

WHY WE MUST SPEAK OUT

BY

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Thank you very much, Phil, and a special thanks to the Empire Club for giving me this singular opportunity to promote (and recruit for) a new, pointedly *non-Jewish* offensive against antisemitism. Good afternoon and thank you for coming.

I am here today because, in 2004, in what we are proud and prone to describe as “the most cosmopolitan nation on Earth,” reported incidents of antisemitism rose — or descended — to an all-time record of 857 for the year. And because it is time for Canadians of good will to stand up and cry: Enough!

I am here because I also perceive what Justice Minister Irwin Cotler perceived when he was still teaching at McGill University — that there is a virulent new kind of anti-Jewishness now infecting the planet, one “without parallel or precedent since the end of the Second World War.”

I am here because thoughtful and well-informed people are now forewarning of a “second Holocaust,” this time nuclear, set (of course) in the Middle East, and in the not-so-distant future.

I am here because I am energized by a single sentence in a recent book titled, forebodingly, *Those Who Forget the Past: The Question of Antisemitism*: “If antisemitism is to vanish from the Earth, it will be from the transformation of non-Jewish rather than Jewish peoples.”

I am here because my wife Elizabeth and I believe that in the end, this is a crisis that must be resolved by non-Jews.

That is why we founded FAST, short for Fighting Antisemitism Together, as one way of crying: Enough! And why we recruited an all-star cast of non-Jewish Canadian business leaders like Phil Orsino to the cause, and why I’ll be saying what I’ll be saying in the next 15 minutes or so — in great hopes of persuading the still not persuaded.

Before I truly launch in, however, I would like to recognize and thank those business leaders who so readily signed on with FAST, and who put their names and their companies’ names to the ad introducing FAST in mid-May.

Some of them, I'm delighted to see, have been able to join us for lunch today, while others have demonstrated their resolve and solidarity by purchasing corporate tables. The ad, they can tell you as well as I, has touched an amazing number of people, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, and generated an outpouring of heartfelt support. I also want to answer something that all of us are getting asked about FAST, which is why we have chosen to focus on one specific manifestation of intolerance when tragically there are so many others crying and vying for our attention.

While my remarks today are purely my own — Elizabeth would tackle the issue in her own distinctive voice, as would all other FAST supporters — I know I speak for the whole group when I say that we deplore intolerance in any and all of its manifestations, but also realize that the more well-defined and focused the target, the better the chances of having an impact.

We encourage all those who feel strongly to start up a version of FAST on their own — which, if asked, we will help along in whatever ways we can.

Meanwhile, I will get on with the story of how FAST came to be, and lay out, as best I can, the reasons why non-Jews must join the battle against what has been described, sadly but accurately, as the oldest and longest of hatreds.

FAST in its earliest efforts addresses itself to the young, in the form of a vow that if we can help it, not one more generation of Jewish children will grow up in fear of the people around them.

Elizabeth and I have been profoundly influenced by stories we've heard over the years from contemporary-and-older Jewish friends and colleagues, and the childhood fears they knew in the face and wake of the Holocaust...

...even here in pre-cosmopolitan Toronto, where being Jewish was reason enough to get beat up on the way to and back from school, along with torrents of verbal abuse that would make a psychopath cringe.

The other reason for an accent on the young is that if indeed we are to make antisemitism "vanish from the Earth," this seems like the place to start, reaching out with truth and reason to young, still-interpreting minds.

Thanks to the generosity of the supporters FAST has attracted thus far, our first educational project is a curriculum-based learning program called *Choose Your Voice*, which FAST is developing in close partnership with the Canadian Jewish Congress, Ontario Region, for use initially in Ontario schools. The DVD and learning guides address antisemitism in the broader context of bigotry — of which it almost surely provides history's most ancient example. Watch for the launch of *Choose Your Voice* this fall.

We realize that this initiative — and for that matter, any others that FAST may undertake — is unlikely to touch the hearts and minds of the real hard-core crowd, the ones who most likely learned their hatred at the parental knee.

But it could serve to further marginalize them, which sometimes is the best you can do when dealing with bullies and bigots.

How so?

First, by stripping them of their potential power base, the people who really don't know any better; and who, for whatever reasons, haven't sought out the truth for themselves.

Second, by going one step further and helping to encourage active opposition to the Jew-haters and racists and assorted other bigots and bullies the moment they start telling their despicable lies or making their ugly, pathetic (quote-marks) "jokes." We believe if the truth can make us free, it should also make us bold.

