

Rabbi Stoller's sermon below addresses the topic of antisemitism. Since the time he gave this sermon, there have been more developments pertaining to this issue. On Saturday, local law enforcement made two arrests in connection with a credible threat against a synagogue in New York City. On Sunday morning, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) gave a presentation at Temple Beth-El about rising antisemitism in the New York area and around the country. This is a serious issue that demands our concern and vigilance. To get involved in TBE's partnership with the ADL, please contact our members Ellen Meyerson at emeyerson1@gmail.com or Nina Koppelman at ninakoppelman@gmail.com.

**How Easily We Laugh
On Dave Chappelle and the Alienation of American Jews—5783
Rabbi Brian Stoller
November 18, 2022**

I'd like to talk tonight about Dave Chappelle.

I've had more conversations this week about his monologue than anything else in a long time. Everyone wants to talk about it.

The first time I watched it, I thought it was hilarious.

It's not that I didn't hear what he said about, "The Jews." I did; I just thought it was lighthearted and funny. It sounded to me almost like he was a fellow Jew poking fun at his own community.

That's a testament, really, to how skilled Chappelle is as a comedian.

My friends all pretty much agreed with me: edgy but funny; walking right up to the line without crossing it; making fun of Jews just like he makes fun of other groups in American society.

But then I had lunch with a colleague the other day, and he had a very different view of it.

He thought Chappelle's comments were horribly antisemitic. He couldn't believe Saturday Night Live had knowingly allowed Chappelle to do that.

In his opinion, the worst part was that, by suggesting that you can't say anything negative about Jews without them coming back and destroying you, Chappelle set it up so that when the backlash to antisemitism inevitably came his way, he could say, "See, I told you so"—and that would only reinforce the antisemitic slurs he was putting out there.

I was kind of skeptical.

After all, comedians play a certain role in social discourse. Aren't they supposed to make fun of the people you're not supposed to make fun of, and point out hypocrisies in accepted social norms—like Chappelle did when he said, "If it's black people, it's a gang; if it's Italians, it's a mob; but if it's Jews, it's a coincidence, and you can't say anything about it"?

I mean, that's kind of poignant, right? It made me laugh, anyway.

It made me think about something that happened to me in my first couple weeks on the job as deputy press secretary for Sen. Fitzgerald in 1999.

Back then, you might remember, the politicians used to talk about what they called a “Social Security lock box.”

Well, one day I wrote a press release announcing that my senator supported that. But my press release had a typo in it that I totally missed before I sent it out.

I meant for the headline to say, “Fitzgerald Calls for Social Security Lock Box.” But instead, it said, “Fitzgerald calls for Social Security Lox Box.”

Literally within minutes, a call came in for me. It was the ADL.

The guy asked me, “Is Sen. Fitzgerald antisemitic?”

“No! What?” I said.

“Your office just sent out a press release calling for a Social Security ‘Lox Box.’ We think he was making fun of Jewish people.”

I tried to explain that it was a typo; that I had written the press release, and I’m Jewish!

Then, a reporter for one of the Chicago newspapers—who also happens to be Jewish (and is now a friend)—called me and told me she was going to write a story about the Lox Box incident.

I was terrified. Here I was on the job for just a couple weeks, and I thought I was going to be fired for sure.

So, I went to her office and literally pleaded with her not to write the story. Thankfully, she showed mercy on me.

I tell this story because, well, Chappelle’s observation, at least on one level, is not inaccurate: We Jews are hypervigilant about antisemitism—sometimes even to the point of absurdity. And that’s kind of funny.

But, of course, we have good reasons for being that way.

I don’t need to tell you how dangerous that trope is, that quote: “The Jews control bank, the entertainment industry, governments, the world.”

You probably know it comes from a fake book called The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, which the Russian tsarist government fabricated in the late-19th century to incite people against Jews and justify its policy of state-sponsored pogroms.

The Protocols purports to be the transcript of a secret convention in which we—quote, “The Jews”—supposedly formulated our plan for world domination.

Even today, the themes of this outright-debunked book are seized upon by antisemites to stir up resentment against Jews.

The image of the Jew as the shadowy puppet master, pulling the strings controlling world leaders, has appeared again and again throughout history.

Just within the last few years, a widely published political cartoon depicted then-President Donald Trump as a dog being led around on a leash by Benjamin Netanyahu.

And, of course, Hitler conjured this trope in an infamous speech to the Reichstag in January 1939, when he said: “If the international Jewish financiers...should succeed in plunging the nations once more into a world war, then the result will not be the Bolshevization of the earth, and thus the victory of Jewry, but the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe!”¹

People who say Dave Chappelle was just making fun of Jews the same way he makes fun of other groups in society may be right on one level, but they’re very wrong on another.

He wasn’t poking fun at us for, say, having big noses, or throwing flashy bar mitzvah parties, or for pursuing prestigious careers.

