

Rabbi Benjamin David

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Good Advice from Private Epstein

If you remember, Eugene Morris Jerome wants only to survive the war and become a better writer. He does both in the end, and we learn to love him in the process, the reluctant star of *Biloxi Blues*.

Eugene, as you may also remember, is far from perfect. As entertaining as he is, as kind as he seems, Eugene is ultimately a bystander. We find him constantly on the side, making notes in his journal, watching everyone else, quietly scoring the actions of everyone around him.

There isn't an abundance of Jews in the universe that Neil Simon builds around 1940s Mississippi. It's essentially Eugene Jerome and his pal Arnold Epstein. And these two sad souls struggle in every imaginable way, with the heat and the grueling schedule, the physical tasks the commanding officer imposes on them, not to mention the brutal treatment they receive from the others in their unit. Oh do they struggle. And we struggle to watch.

We wish Eugene would put the pen down for a minute and stand up for himself just once and for his friend Arnold.

Arnold even says at one point: 'You have to get involved. You don't get involved enough, Eugene... You're a witness. You're always standing around watching what's happening. Scribbling in your book what other people do. You have to get in the middle of it. You have to take sides. Make a contribution to the fight.'

I remember watching the movie as a kid and again over the years.

Here now, on this night of such importance for us and our people, at this particular moment in history, so wrought and so exasperating, as I have the great honor of standing before you now, I will tell you that as much as I read about antisemitism, as much I think about the hate that exists in our world these days, as much as we are all so frustrated by the abounding prejudice all around us,

and as much as I survey our literature for guidance on how to respond to such searing levels of ignorance and bigotry, I wonder if anything offers as much direction as Arnold Epstein's words do.

You have to get in the middle of it. You have to take sides.

It's true. You just have to get in the middle of it.

I know that's so hard to do sometimes but you have to get in the middle of it.

Arnold Epstein would have us fend off all the discomfort that comes with standing up and saying finally 'enough is enough.'

Arnold Epstein would have us get off the sideline, stop watching from afar or minimizing the vitriol online, stop downplaying the misinformation on TikTok and Facebook, stop overlooking the microaggressions we hear at work or in the lunch room, the snide remarks and callous statements by politicians, the overt actions by school boards that seek to ban books about Anne Frank and Elie Wiesel, stop apologizing for the talking heads that coopt Holocaust imagery, stop excusing the comments made in so-called jest, the jokes that aren't funny, let alone the unfettered extremists who march with Nazi flags right here in the United States in 2023.

I think one of the reasons those boys in Mississippi had trouble standing up for their mini-Jewish community is because at their core they didn't believe in themselves or their sense of worth or the power of their own voice.

For me, so much of combatting antisemitism is connected fundamentally to being proud of yourself and proud of who you are, aware of how much mean to this people, aware of how much you mean to this community, proud of your Judaism, believing that your being a Jew is a blessing, that to be a part of this millennia-old people with millennia-old values bound to a millennia-old story is a good thing, that you will not stand idly by when in the presence of offensive speech or action because you believe in this people and see yourself as an essential and vital part of it.

That you'll get in the middle of it because any knock on the Jewish people or Jewish ideas is a wound to your very sense of self.

So let me tell you three stories:

It happened again. He walked out to his car and there, littered all around it, were pennies. Dozens of pennies. The pennies encircled his car and only his car. On each penny, when he crouched down to look, he saw that there was a tiny swastika drawn very carefully with a Sharpie. Like any teenager he was self-conscious to begin with and that was before these quiet acts of hate crime began. He looked around in haste, then started picking up each of the pennies, one by one, a horrible and humiliating act. As fast as he could he stuffed them in his pocket. No one else should have to see these or experience such ignorance. It wouldn't be the last time it happened. He knew that. Deflated and defeated he drove home, the pennies like a pain in his pocket and a gross reminder that Jewish life is not all simchas and sunshine.

Later, when in college, he went to the school library every week night. It was quiet, certainly quieter than the dorm. There he studied and read and worked on the essays due that week. He tended to sit in the same seat, surrounded by the same people. College life was frenetic and this small bit of predictability was like a balm to his nerves. Then one night he came to his familiar spot and put his bag down and started to unpack his things when he looked and saw, etched right into the desk, a giant swastika. Still self-conscious he looked around the library to see who was watching and who else could see it.

Not a coincidence, he thought, definitely not a coincidence, again feeling embarrassed and horrified. He found a new spot for the rest of the year.

