

Yom Kippur 5787 - Kol Nidre

"When Fear Does Not Have the Final Word"

By Rabbi Gabriel Botnick

I always found it curious how this evening isn't called Erev Yom Kippur, or Leil Yom Kippur, but rather Kol Nidre — taking its name from the opening liturgy of the service. Kol Nidre, Ve'esarei, VeChamei: all vows, pledges, oaths, any promises we make between this Yom Kippur and next, are indeed not true promises. They are not binding. We cannot be held accountable to them.

Throughout history, antisemites have seized upon this text as proof that Jews cannot be trusted. They'll point to this core liturgy, from the most sacred day of the year, as evidence that Jews are deceitful and untrustworthy. Which, on the surface, would make sense — except for the fact that their understanding of the text is completely flawed. Every term that appears in the language of Kol Nidre — neder, a vow; shvu'ah, an oath; konem, a promise; and so on — refers explicitly to agreements made solely between a person and God, not between a person and another person. Kol Nidre cannot cancel a contract or a debt, or any other promise made to another person. Jewish law has remained emphatic, for thousands of years, that obligations between people must always be honoured, and that Kol Nidre was never meant to be — and can never be used as — a legal loophole. As far as our commitments to other people go, whether they be Jewish or not, we are always held accountable.

But knowing the true meaning of Kol Nidre, or that the accusation based on it is false, has never prevented people from repeating the lie. Because antisemitism has never depended upon Jews actually being guilty of the things said about us. It depends on a story — a lie — being useful. And once that story proves to be useful, evidence to the contrary becomes irrelevant.

I wish I could say that the lie regarding Kol Nidre was just one of many examples of antisemitic tropes that have been relegated to the dustbin of history. But sadly I cannot make that claim, because in this moment we know all too well that the scourge of antisemitism not only remains present in the world, but is worryingly on the rise.

I'm sure I don't need to remind you that tonight marks one year since the attack on Heaton Park Synagogue in Manchester, where two worshippers — Melvin Cravitz and Adrian Daulby — were killed, and three others were seriously injured. According to CST, the Community Security Trust, that event was the first fatal antisemitic terror attack in Britain since CST first began tracking such crimes back in 1984. And while, thankfully, there have been no other fatal attacks

against Jews here in the UK, there has still been a sharp uptick in antisemitic incidents in recent years, with more than 3,700 reported events last year — more than double the events reported in 2022.

And we can no longer pretend that this is just about anti-Zionism. These attacks are targeting ordinary Jews walking to shul, going to work, sitting in a classroom, and just going about life as usual — not because of any stance they've taken, or haven't taken, on the war in Gaza or Israeli policy, but simply because they were visibly, and unapologetically, Jewish.

And I want to be clear here, because I believe the distinction still matters: it is perfectly valid to criticise the Israeli government or military, or even to question a country's right to exist. But what we're watching unfold these days is precisely what so many of us have been worried about for a while now: the conflation of anti-Zionism and antisemitism. Those who are targeting people in these attacks don't understand — or possibly don't even care about — the distinction between the two. Even Jews who are fiercely critical of Israel, even anti-Zionist Jews, are being excluded, harassed, and pushed out of public life. Which tells you something: this never really was about a policy position at all.

But overt violence is only one manifestation of the antisemitism we're witnessing these days, and, truthfully, most of us in this room will never personally experience such attacks. What we will experience is something far more subtle, more insidious, more difficult to count or prove — but still very much real. A growing number of Jews in recent years have been reporting a sense of prejudice against them simply for being Jewish. At first, you might think you're imagining something: a colleague or acquaintance suddenly turns cold towards you, a group chat goes quiet, an interview fails to result in a job but you never quite find out why. But then you realise you are far from the only person experiencing these things, and that you're not being paranoid — this is just one of those nasty manifestations of antisemitism.

A couple of years ago, there was a Telegraph investigation which described what Jewish writers, agents, and publishers called a "soft boycott." Manuscripts were being quietly rejected. Jewish stories were suddenly deemed too contentious. Professional relationships simply started falling away. There were no public announcements or new policies formally introduced that one could point to as evidence of discrimination. There was just this accumulating sense that certain Jewish voices were no longer welcome.

