal with right-wing anti-Semitism, that is whataboutism.

If you bring up left-wing anti-Semitism in order to address it in addition to right-wing anti-Semitism, that is not whataboutism.

The same rules apply if you switch "left" and "right".

Robbie Waisman taught me once, “you should never compare traumas”. His point being that what pains you and your people is not any more or less painful when compared to the pain of others, if they see their own pain as definitive.

When both sides play the distraction game, all we have are distractions. There are no facts, merely alternative facts. There can be no crystallizing events from which we emerge more unified — there can only be dueling narratives. There can be no common facts for us to agree on — there can only be a series of

faux scandals, building on one another like a game of Jenga, until the entire edifice comes crashing down.

We can acknowledge that different things upset us to different degrees without issuing a moral or character judgment, without saying this time of Jew Hatred is better or worse than that type of Jew hatred – they are both abhorrent. We cannot compare traumas.

If we try to arbitrate legitimate grievances from illegitimate grievances it will ultimately result in a world where no grievances are addressed, because somewhere there will always be a larger monster to destroy.

Thirty years ago, being able to effectively whatabout a debate would require either a voluminous knowledge of the history of a subject or some serious time spent at a research institution. Now? You have the Web. Legions of supporters are on the lookout for perceived hypocrisy and good examples wiggle to

the surface quickly. There's a huge amount of information immediately available from which cherries of whataboutism can be picked. And they are.

Social media is the world's most effective rhetoric-undermining machine, and people who debate politics on social media build more defensive trenches and turrets than a doughboy in 1917. Whataboutism is a small part of those defenses — but an easy and cheap part.

If all of this make you want to throw up your hands, or delete your Facebook account, because you can't win an argument anymore I am with you, but it's the wrong response. Silence or surrender to the loudest voices in the room is never the answer. Sometimes to disagree with the late grate Jim Croce, you do have to spit into the wind.

A few weeks ago we read in Exodus (23:3): “You shall not follow a multitude to do evil; neither shall you bear witness in a cause to turn aside after a multitude to pervert justice.”

Rashbam, a 12th- century French scholar, explained the meaning of this verse: “If, in your opinion, the majority are about to commit an error in judgment, do not remain silent because they are the majority, but state your view.”

British writer Iris Murdoch wrote: “Words constitute the ultimate texture and stuff of our moral being. . . .We become spiritual animals when we become verbal animals. . .Words are spirit. . The quality of a civilization depends upon its ability to discern and reveal truth and this depends on the scope and purity of its language.” (Quoted from, The B.S Factor: The Theory and Technique of Faking It In America,” by Arthur Herzog, pp 202-203)

The purity of language. That is what the Torah mandated not just in the courts but also in the everyday traffic of life. Purity of language is especially vital on the informational battlefield of the 21st century, where words are weapons.

At the beginning, the middle and the end of the day a Jew-hater is a Jew-hater is a Jew-hater.

It is time for us to condemn the anti-semitism of the right, and the anti-semitism of the left.

With no “whataboutism.”

Just name the evil when it comes.

And, be prepared to fight it.

Whatever it takes.

Authors Note: Parts of this sermon came for a collection of web articles that I clipped over the past 18 months, but did not record their sources. I have been working with the text of those original clippings so much that I am not sure any longer where their words end and mine begin. I thus must attest that this sermon is not solely a unique work of my own writing, but a product of an iterative process that involved other sources. I thank those authors for the insights they have given me and I do not intentionally pass their writing off as my own.