Then, years later, as a dad and a husband he drove to work one day and right there where he parked every day there was a Nazi sticker with the words, 'we are everywhere.' He looked around, that same panicked, sickened feeling in his gut and he peeled away the sticker, with the same hands that years earlier had picked up the pennies from his high school parking lot.

Who is the 'he'? That was me of course. But it could have been you. Because we all know those feelings. We know them too well. Shame and horror and outrage and heartache. You have your stories too. Maybe you were one of the families that woke up with fliers on your lawn this week, fliers that blamed 9/11 on the Jews.

Maybe you've been insulted or mocked or beat up or belittled because you have the audacity to be Jewish. We all know the embarrassment and unnerving shock that comes with that gross reminder that you are a minority, you are different, and a long-hated and persecuted minority at that, the world's scapegoat once and again and not only during the Crusades a thousand years ago or in Medieval Europe or Nazi Germany but here, now, in the land of opportunity that our ancestors flocked to in search of life and liberty.

In truth we have found life and liberty here, even if we've encountered so much to stifle it.

Let's be clear: Outside of modern-day Israel, there has never been a land as accommodating to the Jewish people as this one. Here we are senators and movie makers and authors. We are baseball players and doctors and lawyers. And playwrights like the late Neil Simon. Here we are governors and college presidents and leading acts on Broadway. Here we pray and sing and celebrate in relative safety.

And yet... Yet... so many hide their Star of David. So many are less than eager to share their Ashkenazic last name. And yet... so many apply to college selectively. So many of us think carefully about where we will and will not travel.

Deborah Lipstadt notes that what sets antisemitism apart is that antisemites 'punch down and punch up simultaneously. They look down on Jews and see them as lesser beings... And they look up and see them as more powerful, as conniving and as a threat to the antisemite's wellbeing.'

In these terms it's a no-win situation. It defies reason and logic and turns us into things: a dollar bill, a crooked nose, a kippah and glasses, somehow an embodiment of the reason YOU are unhappy, YOU don't have the right job or the right house or the right life.

After Charlottesville, I believe that something changed. We felt it. Something buried deep in our DNA lit up, a slumbering, generations' old memory that had been jolted to life by torch-carrying men who cried out, 'the Jews will not replace us.' Defense mechanisms buried deep within came roaring to the surface, sparked by a profound and existential kind of fear that we felt – you felt – and maybe for the first time in your life. The America we knew for so long had changed.

'The Jews will not replace us.' You remember. The contempt. The rage that people finally unleashed. They were unabashed now. They said it out loud. These were not a few pennies strewn across a parking spot in South Jersey; this was the blare of a gathered mass, marching in unison to the beat of wide-eyed antisemitism.

I watched those images through tear-filled eyes. I watched those images as the grandson of Holocaust survivors. In their marching, in the shouting, I heard a faint echo of what my grandmother heard in Nuremburg, what my grandfather heard in Frankfurt. It was an echo, different time, yes, different place, yes, but the same appalling sentiment that these Jews are dangerous, problematic, not one of us. I sat before the TV and gaped at an America that teetered on an edge, so precarious and fragile that it could seemingly fall into the abyss that is Nazi Europe at any second.

I watched those images like you did and feared for my kids who would soon be wandering this world on their own, the loose sheen of protection we once assumed existed here in America maybe a myth after all. 'The Jews will not replace us,' was all I could hear.

Then came the Tree of Life massacre in Pittsburgh, which took the lives of 11 worshippers at Shabbat morning services. It became an awful morning of mourning. Then came a rabbi held hostage in Colleyville, Texas. Then came Kanye. And not long after him Kyrie. They too said it out loud. They were all saying it out loud now. And they used the medium that people use these days, social media and thus instantly reached an audience of millions.

Friends, the Jewish people need you to get in the middle of it. Listen to Arnold Epstein's cry. Hear him. To quote *Pirkei Avot*, one of our most enduring texts, '*im lo achshav aymatai?*' If not now, then when?

Maimonides would come along and say about this verse that we must choose to act in part so that we get in the habit of acting. Get in the middle of it, in other words. Get in the habit of getting in middle of it.

Another reason to get in the middle of it is so that our kids see us get in the middle of it. I was shy and unsure; I was every teenager and I too wondered if I would ever have the chutzpah, the moxie, to really love myself and my faith and my people effusively and thus stand up tall and proud for who I am as Jew, as a living breathing human being. I was a teenager like every other teenager and thus I wondered if I should be proud to be me, if I mattered, if myself, my ideas, my thinking, my own understanding of God and Torah and prayer and life and death and hope and faith and this giant complicated world... if any of it truly mattered.

