

From the Rabbi's Desk
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We Are the Choosing People!
D'var Torah for the Second Morning of Rosh Hashanah
(A d'var Torah I wrote, but ultimately didn't share on Rosh Hashanah)
5787



This classic piece of dark Jewish humor comes from pre-war Germany.

Two Jewish men are sitting on a park bench in Berlin. One of them is reading the local Jewish community paper, and the other is engrossed in Der Stürmer, the virulently antisemitic Nazi propaganda tabloid.

Appalled, the first man turns to his friend and asks, "How can you bear to read that filthy Nazi rag? Why would you read such evil stuff?"

The second man lowers the paper, smiles, and replies:

"When I read the Jewish papers, all I read about are troubles, pogroms, discrimination, and hardships. But when I read [Der Stürmer], I find wonderful news! According to this paper, we Jews own all the banks, control the media, and are about to take over the entire world!"¹

I used to find the joke amusing, but now it is very close to home. If you replace *Der Stürmer* for social media and a park bench in Berlin with any physical or virtual location where Jews gather to discuss the latest antisemitic meme, the similarities are striking and frightening.

If you are familiar with author Dara Horn, you will know that the author has a unique approach when choosing titles for her books. Her first non-fiction book, *People Love Dead Jews: Reports from a Haunted Present*, was fascinating and thought provoking;

¹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/03/the-2-000-year-old-panic/306640>

and her latest book, *The Final Solution to the Jewish Question: A Love Story for the Living*, is as fascinating and thought provoking as the first one.

The book, as you probably already guessed, doesn't wish to enlighten the antisemite (Dara Horn elaborates on how the modern anti-Zionist movement is a new iteration of the 2,000-year-old antisemitism). The book also doesn't aim to sway the opinion of the Jews who characterize Zionism as a genocidal movement that operates as a settler-colonial project. The author reminds the reader that throughout history many Jews left the fold and that our time won't be the exception.

Apropos of this last point, a few days ago, protesters outside Madison Square Garden targeted Brad Lander, the Jewish progressive Democratic candidate for the US House of Representatives, with insults. He was accused of being "another paid Zionist" and was told to "get out of here." Brad Lander was also called other things, which I don't dare to repeat in this holy place. A person with a modicum of pride and self-esteem would have realized immediately that he has been standing on the wrong side of the street, and perhaps on the wrong side of history. Instead, Brad Lander attempted to appease his attackers and to explain to the people who were furiously insulting him that he had come to join their cause. Unbelievable, but true. In any event, Dara Horn doesn't expect Brad Landers to buy her new book.

Dara Horn's new book was written mainly for the perplexed Jews (most of us?) and acts as both a diagnosis of current societal failures and a prescription for the future. It asks basically two questions: 1) How did we get there? 2) What can we do now?

The author diagnoses the failures and shortcomings in the current teaching of the Holocaust, examines the long history behind the antizionist movement, explores the compromises made by Jewish leaders during the American Jewish "Golden Age" (which is now coming to an end), and investigates organized efforts to poison artificial intelligence systems with anti-Jewish propaganda.

As a prescription for the future, the author emphasizes a focus on vibrant, living Jewish life rather than just focusing on Jewish death and tragedies and proposes a new path rooted in responsibility and freedom to build a shared future. ²

But first we need to acknowledge that our community is being silenced and that we are facing a very powerful lie. We are also experiencing how much courage it takes to resist this lie when everyone around you believes it's true.

However—and again, I am making Dara Horn's words mine—that *courage and resilience is what the Jewish people have always carried with them. I want you to think about this*, says the author: *every Jew alive today, every Jew here, every Jew that you know, is a descendant of people who made that brave countercultural choice. Because guess what? In every generation, most Jews didn't stay Jewish. Throughout many generations, numerous Jews decided to disappear and blend into the surrounding population. After the destruction of the Temple, we tell ourselves this story about Yochanan ben Zakkai and rebuilding in Yavneh. Most Jews didn't come along for that. Most Jews, after the destruction of the Temple, didn't stay Jewish. Being Jewish was not popular. Just consider sticking with a people persecuted, without a temple, and exiled from their land. Staying Jewish was a brave countercultural choice.*

We are still living in that brave countercultural choice. This is the same tiny group of people who spent thousands of years refusing to disappear into empires, like all other ancient groups did... This is the same people who refused to assimilate into supposedly universalist societies that have conquered most of the world: Babylonians, Greeks, Romans, Christians, Muslims, Soviets, and today's Islamist empire in all but name. These are all tyrannical societies that have executed their dissidents and emptied themselves of Jews. This has been true for all the empires that have tried to conquer the Jewish people. It is still true today; it is what we are facing today.

The 20th-century historian Salo Baron famously argued against the lachrymose view of Jewish history, which is a litany of horror. His point was that we should focus on moments of Jewish flourishing instead. There's a different reason to step away from

² <https://www.darahorn.com/book/the-final-solution-to-the-jewish-question>

the lachrymose view of Jewish history: it's our least special characteristic. The negative things that the Jewish people had experienced: exile, enslavement, displacement, ethnic cleansing, persecution, and genocides—these things are not special. There isn't a group in human history that hasn't been through these things. What is unusual and extraordinary about the Jewish people is that the Jews are still here. It is the resilience of the Jewish community in surviving them.

These are conscious choices that made such survival possible. Conscious choices that Jews made over thousands of years to maintain this countercultural civilization against dominant societies that tried to denigrate or destroy it.

We often think of ourselves as the chosen people. We are actually the choosing people. There is nothing organic about maintaining a counterculture over thousands of years when you're surrounded by people applying every possible pressure to make you stop. There are a lot of those choices: literacy, community, and memory, among others. As our relatives and friends in Israel know, it takes tremendous courage to stand up to physical pressure, and as all of us know, it takes tremendous courage to stand up to psychological pressure.³

Now, I have news for you: our mayor is doing what he said he will do (I mean, we don't have free buses or free supermarkets yet, but when it comes to Israel and the Jewish people, he has been very consistent). The Babylonians, the Greeks, the Romans, and the Nazis did what they said they would do. Those who wish to see us gone are doing their homework, 24 hours a day, non-stop. We are not going to change them; we are not going to educate them, and I personally suggest we stop trying. We must denounce them as well as form alliances with those who are willing to stand with us.

But most importantly, we must do what we have been doing for the last 4000 years: keeping Judaism alive, refusing to blend, living a life of Torah and mitzvot. Without committed Jews we won't have anyone to fight the Mamdanis of the world!

Let me conclude with a few lines I shared with you a couple of months ago:

³ Dara Horn shared this inspiring message with members of the Rabbinical Assembly.

We are living in extremely challenging times. And yet, acts of antisemitism and anti-Zionism present us with opportunities to actively engage in the fight against them. Strengthening our Jewish and Zionist identities, increasing our Torah observance, traveling to Israel, displaying Israeli flags, and wearing a kippah on the street (even if you don't call yourself a religious Jew) should be seen today as true acts of resistance.

Indeed, we are living in challenging times, but we can transform them into historic times as well. We must do what the hour demands from us, so when our children and grandchildren and the younger generations ask us, "Where were you when the antisemites chanted, 'We need to make them scared!'" we could answer with our heads high: I was standing tall, with my kippah and my Israeli flag, on the other side of the street.

May Hashem bless all of you and your loved ones with a good and sweet year.