He was, in a joking way, repeating an age-old libelous allegation that, quote: “The Jews” control the levers of power—in this case, in Hollywood—and use their power to oppress others.

A claim that, over the course of centuries, has led not to good-natured laughs but to the persecution and slaughter of millions of Jews.

That’s a big difference. And it makes all the difference.

I don’t know what Chappelle’s intentions were. Maybe, to give him the benefit of the doubt, he didn’t mean to be antisemitic.

But in this environment where antisemitism has gotten so bad and so prevalent, his routine could not have been helpful. In fact, it could fuel the fire.

Maybe, some listeners will think, the Jews do control everything. Maybe that’s why I’m out of a job, why I can’t get a loan, why I’m poor and can’t feed my family.

Some people need that, psychologically. They need to blame someone else, especially someone who seems to be more powerful than they are. Someone they can feel both targeted by and superior to at the same time.

As the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre put it, “If the Jew did not exist, the anti-Semite would invent him.”

Chappelle's monologue was no legitimate social critique. You can only critique something that's real. Otherwise, it's just lies.

It may be funny, but it's no laughing matter.

Which begs the question: Why did I laugh? Why did so many of us laugh?

It can't just be because of how he said it. We're too smart for that.

I have a theory—and it's only a theory. I'm open to being challenged on it.

It's based on an insight I gained from this week's parashah.

When Sarah dies, Abraham goes to the local inhabitants and asks to buy a cave from them, so he can bury her in it.

Rashi wonders: Why does Abraham offer to buy the cave?

After all, he was in the land that God had just said was his. He belonged there. He could bury Sarah in a cave in his own land, if he wanted.

But Abraham took a different approach. He said to the locals: "I am a resident alien among you. Please sell me a burial site so that I may bury my wife there." (Gen. 23:4)

See, Abraham understood that even though he did, by rights, belong there, the local folks didn't necessarily see it that way.

And, sadly, this may be the condition of the Jewish people even today, here in America: belonging, but perhaps not fully; citizens by law, but somehow still resident aliens.

I know, it sounds paranoid.

There is and has been no place for Jews like the United States. We enjoy freedom and acceptance in this country to a degree that is unprecedented in Jewish history.

And, yet, antisemitism is rising.

My friend, who's a Christian pastor in Montgomery County, Maryland, right outside DC, told me that just this past weekend—the day after Dave Chappelle gave his monologue—a local walking path was spray-painted with images of three figures hanging and the words "Jews deserve no mercy."

And this was the second time in three months that this same area has been vandalized with antisemitic graffiti.

But because of our widespread acceptance in this country, we American Jews have become alienated from our own history—and even our own present.

Especially as we've gone down the generations from the first-generation Jewish immigrants, our identity has shifted from "Jew" to "American."

I'm not suggesting that's a bad thing per se. In fact, it's the goal many of our parents and grandparents and great-grandparents hoped for and worked toward.

But an unintended result of it is that when we hear someone like Dave Chappelle talk about "The Jews" controlling things, we have two unconscious responses:

One: We don't know the horrible history of the puppet-master trope enough to be fazed by it.

And two: Like most Americans, we think of "The Jews" as some abstract and shady-sounding group of people who, even if they do exist, are definitely not us. So, whatever it is he's saying "The Jews" do, he's not talking about us anyway.

Which makes it easy to laugh.

This theory has played out for me in conversations I've had during the last week.

I've noticed that my friends who are older tend to think Chappelle's routine was definitely antisemitic and not funny at all.

People my age seem to be mixed on it: Some found it offensive, while others think it was funny and edgy social commentary.

But people I've talked to who are Gen Z and younger do not seem to be offended by it at all.

In fact, I showed the monologue to our seventh graders the other night hoping it would stimulate an interesting back-and-forth, but none of them even blinked at it.

Actually, the only thing they took issue with was that Chappelle used the N-word.

Which to me puts a fine point on the shift in American Jewish identity:

To our minds, we are fully American, in every way. Together, with the rest of the American tapestry, we are all "us."

But to the minds of some others, we are "The Jews": resident aliens who will never be part of that "us." In their eyes, we will always be a "them" that doesn't belong here.

This Sunday at 10 a.m., we will be hosting a speaker from the ADL who will talk about rising antisemitism and extremism in the New York area.

I hope you'll come and listen to this important presentation and get involved however you can.

I want to thank our members Nina Koppelman and Ellen Meyerson, and Joy Allen from our team, for working to put this program together.

The truth is, though, it's not only the extremists who we should be concerned about.

My pastor friend, a progressive Christian who is a great ally of the Jewish people, told me that people he knows come to him all the time asking about Jewish influence in Hollywood. That surprised me.

And now, a prominent mainstream comedian is talking about it on SNL.

We laugh so easily.

But it's no joke.