Sometimes, though, the exclusion is unmistakable. Last summer, British Jewish comedian Philip Simon had a show at the Edinburgh Fringe cancelled after the venue raised objections to some of

his online posts. He says that he had never expressed support for anything other than freeing the hostages and finding a path towards peace. Yet the venue decided that his views were incompatible with its own position on Israel. This summer, the venue finally admitted that it had indeed unlawfully discriminated against him.

More often, though, accusations of antisemitism are far more difficult — if not impossible — to prove. Holocaust historian Dr Rafael Medoff was meant to release a new book exploring 150 wartime cartoons, which supposedly document what Americans knew about the Holocaust as it was unfolding. But then his publisher cancelled the book's release after he refused to amend the book's introduction, upon their recommendation, with a passage accusing Israel of genocide. The publisher insists that the decision was financial. And perhaps that dispute is itself revealing: this kind of exclusion can nearly always be explained some other way. A financial decision. A scheduling problem. A manuscript that was not quite right. It may be difficult to prove antisemitism in such cases, but that does not make it something we're imagining.

And beyond the headlines, there are the conversations that don't make the papers. Conversations I've had, right here, with people in this room. About work. About what they've stopped saying out loud. About what they've started hiding. About their fears. That fear is real, and I want to acknowledge it. I don't think it does us any good to pretend it isn't there, because it is always there — simmering at the back of our minds, hanging over so many of our interactions.

But I don't want that fear to be where we end up tonight. Instead, I want to know how we move forward — with this threat of antisemitism pressuring us to hide who we are, apologise for who we are, or defend our own existence. What kind of response might actually allow us to go on living as Jews, and for Jewish life to endure?

You know, if I had given this sermon a couple of years ago, or even last year, I suspect I would have said that we need to do more outreach, or we need to address and correct the lies, expose the conspiracies, and persuade people that they are mistaken. And while I don't think we should give up on such efforts entirely, I no longer believe arguing our case, on its own, is the answer. It's exhausting, having constantly to explain ourselves to strangers. But it's also problematic and corrosive, because the moment we start down this road, we have already accepted a core assumption of antisemitism: that the right for Jews to exist needs to be defended at all.

So for months, I've been sitting with this question, trying to come up with an answer for you. Thinking of some way to give you hope without spouting off a succession of empty platitudes, or raising the alarm and claiming that the sky is falling and there's nothing we can do to stop the

tidal wave of hate. I read numerous articles and spoke with countless colleagues. But then finally it occurred to me: we are hardly the first generation of Jews facing the threat of antisemitism. Certainly there must be wisdom from the past that could be applied to life today. And so I decided to look back throughout history.

I did some initial searches for rabbinic writings from the Iberian Peninsula in the 1400s, when our ancestors were facing expulsion and the Inquisition. I thought about exploring writing from Jews facing pogroms in the Russian Empire in the late 1800s, or from small post-Soviet communities rebuilding Jewish life after generations of state-sponsored hostility. But then I thought: this is Belsize Square Synagogue, a community founded by German refugees. If I'm searching history for a Jewish response to exclusion, there must be wisdom I can glean from our own heritage.

Now, I want to say this as plainly and clearly as I can: I am not saying, nor am I implying, that Britain today is the same as Weimar Germany, or that we are heading towards the same political and social outcome. That is not my argument, and I ask that you not hear it that way. But what I am saying is that German Jews in the late 1920s and early 1930s were already asking how Jewish life should respond to a surrounding culture that was becoming increasingly and openly hostile towards them. And the answers they suggested at that time are certainly worth exploring.

The first response that generation proposed was that of persuasion. Rabbi Leo Baeck, the pre-eminent leader of German Jewry in the early twentieth century, used his position and reputation among theologians of all faiths to argue for Jewish dignity and protection under German law. He wrote articles in widely read journals, addressing German society at large, exhorting them to approach the growing crisis with moral fortitude. He said that the courage to affirm one's own life is the foundation of Jewish identity, and that trying to hide what we are only invites more hostility, not less. In addition to Leo Baeck, our very own founding rabbi, Dr George Salzberger, also spoke and wrote publicly in defence of Jewish identity and dignity.

