ITS NOT ABOUT KANYE – ITS ABOUT US
RABBI DAN MOSKOVITZ
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I don't want to talk about Kanye and his Jew-Hatred filled rantings on social media. Nor do I want to talk about former President Trump's toxic notion of the ungrateful Jew in his clearly articulated transactional view of Jewish support.

Half a dozen of you sent me a 2-minute video clip from Israeli actor and activist Noa Tishby that summarized the past week in anti-Jewish racism more succinctly than I think I ever could. Here is that clip:

PLAY VIDEO



She's right it has been quite a week and if you've been paying attention, you know that it's not Passover, by which I mean, this week is not different than any other week. The rise of anti-Jewish hate on the left and right and the relative silence/indifference of the press and media/celebrity class has been just a deafening and unsurprising.

I spoke about it last week on CKNW, where one intrepid reporter, Eric Chapman noticed the sound of silence as well.

But I don't want to talk about antisemitism here tonight, not to this congregation or those watching online who know these facts all too well and have been on the receiving end of such hatred for generations.

As I have said many times before, paraphrasing the indominable Bari Weiss, 'Jews will not solve antisemitism, only non-Jews morally outraged with the denigration the Jewish people can put an end to the world's last acceptable prejudice.'

Instead, what I want to talk about tonight is why in spite of worries that "Never Again" might happen again, we need to take a moment to consider just how different Jews are now than we have been ever before in our 3,000+ year history a targeted and persecuted people.

You might've heard of the joke,

Two Jews walk into a bar…

One of them, citing Haaretz, the liberal Israeli newspaper, is in despair, lamenting the latest onslaught of attacks on Israel, and a consequential spike in anti-Jewish violence across European and U.S. cities.

The other Jew, referencing the Iranian press, is delighted by tales of Jewish power, as he reads aloud that the Zionists control Washington, Wall Street, Hollywood, the global financial markets, and the media.

Hah! If only we were that powerful.

Let's take a moment to get some perspective here. I know we are all worried about slippery slopes and straws that will break a camel's back, that if we don't respond to every instance of anti-Jewish hate then we give license to the haters to keep on hating. And that is sound reasoning for the non-Jewish world. But here, just among us; we've got bigger problems than Kanye.

- Decline of Jewish identity among all non-Orthodox Jews around the world
- Iran, Hezbollah, Hamas – each has sworn to destroy the Jewish state and the Jewish people therein, further they are amassing the weapons to try to do it.
- Decline of political support for Israel in the US congress; and the egregious anti-Israel bias of the United Nations.
- Assaults on Jewish students on campuses across North America, particularly amongst many of our own children at Canadian Universities back east.
- The growing chasm between progressive, secular and traditional Jews – our inability to work together, pray together, gather together in common cause.
- This is to say nothing of the challenges presented by out-marriage, the high cost of living an affiliated Jewish life, and a general decline in Jewish knowledge that is contributing to a generation of Jews that don't know how to be Jewish.

Some of those problems are indeed deeply rooted in antisemitism, I do not mean to minimize its insipient rise from the thin veneer of civil society where it has been barely contained for the last few decades.

But, even with all those problems, there has been no better time to be a Jew in history than right now.

Allow me to share three reasons why, even though it would appear that our demise, long anticipated, appears closer at hand, we are in fact as the joke tried to make clear, far more in control of our own destiny as a people than ever before.

Mind you, there have been a few times when, with our own destiny in our hands we were the cause of our own disunity and destruction; the first and second temple period come to mind, but still things are better now than even before those falls.

ONE: The State of Israel
We have a homeland. It's easy to forget that just 80-some-odd years ago, that wasn't the case.

YES, buried within Former President Trump's criticism of American Jews for being ungrateful, commanding them to show him proper respect—and issuing a veiled threat if they do not; is an important point at the very end of his characterization of the ungrateful Jew. He is right when he says, "US Jews have to get their act together and appreciate what they have in Israel—Before it is too late!" Not because they owe it to him, but because we all owe the fact that we are not facing pogroms and concentration camps, God forbid ever again because there is a State of Israel, and whether we live there, visit there, or send our prayers there, the fact that it stands means that Jews will never fall again, at least not without a fighting chance. Jews should never take this for granted.

TWO: Jews are everywhere
I mean that literally and metaphorically. It used to be that we were gathered together in small, isolated, and vulnerable corners of the world and social society. Nations we could not live freely in, clubs we could not belong to, universities and jobs we could not ever hope to participate in. That is no longer the case. We have reached the highest levels of power and influence around the globe. We are still just .2% of the world's population, 2% of the population of the US and Canada – but we are disproportionately overrepresented in industry, science, medicine, law, academia, entertainment, everywhere it seems except professional sports, for which I hold every Jewish mother personally responsible. I'm only kidding, sorta. As the saying goes, we punch well above our weight class. Good for us and good for the future of humanity.

THREE: Judaism is evolving before our eyes
It's and often repeated colloquialism that in Chinese the world for crisis is the same as the word for opportunity. I've been told by people that actually speak Chinese, that such a correlation is not exactly grammatically correct, but its close enough to make the point. In the midst of all these challenges, Jews, Jewish communities, the State of Israel are innovating and adapting to confront them and overcome them. Our of this crucible of internal and existential threat have come transformative ideas and initiatives.

- Free Birthright trips to Israel, which are not free but paid for by a network of Jewish philanthropists.
- Innovations in Jewish worship, music, learning that shtetl generations could not even dream of.
- Awareness of and the embrace of Jews from all backgrounds, identities, orientations, and those that are Jew-adjacent, creating Jewish homes, raising Jewish families.

Yes, Jewish identity is under threat from within and without, but we are not cowering in a corner, eyes closed hoping the bad people and the bad dream will simply go away. We are confronting these challenges from a place of power, pride, and possibility.

Last weekend, we celebrated Simchat Torah, in which we mark the conclusion of the annual cycle of reading the Torah and celebrated the beginning of the Five Books of Moses anew. We welcomed 40 new students into our religious school in a year when we have welcomed more than 75 new families into our congregation, which now approaches 950 households, from a little more than 600 households 9 years ago.

Tomorrow morning we will begin the reading of Torah all over again with Bereshit the story of creation, the cycle will continue, unbroken as it has, in spite of all attempts by others and our own internal conflicts to the contrary.

As the brilliant scholar and teacher, the late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, pointed out, the holiday of Simchat Torah goes unmentioned in the Bible or the Talmud. It began in Babylon, after the Jews had been exiled from the Holy Land, in the fifth or sixth century. From there, it spread to Jews exiled and scattered to the furthest reaches of the globe. Not by rabbinic edict, but by the grassroots.

As Sacks reminds us: "By the time Simchat Torah had spread throughout the Jewish world, Jews had lost virtually everything: their land, their home, their freedom and independence, the Temple, the priesthood, the sacrificial order—all that had once been their source of joy." The only thing left, writes Rabbi Sacks, was the Torah itself: "All that remained was a book."

Yet those Jews—who lacked land, who lacked political power, who lacked a shared culture—danced and celebrated in the face of devastation.

At this time in history, we have land, we have power, we have a vibrant and expanding Jewish culture. We have it all, and yes we still have antisemitism, it's not going away, but perhaps more assuredly than ever before we can affirmatively say, "neither are we". Quoting the indominable Bari Weiss, "Tomorrow we will read, as every generation has before us, those first words of Genesis: "In the beginning . . . " And we will remember that our very lives were made possible by Jewish men and women who found a way to continue that cycle, unbroken. Who refused, against all evidence to the contrary, to give into despair.