

One of my favorite holidays is Passover. It is also one of the most widely celebrated holidays, even by Jews who aren't particularly observant, who may consider themselves pretty secular.

What is it about Passover? It's not the easiest holiday to observe, it takes time, sometimes even travel, and the shopping and the cleaning...well, it's a lot!

Observing Passover isn't just one day, either. It's celebrated on two nights by most people I know, and often, additional Passover Seders are hosted by synagogues, by Brotherhood groups, Sisterhood groups, Community Seders, and more. And we remove certain foods from our home and eat matzah and use special Passover recipes during the eight days of Passover. Some observe just the seven days, including those who live in Israel.

But there's also the fun aspects of Passover – singing the Four Questions, getting together, telling the story of the Four Children, and yes, the four cups of wine!

There's also the telling our story – the required element – the *maggid*, the telling of the story of the Exodus.

At the beginning of the book of Exodus, a new Pharaoh reigns over Egypt who, the text tells us, “did not know Joseph.” We don't know what this really means – it's either he really didn't know Joseph – personally. It also can mean this Pharaoh didn't know that Joseph had served Egypt, and that he didn't know Joseph's people, the Israelites.

And then the Pharaoh speaks to his people what may be the earliest record of an antisemitic statement: “Look, the Israelite people are much too numerous for us. Let us deal shrewdly with them, so that they may not increase; otherwise in the event of war they may join our enemies in fighting against us and rise from the ground.”

The Haggadah recognized that Pharaoh's hatred of the Israelites was not unique. It tells us: “And not just one enemy has risen up against us to destroy us, to the contrary: in every generation, they rise up against us to destroy us.”

We in Ojai are not strangers to antisemitism. Most recently, sometime during the night of February 19<sup>th</sup> to the morning of February 20<sup>th</sup>, a pink peace sign in front of Fern Barishman's home on Ventura Street was defaced with a spray-painted backward swastika, an obscenity, and a racial epithet.

In the news this week, Meyers Leonard, a player with the NBA's Miami Heat said an antisemitic slur during a live stream while playing the Call of Duty video game.

I believe that our Torah text on Pharaoh's statement teaches us two major expressions of antisemitism.

The first is that Pharaoh was someone who "knew not Joseph." Sometimes people say things about others who they do not know. They just don't know them, and repeat something they've heard, and never really thought about. And they have no idea what their words mean, nor how damaging it can be.

The second is that Pharaoh was someone who looked upon the Israelites as "the other," and reacted with fear. People we do not know can scare us. We don't know what they're saying or doing, and we react fearfully. Pharaoh took that a step farther and issued an edict to deal shrewdly with them. His edict was out in the open – to kill the baby boys in order to reduce the numbers of the Israelites. This is an action of violence, which instilled fear and caused death, and further oppressed the enslaved Israelites.

The first expression of antisemitism, repeating words and phrases may come from just not knowing. It may also come from intentional hostility. The second expression is of intentional violence and damage to another person and/or their property.

The spray-painting of signs in front of Fern Barishman's home just a few weeks ago represents a hate crime, damage to property, a frightening, physical expression of antisemitism. The words of Meyers Leonard represent what I believe is a person who "knew not Joseph."

But within all this, I see much to be hopeful about.

In an open letter to Meyers Leonard, posted on Twitter, Julian Edelman, the New England Patriots wide receiver (yes, Jewish) wrote to Meyers Leonard:

*So we've never met, I hope we can one day soon. I'm sure you've been getting lots of criticism for what you said. Not trying to add to that, I just want to offer some perspective.*

*I get the sense that you didn't use that word out of hate, more out of ignorance. Most likely, you weren't trying to hurt anyone or even profile Jews in your comment. That's what makes it so destructive. When someone intends to be hateful, it's usually met with great resistance. Casual ignorance is harder to*

*combat and has greater reach, especially when you command great influence. Hate is like a virus. Even accidentally, it can rapidly spread.*

*I'm down in Miami fairly often. Let's do a Shabbat dinner with some friends I'll show you a fun time.*

*JE*

And this is not the first person who has spoken antisemitic words that Julian Edelman has reached out to. For this, I am hopeful.

Here in Ojai, two days after her sign was vandalized, Fern Barishman opened her front door to find a potted plant in a red container, with a gold heart decoration and two cards, signed by 33 people, including Ojai Mayor Betsy Stix, reading, in part: "Your Ojai neighbors love and support you!" The cards and gift were collected by Nicolette Walker-Itza of Ojai who reached out on social media to gather support for Barishman, to let her know she is loved. Her Facebook page is filled with loving, supportive comments. Chiany Dri of Ojai, an anti-racism educator, has been inspired to organize a group called Ojai For Justice, for people to document incidents of hate in the Ojai Valley and to stand together against it. For all who reached out in support of Fern, and those inspired to organize, I am hopeful.

I am hopeful. In "Anthem," Leonard Cohen wrote: "Ring the bells that still can ring, forget your perfect offering. There's a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in."

The world out there is far from perfect, but I am hopeful. There's a crack in everything, but that's how the light gets in. May the voices that rise in response to ignorance and hurt, injustice and pain, violence and fear bring light, healing, goodness, and hope to our world.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Lisa Bock