And while both of these rabbis certainly displayed laudable bravery by standing up to, and calling out, their Christian colleagues, I have to say that, in hindsight, their approach feels woefully inadequate — especially as it seems to mirror, rather uncomfortably, the very same outreach strategy that appears to have failed us: explaining ourselves to others, demonstrating our usefulness to society, and reassuring others that we're just like them.

In her new book, "The Final Solution to the Jewish Question," which is a follow-up to her previous, much-celebrated book, "People Love Dead Jews," Dara Horn writes about the

inefficacy of this oft-attempted strategy, and how each generation wrongly assumes that antisemitism will simply fade away once people just get to understand us better. She explains how one would have thought that, after the Holocaust, people would have been hesitant to express any prejudice against Jews. Except, in post-war America, antisemitism continued to run rampant. In fact, records show that many Americans who had never met a Jew just assumed there must have been a reason the Nazis targeted Jews in the first place.

And so a concerted effort was undertaken by Jewish leaders — mainly rabbis — to make Jews less foreign and mysterious to Christian America. And they did this by doing something rather subtle: changing what it means to be Jewish. The people leading this effort saw how the Nazis framed Jews as a race, so they made a deliberate decision to present Judaism not as a race, but as a religion. Now, all throughout history, Judaism has been more than a race, ethnicity, or religion, and in the ancient world what defined Judaism was rather common: we were an am, a people — a family of families, bound by history, language, culture, land, law, and, yes, also religion. But by the twentieth century, the concept of peoplehood had become a foreign idea. People understood nationality, race, and ethnicity, but most of all, they understood religion. So American Jewish leaders began teaching about Judaism as a religion, saying "we're just like you, we just happen to pray in a different kind of church." And perhaps that strategy made sense at the time. But it came at a cost. Because we're not just a religion, and while reducing Judaism to something comfortably familiar to others might make us easier to explain, it also makes us smaller — and it allows the surrounding culture to set the terms of Jewish acceptability. And maybe that's why persuasion cannot be the entire response to our current dilemma.

There was, however, a second proposal in the early '30s, suggesting another way to respond to the rising antisemitism of the time. The Bohemian philosopher and journalist Felix Weltsch argued that Jews must refuse fear and refuse retreat, and instead build something of real value. So Weltsch proudly and unabashedly built up a successful, weekly Jewish-Zionist newspaper, the *Selbstwehr*, meaning "self-defence." But in the end, despite having built something quite influential, Weltsch was forced to accept retreat, and found himself escaping on the very last train out of Prague, mere hours before the Nazis marched on the city. Eventually, Weltsch reached his final destination, Mandate Palestine, where he lived from 1939 until his death in 1964.

Of course, there's something ironic in the man who preached against retreat ultimately having to leave. But Weltsch's story highlights for us that, sometimes, leaving is necessary — because being courageous does not mean we have to be reckless, and being proud of your Jewishness does not demand that you ignore genuine danger. And I understand the instinct to look elsewhere

for safety. I've spoken with multiple people in recent years, including some of you here tonight, who are seriously considering moving to the United States. But I'll tell you honestly, as someone who is both American and now also British, that, as a Jew, I feel safer here in the UK than I do back in the States. Here in London, I don't worry about someone showing up at our front gate with an automatic rifle. That doesn't mean things here are perfect. But I personally don't think leaving is the answer.

However, I do think Weltsch was onto something with his initial instinct, at least: that in the face of antisemitism, the best response might be the insistence upon building something of value. Because that is precisely what Jews have done again and again throughout history, when the existing form of Jewish life happened to fall under threat.

