

Yitro 2021 Pharoah and the Power of Conspiracy Theories

Shabbat Shalom

Have you heard the one about how Jewish space lasers caused the California wildfires? A joke? Unfortunately not. I am talking about Thursday's Jerusalem Post report on a newly public 2018 Facebook post written by then future lawmaker and now Congressional Representative for Georgia, Marjorie Taylor Greene in which she blames California's wildfires on the Pacific Gas and Electric Company in conjunction with the Rothschilds — the Jewish family most prominently featured in anti-Semitic conspiracy theories for about two centuries. Apparently, according to Greene, "Rothschild Inc" started the fires using a space laser, and its goal was to clear the way for a high-speed rail project.ⁱ Greene has the distinction to be the first blatant QAnon supporter elected to Congress. Oy, how I wish it were a joke!

If you haven't been following the news, QAnon is an umbrella term for a variety of conspiracy theories with hundreds of thousands of followers,ⁱⁱ focused on a global cabal seeking to take over the world. Sound familiar?

As an identifiable minority, we Jews have been the butt and victims of conspiracy theories seemingly forever. There were some isolated pogroms, deadly mob attacks, on Jewish communities in the ancient world. But violence escalated as the Big Lie of Christianity upon which Christianity was canonized within Christian Scripture: we Jews are the agents of the Devil and do everything we can to undermine God's work, killing Jesus for starters. By the Middle Ages, the anti-Jewish conspiracy theories included the blood libel: that Jews slaughter Christian babies to use their blood in our rites, especially baking matza (an image evoked in current Q Anon theories of child molestation). Never mind the truth that we Jews don't even eat the blood of animals and hold all human life sacred. By the 19th Century, a Russian forgery called the Protocols of the Elders of Zion,

politicized anti-Jewish into a full blow anti-Semitic world conspiracy, claiming a Jewish cabal sought control over the world (evoked in the Rothchild laser conspiracy theory spread by Greene before her election but never renounced by her.)

Over the centuries, these conspiracy theories, resulted in the slaughter of entire communities, a much more brutal reality than the image we get in Fiddler on the Roof. If you think such violence cannot happen here, our Black neighbors know better, given deadly white vigilante attacks in 1908 in Springfield, Ill, 1921 in Tulsa Oklahoma and 1923 in Rosewood, Florida (if you have HBO you may be able to see the movie Rosewood about it). Conspiracy theories inspired the shooter at Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh a few years ago. We saw a small taste of how conspiracy theories can launch mob violence on Jan. 6 during the storming of the Capitol.

Why do I share this painful historical review with you on our holy Sabbath? Because Pharoah gives birth to the very first conspiracy theory and its

only antidote can be found in our Torah reading this morning in Parshat Yitro.

In the beginning of the book of Exodus Pharaoh spins the first Big Lie: no matter the Israelites have already lived peacefully in Egypt for generations, they are a danger because they WILL (not might but will) join forces with Egypt's enemies and overwhelm the Egyptians. The Egyptians buy his story and the plan to enslave us. No one asked discerning questions about where was proof of a credible threat. No one dared contest or protest this lie, for fear they would be committing literal or political suicide. Only the midwives refuse to acquiesce, though by subterfuge, citing derogatory tropes Pharaoh would approve of, about the Israelite women birthing quickly, that means like animals, to protect themselves when Pharaoh asks why they could not slaughter the male Israelite children.

These midwives are the first rescuers in history. At great risk they did what was right as individuals and small groups, when most around them either passively or actively went along. Only one nation, and only one national leader, stood up from the very

beginning, denying the legitimacy of the lie. In explaining how Denmark was able to save almost all its Jewish population, King Christian the tenth once explained that the key was never allowing the lie of Jews being different to get a foothold. The King, clergy, government, police, farmers, fishermen and busdrivers all took action immediately as a united nation in standing up against the lies that ferment hatred and violence.

This leads us to our Torah reading this morning. In parshat Yitro, the third of the ten commandments reads, as traditionally translated: Thou shalt not to take the Lord's name in vain (Exodus 20:7). I am sorry to break this to you: This third commandment does not refer to whether or not we should not say God's Hebrew name or put a hyphen in place of the o in the English word God.

The medieval commentator extraordinaire Rashi, basing himself on the Mishnah (Shevuot 29a): explains our 3rd commandment in this way: we are not to use God's name to make more

plausible something we know to be untrue, for example swearing about a stone pillar that it is made of gold. In other words, to swear to the truth of an obvious lie, a big lie, is a really, really big sin.

You'd think this should be obvious: how could anyone think a stone pillar is made of gold. But as we know from recent history: if you repeat a lie often enough more and more people will believe it. The only way to combat such lies, as the King of Denmark knew, is to confront them head on immediately and unambiguously. Otherwise, those lies will spread and grow and become the kind of Big Lies that damage the very fabric of human relationships and civil society, as we so learned this January.

Here is the lesson from our Torah reading this morning: The danger presented by twisting the truth is so insidious and dangerous to the kind of just and civil society God wants and commands us to create and sustain, that God placed as the THIRD commandment the commandment not to twist the truth, and certainly not to justify such lies as God's work or will!

My friends, we have our work cut out for us, for lies repeated are believed by people and when folks believe something it is hard to change their minds. Hard, but not impossible. It will take leaders and all of us rank and file from left to right to reject these conspiracy theories, the code words that hint at them, and the political leaders who trade in them, as the King of Denmark did at the threat to his life and the life of his family. It takes us being vigilant about what is taught in our schools and prepare our children to think critically and speak out when they see or hear something that sounds wrong.

And for our family and friends who have drunk the kool-aid and swallowed the lies: we can sustain a relationship of love that keeps the lines of communication open and allows us to slowly chip away at the false edifices of conspiracy theories that have redefined reality for them., by sharing our own fears and concerns and experiences. It is a slow process but a worthwhile one.

This is not easy work. But, to paraphrase Rabbi Tarphon, neither are we free to exempt ourselves from it. This is not about a Jewish space laser

conspiracy theory we see as a joke. It is about our future as an American Jewish community and the future of our nation and those around the world who look to us as a beacon of democracy, scientific inquiry, and civil society.

Shabbat shalom

<https://www.jpost.com/diaspora/jewish-space-lasers-funny-marjorie-taylors-antisemitism-is-real-657734>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.nytimes.com/article/what-is-qanon.html>