

“Time to Go to the King”: Reflections on the ADL “Never Is Now” Summit

Rabbi Brian Stoller

Parashat Vayakhel 5784 / March 8, 2024

This week’s parashah begins with the phrase “*vayakhel Moshe et kol adat b’nai yisrael*,” which means: “Moses gathered the entire Jewish community together.” (Ex. 35:1)

It’s apropos because on Wednesday and Thursday of this week, Jews from all over the country gathered at the Javits Center in Manhattan for the ADL’s “Never Is Now” Summit. I had the privilege of attending, along with eight other members of our congregation.

This is an annual conference about antisemitism, but this year, of course, was different. There was a special sense of urgency; you could feel it in the way the participants and the presenters alike carried themselves and talked about the state of antisemitism in our country today.

It was similar to the energy in the Temple Israel sanctuary last Sunday at the Great Neck Rabbinic Dialogue. We American Jews have always taken antisemitism seriously, but right now it feels more real, more pressing, closer to home than usual.

The keynote speaker on Wednesday afternoon was Dara Horn, the author of the influential book *People Love Dead Jews*.

Horn is an excellent writer, so it’s no surprise that her speech included some well-crafted lines.

At one point, noting that we’ll be celebrating the holiday of Purim in a couple weeks, she likened our present situation to the events recounted in the *Book of Esther*, when the Jews of Persia faced annihilation by Haman and his Jew-hating mob. Like the Jews back then, Horn said, we American Jews are imperiled by the spike in Jew-hatred since October 7.

“This is our Queen Esther moment,” she said. “Now is the time to go to the king.”

In case you don’t recall the details of the Purim story, Horn was referring to the pivotal moment when Mordechai, having learned about Haman’s evil plot against the Jews, prevailed upon his reluctant niece Esther—the Persian queen who was also a closeted Jew—to intervene with her husband King Achashverosh to save her people from destruction.

Mordechai says to Esther in the megillah’s most famous line: “Who knows? Maybe you have come into your royal position for just such a crisis.” (Est. 4:14)

On the simplest level, he seems to mean, “Who would’ve ever thought a humble Jewish girl from the city would become the queen of Persia? It must be because God knew we would need you to save us!”

On a deeper level, the classical commentators sense a certain urgency in Mordechai’s plea, rooted in anxiety—anxiety about the fragile state of Jews in the Persian Empire.

As though he was saying, “The condition of our people here is reasonably secure right now, but who knows if things will stay that way? Maybe this time next year, it won’t be so good. Maybe it will be much worse.”¹

“And by the way: remember Vashti? She was in the king’s good graces—until she wasn’t. So don’t wait. Go to the king *now*, while you still can.”²

Horn’s message made me think back to 2018 and the American public’s response to the Tree of Life synagogue massacre.

I was in Omaha then, and I remember being so heartened by how many non-Jewish community leaders and elected officials came out to stand with our Jewish community as we mourned this tragedy.

Here’s what I said at the community vigil for the victims:

“Today, all of you—Christians, Muslims, people of all faiths, secular citizens, our public officials, and civic leaders—are coming together, standing here and in so many places throughout our country to mourn *with* us, and show your *love* for us, and your *friendship* with us.

“We thank you for raising your voices together with ours to say, ‘This is not acceptable in the United States of America! The assault and murder of Jews will not be tolerated in our country!’

“Antisemitism has been with us for as long as there have been Jews. But the unified voice of our fellow citizens condemning antisemitism outright; and the compassion and love and solidarity and genuine concern you are showing to our community—this is unprecedented. And it is a blessing.”

When I look back on these words, I’m just not sure if we can still say the same thing today, in 2024, in post-October 7 America.

I have heard so many of my rabbinic colleagues talk about how their longtime friends and partners in interfaith work have kept their distance since October 7. Some communities and organizations that have been our allies have turned away from us, even against us. It even feels like the Jewish community’s standing amongst some government officials has begun to erode. Maybe it’s only on the margins right now, but the breakdown of the strong bipartisan consensus for Israel and Jewish communal interests feels more acute and more public than ever.