More than 2,000 years ago, when the Land of Israel was under Greek rule, the simple act of reading the Torah became punishable by death. According to our tradition, it was at this time that our sages instituted the practice of reading the Haftarah — a passage from one of the books of the Prophets, thematically linked to the weekly Torah portion, that would have been read had it not been a capital crime to do so. And here we are, many centuries later, still observing this practice that was born out of a response to oppression.

In the year 70 CE, when the Roman army destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem, Jewish religious life faced extinction. But Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, along with a handful of other sages, didn't try to re-institute the old system of sacrifices just somewhere other than Jerusalem — that would have gone against everything we believe. Instead, they built something radically new: a portable form of Judaism that no longer required the Temple or the priesthood, and that could be lived and practised in synagogues and homes anywhere, through prayer, learning, law, and the sanctification of daily life. Every single one of us in this room is a rabbinic Jew. We are all living proof that this innovative response to oppression has managed not only to endure, but to thrive.

Later, when Jewish communities found themselves scattered across Egypt, Babylon, and the rest of the Roman world, there was a real fear that our oral tradition might fracture and disappear. So Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi took another radical step: he broke the explicit prohibition against writing down the oral laws. Rabbi Yehudah's creation, the Mishnah, became the foundation of the Talmud, and is what has enabled Jewish communities separated by continents and cultures to maintain a common tradition.

Now, one recurrent theme throughout these moments in history is quite obviously persecution. But just because something good resulted from those moments doesn't mean persecution is itself

good, or something to be desired, God forbid. But in the face of that persecution, there arose another common theme: our refusal to let restrictions placed upon us become the final word. Every time we've been denied the ability to live authentically, we've built something new instead. And sometimes, that something new has outlasted the people who tried to silence us — by generations.

And that inclination to build is indeed the third response attempted in pre-war Germany. In early 1933, a young theatre director, Kurt Baumann, was trying to digest the magnitude of recent events, in which all Jewish artists, musicians, actors, and writers suddenly found themselves dismissed from German cultural institutions. He was trying to fathom how this happened, and in the process, he noticed something remarkable. He noticed that, in Berlin alone, there were 175,000 Jews — a population equal to that of a decent-sized city, and more than enough people, he thought, to support their own stages, orchestras, and other cultural institutions. And so, with Kurt Singer, a physician and influential musicologist, he established what was known as the Kulturbund, the Cultural Federation of German Jews, which offered opportunities for employment to the recently dismissed artists, and entertainment to the larger Jewish community, who were banned from attending non-Jewish performances.

Now, I want to be honest about what building the Kulturbund did — and did not — accomplish. It did not stop a single antisemite, and it did not prevent the Nazis from taking power or the atrocities they perpetrated once they did. But it did deny antisemites something they very much desired: to make Jewish life smaller, to make us less visible and more frightened. The goal of building the Kulturbund was never to guarantee safety through culture. It was to make sure that hostility and exclusion would not be permitted to determine the shape or depth of Jewish existence.

So what does this mean for us now — for us living in Britain in 2026, and facing worse antisemitism than most of us have ever known? I think the aim, right now, is to refuse erasure. We must resist and endure this rise of antisemitism through acts of solidarity and through building — by refusing to hide, and standing proudly as who we are.

This does not necessarily mean that Belsize must suddenly become a theatre company, a publishing house, or an artists' agency. But there are people in this room who are well positioned in British cultural life, and are able to help make this happen. If Jewish writers are excluded from certain spaces, where possible, those who are able should look into creating platforms for Jewish voices. If artists are being denied exhibitions, then we should help find ways to show their work. If playwrights are losing stages, we should ask whether Jewish communal spaces are able to host

their productions. And if Jews of any stripe are being isolated, then certainly we can build a space in which they need not stand alone.

This is actually already beginning to happen. In the immediate aftermath of October 7th, a new organisation called The Brigade was founded in Hollywood. This invitation-only network brings together executives, creators, and other leaders across the worlds of entertainment, culture, and media. Its aim is to build the relationships and infrastructure that can enable them to elevate Jewish voices, to support allies, to promote responsible storytelling, and to use art and culture to counter antisemitism while building bridges. And what began in Hollywood has now grown into a global network of more than 1,000 leaders, with members here in the British film industry. If you happen to work in the industry, or a related field, it is definitely worth your looking into securing an invitation to join.

