You Will be Defined. The Question Is: By Whom?

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I grew up in Tampa, Florida. It is a wonderful place. I was raised in a secular family with a strong sense of Jewish identity, but I did not understand what that identity meant or why being Jewish was something distinct. From a young age, my public-school classmates told me, “You’re not white. You’re Jewish.” I didn’t quite grasp this. It created a sense of otherness, but it also felt like something special, even precious. While I thought I looked like most of my classmates, they saw something else. There were not many of us Jewish students, and we were all told the same thing, very matter of factly. It was simply accepted, along with whatever difference it meant to be Jewish.

As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks observed, if you do not define your identity, others will define it for you and not always kindly. My experience at the time was benign and I did not yet appreciate what being Jewish meant, but the world had already begun to tell me.

Before I came to understand Judaism, I came to antisemitism. I learned how Jews were seen long before I understood who Jews were. That is not a stable way to build identity. It would be many years before I began to internalize what it means to be Jewish and observe our practices. I remember hearing phrases like “Jewish values,” but I did not know what those values were. I was fortunate to have strong history teachers, and we learned about World War II and the Holocaust, but I had no real sense of the thousands of years that came before. Years later, I encountered Tanakh, tefillot, and mitzvot, along with the teachings of Rabbi Sacks and other giants. I began to see the difference between an identity shaped by others’ hatred and one rooted in knowledge, practice, a tradition of strength, and most importantly a connection with HaShem.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks warned that Jews would be defined by others whether they chose it or not. This has been the pattern for centuries. Antisemitism has taken many forms, a dynamic hatred that adapts to the weaknesses of each society in which it takes hold. The writer Vasily Grossman, who witnessed both Nazi and Soviet brutality, understood something essential about antisemitism. It is not simply hatred of Jews. It reveals something about the society that produces it and the individuals who perpetuate it.

It often presents itself in acceptable, even noble terms, cloaking hostility in the language of morality, whether as opposition to a religion, a race, or, as we see today, a country in the popular form of anti-Zionism. It is all too easy for a sacred religious identity to become defined in response to hatred, rather than grounded in its own inheritance. When those who hate you define you, the result is an unstable and uncertain identity. It pulls you away from the stable foundation laid millennia before and fills the space of faith and practice.

I thought I could recognize propaganda. I thought it was something obvious, something you could spot and reject. But over time I came to see that it is often far more subtle. It does not always announce itself. It adapts. It shifts language. And when it comes to Jews, it has done this for centuries. Antisemitism has followed a familiar pattern throughout history. Whatever a society fears or resents, Jews are blamed. This is why the accusations can be contradictory. Jews are cast as outsiders and, at the same time, as wielding hidden influence. Too weak and too powerful. The claims do not need to make sense. They only need to serve a purpose. When identity is shaped in response to those claims, it becomes unstable and uncertain, dependent on those who deny your place and, at times, your right to exist. The contradictions do not cancel each other out. They coexist. That is part of the point. I experienced this firsthand recently.

I ran for the Teaneck Board of Education this past fall. It was an all-consuming experience for myself and my family. My running mate and I ran on a platform of accountability, community, and excellence and we ran a campaign of integrity. We expected a tough race. What we did not expect was the level of personal attack. There were six candidates. I was the only one identified by religion. I was labeled a “Jewish activist.” While I don’t object to the term, it was not how I would describe myself. More importantly, it immediately marked me as different. Throughout the campaign, I encountered a familiar contradiction: I was cast simultaneously as an outsider and as someone connected to powerful groups exercising insider control. My running mate, who is not Jewish, was also targeted. He was portrayed as having compromised himself by aligning with the Jews.

This is part of the power of antisemitism. Some dismiss it as politics, a dirty sport if there ever was one. But these attacks went beyond policy or disagreement. They became personal and drew on popular tropes. On election day, a box truck drove through town with a large screen displaying the message “Stop the non-public school takeover.” The message reduced complex public issues to a simple threat and the messaging was effective. I did not win, though the race was close. My running mate came even closer. I accept the result. What I do not accept are methods that moved beyond policy and into something more personal and troubling.

The challenges we face today are new in form but familiar in substance. The language and setting change, but the pattern remains. A grounded Jewish identity, shaped by our sacred texts, faith, practices, and history, and strengthened by our families and communities, provides stability where none exists in the accusations of others. It is not a shield against hatred, but it allows us to withstand it without being defined or destroyed by it. That kind of identity does not emerge on its own. It must be taught, learned, and lived. It is the responsibility of each individual to embody it with gratitude and strength, of parents to teach it to their children, and of each generation to pass it on.