Don’t get me wrong: I believe our position vis-à-vis the government remains generally strong. But reading the current state of things through the lens of the Esther story, we might have good reason to wonder whether we’ll be able to say that at this time next year—or five years from now.

Maybe Dara Horn is right—that *now* is the time to go to the king, while we still can.

This is certainly the message I got from being at the ADL summit this week.

The Hebrew word for king is *melekh*, and the word for kingdom is *malkhut*. In *halakhic* terminology, the word *malkhut* is sometimes used as shorthand to refer to the civil and criminal law of the state.

So, to “go to the king” doesn’t just mean to physically approach the ruler; it also has the sense of turning to the law to address your grievances.

And indeed, something I noticed at the ADL conference was an emphasis on what is sometimes termed “lawfare”—meaning: using the law as a tool to fight antisemitism.

- One session I attended focused on strategies lawyers are using to overcome immunity provisions so as to make social media companies legally liable for anti-Jewish content being disseminated on their platforms.
- Another session featured government officials talking about the Biden administration’s strategy to combat antisemitism, which includes using the executive branch’s regulatory powers to curb anti-Jewish practices in private commerce.

For example, one thing I found interesting is that one of the agencies most actively involved in this is the U.S. Department of Agriculture, because they have jurisdiction over things like ensuring access to kosher food.

- The attorney general, Merrick Garland, also spoke about how the Justice Department is working to prosecute anti-Jewish crime.

I found it fascinating that at least one of the sessions I attended was being offered for CLE—or Continuing Legal Education—credit. Very much at the center of this communal gathering was learning how to use the law as a practical tool to fight antisemitism.

In this way, the conference openly embraced an approach that the legal theorist Brian Tamanaha describes as “law as a means to an end.”³

To me, the message was that trying to educate people not to be antisemitic may be noble, but it’s not sufficient. ...

That perhaps the best way for Jews to be effective against our enemies in the post-October 7 world is to become savvy and adept in the law if we can, or to support those who *are* in figuring out how to wage this war against modern-day Hamans in the Congress and the courtrooms—because these may be the most important battlefields of all.

To learn more about how to help, I encourage you to visit the ADL’s [website, adl.org](https://www.adl.org). TBE is part of the ADL’s synagogue initiative, and I’d love to see more of us get involved in the ADL’s important work.

Our congregants Ellen Meyerson and Nina Koppelman work together to lead our ADL efforts, so if you'd like to get involved, you can speak with either one of them. Or talk to me and I'll be happy to make an introduction.

For many years, the American Jewish community has enjoyed significant goodwill from the American public and strong support from the government. That's because, as the prominent American Reform Rabbi Israel Bettan once put it, "In Judaism, devotion to the welfare of the country in which one lives has long assumed the character of a religious duty."⁴

We have shown this religious dedication to the United States of America, and we have been embraced for it.

But, as Bob Dylan famously said, "The times, they are a-changin'." Our position, I think, is still quite strong, but who knows what the future will bring?

Maybe that's an overstatement. Maybe it's not.

But in any case, the good news is that, unlike our pre-Enlightenment ancestors who were permitted to live in various countries only at the pleasure of the king, we no longer have to "submit to submission, accept it, [and] make the best of it,"⁵ as the Jewish political historian Michael Walzer put it.

To quote the Jewish Instagram celeb Montana Tucker, who spoke at the ADL summit, "Everyone in this room is a powerful Jew."

We don't have to give in to this antisemitism. We can use our voices, our relationships, our influence with those in power, and our deep knowledge of and involvement with the law to *do* something about it.

"This is our Queen Esther moment. Now is the time to go to the king."

1 M. *Shekalim*, ch. 1

2 *Ibid.*, ch. 2

3 *Ibid.*, 5:2

4 Tosefta, *Shekalim* (Lieberman) 2:15

5 Rabbi Robert I. Kahn, "The Faithful Shepherd," sermon delivered to the HUC-JIR ordination class of 1960.