RH 5787 — The Rock, the Hard Place, and the Pearl – Rabbi Andrea Merow

We Jews have been carrying anger for three years. Anger. Fear. Exhaustion.

Sometimes all before breakfast. Of course, we were angry and frightened on October 7th. I was. But the antisemitism that has grown around us for years—and especially over these last three—has left us with something else, too: a feeling of being overwhelmed. People now tell a story about the Jewish people that sharply contradicts who we know ourselves to be. And that is painful.

You have known me for more than five years now, so you know that I would never choose to stand here on Rosh Hashanah and speak about antisemitism. Dwelling on the difficulties of being a Jew is not why I became a rabbi. I do not believe that concentrating only on our pain is what builds a meaningful Jewish life—or what helps us create our joyful, warm community. I came to this life to teach Torah and to help guide our people toward moments of holiness and sacred community.

And yet, here we are.

Antisemitic incidents keep growing. Pittsburgh. Poway. The murder of two young Israeli embassy staffers. Bondi Beach. This past July, seventy percent of all reported hate crimes in New York City were committed against Jews—70 percent. Antisemitism has found a home in organizations of writers and therapists, in schools, workplaces, and professional associations. What is so frightening is not simply that it exists. It is how *normalized* it has become in some circles.

And this has become personal for most of us. I was surprised when some of you, very kindly, suggested I take off my kippah when I walk the dog in town—or put the Jewish star necklace I received at my bat mitzvah under my shirt—just to be safe. I deeply appreciate the concern. But that is not how I live.

Still, I hear the fear underneath those suggestions; the fear is real. It is why, this past year, we chose to honor our guards and police officers who help keep us safe. I understand the anger, fear, and exhaustion that so many of us carry.

Most of us grew up believing in Jewish American exceptionalism. It was great to be a Jew in America in the late 20th century. But our elders knew what antisemitism looked like because vestiges of it were part of their lived experience. Some of our elders have told me that when they arrived in Princeton, there were places where they could not buy a home. I grew up near a golf club that did not admit Jews, in my lifetime.

Yet, **I** knew antisemitism mostly as history—something that happened in Europe or the Soviet Union. And when it happened here, even in Pittsburgh, I could still tell myself that it came from the fringe.

I do not think we can keep telling ourselves that.

In his book *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition*, David Nirenberg, from down the street at the Institute, explains that antisemitism is not simply hatred of actual Jews. It is a way of explaining what is supposedly wrong with the world by labeling it "Jewish." Hartman scholar Yossi Klein Halevi explains it this way: antisemitism projects a society's deepest anxieties onto "the Jew." It turns us into a symbol of whatever that civilization has decided is most evil.

Christian societies accused us of killing Jesus.

The Nazis said we polluted the purity of race. Marxists made the Jew a symbol of capitalism. And today, others portray Israel—and therefore often Jews—as the embodiment of colonialism and oppression. The accusations change. The function does not. Make the Jew into whatever a society has decided to despise. Klein Halevi calls the period of Jewish history we have just completed the "post-post-Holocaust era"—the end of those decades in which much of the West treated antisemitism as a settled, historical embarrassment. That era was ending well before October 7th. Maybe it ended at Charlottesville, or before, but it was ending.

Living through the collapse of an assumption you built your identity on—an assumption about your safety, your belonging, and your future—creates fear and overwhelm.

What weighs on us is not only the volume of antisemitism. It is also the directions from which it comes. In America, look to the far right, look to the far left. The language is different. The politics are different. But both have constructed narratives about why Jews are dangerous and why Jews are the problem.

Let me state clearly that I believe fair and loving criticism of an Israeli government is not inherently antisemitic. Over the years, I have offered such criticism myself because I love Israel and am deeply invested in its existential and moral future. Asking whether a government is acting morally in our name is a deeply Jewish thing to do.

But something monumental has changed.

Increasingly, the argument is no longer about the actions of a particular Israeli government. It is about whether a Jewish state has the right to exist at all. In some circles, Jews are considered acceptable only if we sever our several-thousand-year connection to the land of Israel. That is not criticism of a government. That is an attempt to make the entire Jewish State illegitimate. And when Israel is blamed for every evil in the world—when it is portrayed as the world's singular embodiment of colonialism, oppression, and evil—we are seeing the ancient mechanism that Nirenberg described take a contemporary form.

This has left many of us on both the political right and the political left feeling somewhat homeless because we no longer recognize movements we once called home.

But I will not begin this new year with only anger, fear, and exhaustion. Our tradition offers better ways to meet this moment. The truth is, this is, of course, not the first time the Jewish people have lived between a rock and a hard place. For three thousand years, we have encountered destruction, fear, and hatred.

We have never allowed those forces to write the whole Jewish story. We will not now.

Imagine for a moment the image of a beautiful pearl. When an oyster encounters an irritant, it responds by creating layer upon layer of a new protective surface, until what once caused discomfort is surrounded by something luminous. A pearl is created. I think the Jewish people know something about making pearls.

For three thousand years, we have faced adversity that might have broken us. And again and again, we have responded not only by surviving, but by creating a luminous civilization, a People, cultures, not only a religion, an Am – Peoplehood.

I think the Jewish people know something about making pearls. We responded to the difficulties in history, creating Torah commentary, Talmud, philosophy. Midrash, poetry. Shabbat tables and holiday rituals. Yiddish, Ladino, modern Hebrew. Jewish communities in places our ancestors could never have imagined. The State of Israel. This synagogue. **Our survival is not the story. Our THRIVING is the story.** And that is a particularly important message this New Year.

Rosh Hashanah invites us to look back, but also to envision what we will create in this New Year.Our liturgy says: *Hayom harat olam.* Today the world is born. Today, we are asked what kind of Jewish world we will bring into being in the coming year.