For a really good recent example of boldness in the face of vicious antisemitism, we can also look to the young — no further, in fact, than those four Grade 10 girls at Branksome Hall who stood up and were counted against a new anti-Jewish web site set up this spring, incredibly, by boys at another local private school.

The girls could have rationalized their discovery away, pretended it never happened or left it for unidentified others to deal with — human history, as we know, is waist-deep in willful ignoring — but instead they went directly to the authorities, notably their principal.

What she did was also exemplary, as were the actions taken by the principal of the boys' school after she brought this awful matter to his attention.

His response was swift, unequivocal and just: three were expelled and four more were suspended — the latter (as I understand it) for knowing what was going on but standing by and doing nothing.

Also on the positive side, both schools smartly turned the crisis into a major learning opportunity (for which it was sadly so perfectly suited), a pulling-out-all-the-stops effort which might include using *Choose Your Voice* in at least one of the schools next year.

Those of you who followed this story as it unfolded could not help but be further disturbed, I'm sure, to learn that one of the expelled boys was himself Jewish.

What are we to make of this? Nothing. Nothing beyond the simple sad fact of the utter *relentlessness* of antisemitism, and its uncanny (to me) ability to infect what, by all the odds, would be the most unlikely of souls.

How can it be that even now, in the 21st century, and in the face of repudiation by Pope John XXIII, Pope John Paul II and most of the world's other Christian leaders, there are still those who think "the Jews" should be punished for all eternity for the crucifixion?

How can it be that even now there are still people who believe in a Jewish plot to seize control of the world as spelled out in *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a 19th-century Russian forgery so blatant even a happy persecutor like Stalin stopped believing it?

How can it be that even now, despite evidence that gives new meaning to the word overwhelming, there are still people who refuse to acknowledge even the *reality* of the Holocaust, much less any lesson it might have to teach? (And oh, by the way, did you hear the one about how the Jews started the war?)

How can it be that in a country like ours, at an enlightened time like this, there are still people so *irrational* about Jews and Judaism, and so unswerving in their hatred, they would not shed a tear and might even cheer if another Holocaust came along?

These questions are not rhetorical, certainly not for me. I remain genuinely mystified that history's "oldest" and/or "longest" hatred is still so robustly with us. It is a feeling apparently shared by the editor of the previously mentioned book, *Those Who Forget the Past*.

"After nearly two decades of reading the literature of antisemitism — both the thing itself and the analysis of the thing itself — I have yet to find a satisfactory explanation for its persistence," Ron Rosenbaum writes in his introduction.

Then, after running through and mulling over the standard theories, including payback for the crucifixion, he makes what he himself describes as something that "might sound at first like a radical suggestion — [that] *it doesn't matter anymore...*

"At this point antisemitism has become embedded in history," he says, "or in sub-history, the subterranean history and mythology of hatred [and] it will always be there, a template for whatever hurts need to find an easy answer, a simple-minded balm: the Jews are responsible.

"The explanation for renewed antisemitism is antisemitism: its ineradicable pre-existing history and its efficiency. It has become its own origin."

Carrying on with this line of thinking, it follows that the modern antisemite can happily hate Jews for no special reason at all, and then make the leap to words and deeds at just about any pretext.

Looking back on what made 2004 such a year of infamy, one can't help but note that the first big spike came in March, following the initial release of Mel Gibson's controversial crucifixion movie.

On the other hand, antisemitic incidents had already been on the rise in Canada and elsewhere for four straight years, dating back to the first great spike of the 21st century, the one that shot up, incredibly, in the wake of the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center.

In this big lie, worthy of Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels himself, the World Trade Center atrocity was a “Jewish-perpetrated plot,” engineered by “the Elders of Zion” as evidenced in part by the “fact” that “no Jews (or Israelis) died” in the collapse of the twin towers because they had been forewarned (all 4,000 of them) to stay home that morning.

Despite the patent falseness and naked absurdity of such a proposition, this Big Lie spread like the Reichstag Fire, instantly and all across the Internet. As Hitler wrote in *Mein Kampf*, the greater the lie the greater the chance of it being believed; and this one has not been an exception.

If you haven’t heard this story before, you can be forgiven. In the circles most of us move in, antisemitism wears a more sophisticated face. We don’t tend to hear a lot of the more pathologically crazy talk, any more than we tend to rub shoulders with the fire-bombers and tombstone-topplers and cowards with spray-cans at 3 in the morning.