I needed to learn that I mattered and I did learn that, from great rabbis and teachers and camp counselors and coaches.

Even now, for so many adults, I ask you: Can you find a way to recognize at last all that you bring to the world? Can you see it? Do you know that you matter? Do you know how much you mean to the Jewish people?

Before you spontaneously answer 'yes,' think about it.

Let me tell you today lest no one ever told you: Who you are is worth loving and worth cherishing. You have withstood so much and seen so much and overcome so much. You have wisdom and conviction in your veins. You are more courageous and more resilient than words could ever capture. You, my friend, are worth it. You are worthy and you are worth standing up for. We all are.

And absolutely that's my message to the teens and college kids here today, even if I know it's so hard to hear. Even if it feels totally awkward and beyond embarrassing.

You take all of what it means to be a kid today, all the stress and anguish and relentless grating together of all the pressure and now you add on the fact that there are people who target you precisely because in addition to being 11 or 14 or 17 or 19, in addition to being too tall or too short, in addition to not having the perfect skin or perfect hair or perfect grades or perfect house or perfect life or perfect clothes or the best fastball or the best serve or the best whatever you are also one of those terrible Jews who owns it all and controls everything.

If you experience some kind of hate, some kind of prejudice, and you're not willing to go to the principal or the teacher or the guidance counselor, if you're not ready to talk to your boss, if you're not ready to do that yet, come to me so I can help. I will tell you that I've done this often, very often, too often over the years and am ready to keep doing it.

And if you're not sure where you can be yourself, your own unique, imperfect self, then this is the place. KI is the place.

We have to get in the fight, you and me. If you don't want to quote Arnold Epstein, let's quote the Torah itself. In Deuteronomy, when referencing the mandate to return an object that does not belong to you, our holiest text uses this language: *'lo tuchal l'hitalem.*' You must not remain indifferent.

Or how about the prophet Isaiah, who said: 'Do not be silent. Lift up your voice.'

Last year, 60% of religious hate crimes in the U.S. were directed at Jews, even though we make up less than 2% of the U.S. population. 1 in 4 Jews experienced antisemitism last year.

Maybe you saw the Broadway sensation, *Parade*, which tells the story of Leo Frank, the Jewish man who was lynched in 1915 following the accusation that he had murdered a teenager girl in the basement of his pencil factory in Atlanta.

I read with interest an interview with one of the show's leads, Micaela Diamond, who plays Leo Frank's wife. She is a Jewish actress playing a Jewish character. She said:

'Working on this show night after night, I'm forced to confront another truth: Antisemites have never cared what kind of Jew you are, whether you attend synagogue or throw around Yiddish words... There is fear in acknowledging ourselves — Jewish people — as marginalized. But as Lucille learns through the course of the play, assimilating into the mainstream and hoping that will protect you isn't the answer.'

What she says is true of course. Antisemites — then and now — care little of your observance or appearance or profession. We can't pretend we Jews are different because we are so seemingly modern and evolved, that we're immune from the hate and hatemongering because we don't walk around with a black hat on our head or spend our days buried in a book. To the bigoted folks who live right here in our backyard none of that makes a difference.

The Nazis who protested *Parade* on the streets of New York, waving their swastika flags, the brutes who bullied Arnold Epstein in his barracks, the kids who tossed pennies around my car thirty years ago, they don't see the distinction we might try to make in half-hearted apology.

Antisemitism was alive in Atlanta at the start of the century as it was in Biloxi in the middle of the century as it is just about everywhere in 2023.

Whether you're a factory owner or a soldier in the army or a rabbi here outside of Philadelphia. Whether you're Leo Frank or Lucille Frank, whether you're Ann and Fred Strauss my grandparents of blessed memory, whether you're Micaela Diamond, whether you're Neil Simon, whether you're you or me or our kids or our parents who came here with nothing but verve, no matter your accent or your ideology or your politics or your last name or your understanding of God or Torah or Israel or Shabbat or any of it, whether you come to services every week or once a year, whatever your age, this is your fight.

This is your fight.

This is your story. This is your song. And you have to get in the middle of it.

Finally, let's say a word about politics. If nothing else, here's my challenge to you this year: Can you put your Judaism above your political party? Can you call out antisemitism loud and clear when you see it on the left and when you see it on the right? Will you join me in doing that?

Will you refuse to explain away bigotry no matter where it comes from?

Let's not just scribble in our book from the side. Join the fight. Join me in the fight. I know you will. Amen.