I believe our tradition asks three things of us as we face this moment.

First, we protect ourselves. We lock the doors. We thank the guards and police officers who keep us safe. We take threats seriously and allocate funds for security. We make certain that the law protects us; we speak up when it does not; and we strengthen the democracy that makes that protection possible. We confront antisemitism whether it comes from the right or from the left. We do not minimize it simply because it comes from people with whom we otherwise agree. We do not excuse it. We do not remain silent.

The Torah teaches, *V'nishmartem me'od l'nafshoteichem*—"Guard yourselves very carefully" (Deuteronomy 4:15). The Torah's word is *nefesh*—soul, life, self. The Netziv, Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, reads this verse as a command to guard not only the soul, but the body as well. We are responsible for protecting both. And that is exactly the challenge before us. We must guard our bodies and our institutions from what others might do to us. We need the locks and the guards and all the protections that keep us physically safe.

And we also have to guard our souls from what hatred and fear can do **inside us**—from allowing the need to defend Jewish life to diminish the Jewish life we are trying to defend. We did not build synagogues merely to lock their doors. We built it so that there would be something sacred inside those doors—and something beautiful that we can carry out from here.

And so, the second thing we must do is protect our Jewish souls by moving beyond fear and anger and toward deep joy. And to get to a place of joy, we need to first try to release some of our anger.

The Talmud teaches that when a wise person becomes consumed by anger, wisdom departs (Pesachim 66b). Maimonides takes this warning so seriously that he teaches that we must distance ourselves from anger. Not because there is never a reason to be angry. There is. But because anger can begin to control us. It narrows our vision. It makes it harder to think clearly, and harder to experience joy, transformation, and holiness. Anger can stunt our spiritual growth.

And we need our wisdom now. We need it to protect ourselves without allowing fear to make our world smaller. Last February, Bret Stephens gave a talk on The State of World Jewry at the 92nd

Street Y. He argues that our answer to antisemitism cannot just be to have less antisemitism; it must be to have more Judaism.

Safety is only the beginning of our response. It is not the purpose of Jewish life. We need wisdom to decide what we want to become in response to this moment. Rebbe Nachman of Breslov famously taught: *Mitzvah gedolah l'hiyot b'simcha tamid.* It is a great mitzvah to live with joy. But the converse is also true: living a life of mitzvot—of commandments, Jewish actions, and good deeds—brings us great joy. Rebbe Nachman did not teach joy because he lived in an easy Jewish world. He knew Jewish suffering. And still, he taught that joy is something we must work at and cultivate. Joy is not denial. Joy is resistance. And it is where we need to live.

And so, this year, let us create more joy here on Nassau Street. Joy in services—and in service to others. Joy in Doing Jewish, in Being Jewish. Joy in soulful study and song-filled prayer. Joy around a Shabbat table. Joy in debating Torah. Joy in children running through our hallways—and through our sanctuary. Joy in showing up for one another.

Let us define ourselves through our covenantal connection with one another, and with God. This holiday, or this week, choose to add one more positive Jewish activity to your life this year; it is how we resist antisemitism. Join us for our festive Friday eve service; come Saturday to shul, or just for lunch. Host more Shabbat meals; get involved here. We build Jewish identity around community, Shabbat, holidays, study, and helping those in need. Around arguing with God and each other. Around blessing ordinary moments. Around creating *kedushah*—holiness. **These are Judaism's great acts of spiritual resistance.**

The third thing we must do in this moment in history is to know and tell our own story. Dara Horn has a new book called *The Final Solution to the Jewish Question: A Love Story for the Living.* She's daring us to flinch — but read her argument underneath it. Her argument is that we have become far too good at teaching the world—and sometimes ourselves—how Jews have died, and not nearly good enough at teaching what Jews have lived for, what we have created, how we have thrived. First, we educate ourselves—and the wider world—about the richness and creativity of Jewish civilization, not only its history of persecution. This year our 7th graders, and others, will begin a new curriculum called *The Tell*, which Horn and her team wrote to tell the inspiring story of Jewish civilization.

And then we must reach others to encounter our story through us. Every person in this room is an ambassador for the Jewish people. In your work, your civic life, at a neighborhood gathering or a PTO meeting, you have the power to create allies for the Jewish people—not primarily through arguments, but through relationships.

A few summers ago, the Jewish Center's Interfaith Refugee Resettlement Committee invited many of the immigrant families it had helped in recent years to join us at a synagogue service that celebrated the accomplishments of these new immigrants. These people were from Afghanistan and Ukraine. Muslims, Christians, and Jews. I cried as they spoke about their love for the people who had welcomed them, brought them food, helped them find housing, and guided them through a bewildering new world. Those families are now our allies. They did not learn about Jews from TikTok.They learned about Jews from Jews. From people who showed up and welcomed them. That is how allies are made. Not through slogans, but through relationships.

Our history is full of rocks and hard places. But we can choose to continue to create beautiful Jewish life. We can protect ourselves without allowing fear to rule us. We can feel our anger without letting it harden us. We can raise our children on a Judaism shaped not only by what has been done to us, but by what we have created. We can fill this synagogue and our lives with Joy, from Torah and prayer, music and service, friendship, laughter, and hesed-service to others. And we can help others know us—not as symbols, not as projections, not as villains in someone else's story—but as human beings. As Jews. The challenges before us are real. But so is our power to create something luminous, like a pearl, from it. *Hayom harat olam.* Today the world is reborn for a new and better year. A year of our agency. May this be the year we protect Jewish life and deepen Jewish living. May this be the year we refuse merely to survive—and choose, with courage and joy, to live fully as Jews.