But Jewish life is larger than the arts, and I want to push us to think beyond the idea of culture in the narrow sense, towards the full range of what makes up Jewish peoplehood. I've spoken before about what I call the Five T's of Jewish Identity.

Torah — not just Torah study, but Jewish learning of every kind. We should be supporting all types of Jewish learning opportunities. Tefillah — prayer and services. It would be wonderful if even ten percent of you became regular Shabbat attendees... I mean, a rabbi can dream, right? But this can also be Shabbat dinner and Passover Seder — imagine inviting outsiders into these sacred and beautiful moments of gathering. Tzedek — performing acts of justice or mitzvot, refusing to stop helping others even when we don't feel helped in return. Tarbut — culture in the widest sense: yes, music, theatre, and literature, but also food, history, science, and genealogy. And Tzioniut — the Israeli and Hebrew dimension of Jewish identity, a relationship that we may wrestle with, argue about, and live differently, but that cannot be erased merely because the surrounding culture has made that relationship uncomfortable.

None of us will inhabit all five T's in the same way. But each aspect offers a unique connection point through which Jewish life can become deeper, richer, more creative, and more capable of holding us — individually, as well as collectively.

And this is exactly the conversation that's been driving our recent initiative: Belsize of the Future. We've been asking what our community might look like fifteen years from now, as we approach our centennial. We do not yet have a settled list of programmes or projects — we have not yet reached that stage of the process. But we have already begun laying the groundwork by asking and answering questions such as: What is essential to the character of our community?

What should be preserved or strengthened? What must Belsize look like to best hold us as we navigate towards an unsettled future? The next stage is not something being decided quietly for the community, but rather it is being decided by the community, through your knowledge, experience, and imagination. The final community-wide session in this initiative is taking place on Tuesday, November 10th. That evening, we will share a clear vision and strategy that resulted from earlier communal conversations, and we'll be gathering ideas from you to help us choose the best path forward. I do hope you will join us for this next stage in our journey.

But I want to be clear about one more thing: building something for ourselves does not mean retreating into a sealed, Jewish silo. We cannot live permanently with our doors closed, nor should we pretend that everyone else has failed us. So perhaps the image of what we're building isn't so much a fortress as it is a glass pavilion — strong enough to shelter us, open enough for us to see the world beyond, and transparent enough for the world to see the Jewish life flourishing within. A place with walls, yes, but also with doors. And when it is safe and appropriate, we open those doors and step outside, and we work with partners from other faith communities and across wider society, with allies in cultural institutions, with neighbours, and with government leaders. We cannot give up on that work. But we also cannot rely on it alone.

There's an idea that I want to close with tonight, that comes from the end of Dara Horn's new book. People often think of Jews as the "chosen" people. But we are not merely the chosen people. We are the choosing people. We are here because generations before us chose — deliberately, and at real cost — not to disappear. Whatever challenges and threats they faced, they refused to give up their Jewishness. They refused to hide their Jewishness. They refused to apologise for their Jewishness. Instead, they kept choosing to stand strong, to be proud, and to build new expressions of their Jewishness that would carry them into the future.

And now, with similar challenges before us, we also face a similar choice: will we choose to hide, apologise for, or give up on who we are? Or will we continue to choose to remain committed, rooted, and creative — to become more deeply, more creatively Jewish, to build a Jewish life strong enough to hold us, and everyone that the wider world would rather exclude? Not only so that we can endure whatever lies ahead, but so that we can leave behind a legacy worth inheriting.

Who knows? Maybe all we can hope for in this moment is that we be able to endure these turbulent times. But maybe, just maybe, centuries from now, future Jews will look back at our generation and say: sure, they might have been afraid, but they did not allow that fear to make them smaller. They might have been excluded, but they refused to let that exclusion turn into

erasure. And they might have faced challenges that no one should ever have to face, but they chose to respond by creating something beautiful. Something innovative. Something radical. Something enduring.