Antisemites you and I are likely to encounter get their licks in at Jews by ever-so-eruditely trashing Israel. Or if they’re especially deep thinkers, trashing Israeli policy and behaviour.

Now it is obviously not true that everyone who criticizes the policies of the State of Israel is *de facto* an antisemite.

Indeed, as the renowned Alan Dershowitz points out in his book, *The Case for Israel*, “the harshest substantive critics” of the Israeli government are Israelis themselves, “inside and outside the government – and sometimes even in the cabinet.” (He also includes himself on more than one occasion.)

Nor has any honest critic ever been labeled an antisemite, not in his experience or mine or anybody else’s that I know.

As Thomas Friedman of *The New York Times* has written, “Criticizing Israel is not antisemitic and saying so is vile.” But, he goes on, “singling out Israel for opprobrium and international sanction — out of all proportion to any other party in the Middle East — is antisemitic and not saying so would be dishonest.”

And that’s the point I’m getting to — the point where antisemitism becomes a non-Jewish problem. I don’t have any formula answers for keeping this sub-type of bigot at bay, but how’s this:

When today's 'sophisticated' antisemite says, "But really, aren't the Israelis doing to the Arabs (or maybe Palestinians) the same thing Hitler did to the Jews?" you could answer:

"No. And if you had paid even the slightest bit of attention in your 20th-century history classes, you would realize how uninformed and cruel what you just said makes you sound."

Or:

"You betray an ignorance so exceptional it could almost be deliberate."

It's also okay to sharply turn heel and quickly walk away; that message is pretty clear, too. But as I guess we signaled pretty loudly with the creation of FAST, the time is past for smiling politely and letting the bigot "have his opinion."

Let me also be clear that if I ever got word of people like this poisoning the atmosphere in my organization, I would not be restrained in my reaction — just as I would not be restrained in my reaction to any other expressions of bigotry and hatred.

We must not confuse these often-practiced rants with idle talk. These are not just words, but encouragement to those who would take things further. What gets said and what gets believed matters more urgently now than ever.

Although hopes for an Israeli-Palestinian truce are higher than they've been in many years, the stage for a war of attrition in the Middle East is just as set and scary as it ever was.

Maybe scarier. There's a scenario floating around these days, authored by a former Iranian defence minister. It promotes the idea of a nuclear war in which the Arab world would take 15 million casualties as an acceptable tradeoff for five million Israelis, i.e. them all.

Farfetched? Perhaps and let's hope so. But when it comes to antisemitism, whether you look back 60 years, 600 or 6000, things that once seemed far-fetched — Kristallnacht, for example, or Auschwitz — have suddenly, brutally turned very real.

Few people have been more aware of this than Professor and Rabbi Emil Fackenheim, the internationally celebrated philosopher and Holocaust scholar who taught and wrote at — and graced — University of Toronto from 1948 through 1984.

In fact he watched the horror develop right in front of him, as a child, university student, seminarian and, briefly, one of the very last rabbis ordained in pre-war Berlin. He was arrested on Kristallnacht, November 9, 1938, and spent three months in a concentration camp.

He fled to England in the summer of 1939 only to be arrested — irony of ironies — as an “enemy alien” when, weeks later, England and Germany went to war.

This got him shipped off to Canada, where he attended, then joined the faculty at U of T as well as (early on) serving as rabbi for a congregation in Hamilton. In the meantime an older brother died in the Holocaust.

Among the many memorable things Dr. Fackenheim spoke of and/or published in his 87 active and productive years is his coining, in 1970, of the now-oft-referred-to expression, “the 614th Commandment.” As he explains in an essay titled *Faith in God and Man after Auschwitz*:

“...In Jewish tradition there are 613 commandments, sufficient for all situations future as well as past. But the tradition could not anticipate Hitler: the Holocaust was unpredictable, even for [oral Torah].”

This must not be seen, he goes on to say, as just another “case-among-others of racism-in-general” but as something unique, even for Jews and their almost seamless history of persecution. The sin was not “Jewish behaviour” this time; the sin was Jewishness itself.

So what is this extra commandment that Dr. Fackenheim believes Jews should also live by? “Let me restate the 614th Commandment,” he writes in one of his last essays, “That Jews are forbidden to give Hitler posthumous victories.”

I am here today because I believe that this should not be a lonely battle — as it has so often been, for so many, for so long. And because I believe that this 614th Commandment is something we all should be living by.

Thank you for your kind attention. I hope some of you will join us in the cause.