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It can happen here—and it is

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Forget the notion that “it can’t happen here” because it is happening here, and we in the Jewish communities of the United States need to stand up against it before it is too late.

The origin of the saying, “When fascism comes to America, it will be wrapped in the flag and carrying a cross,” is under dispute. It was credited to Sinclair Lewis, but he never said that in so many words.

The one who came closest was James Waterman Wise, an early 20th century journalist, author and Zionist activist, and the son of Rabbi Stephen S. Wise. If fascism ever came to the United States, he warned several times in the 1930s, it would “probably be wrapped up in the American flag and heralded as a plea for liberty and preservation of the constitution.”

History supports that statement. Fascism, wherever it has reared its ugly head, has always been wrapped in patriotism and, all too often, in religion, as well. And the Jews were usually targeted to be among its greatest victims.

In a 1939 speech, Wise also said this, “The Jew is only a decoy, a smokescreen. We’re not the real object. Their real purpose is to smash democracy and American traditions.” By attacking Jews, Wise was saying, the fascists were playing to the latent anti-Jewish sentiments among the population so as to win over that population to its side.

Fascism is wrapped in an American flag today—and in religion. One only needs to listen to the speeches and read the essays by White Nationalist leaders. It even has infected the more radical elements of the Republican Party. No more proof of that is needed than the sudden, very public appearance of something called an othala rune (also known as an odal rune). According to the Anti-Defamation League:

“The othala rune is part of the runic alphabet system….In the 20th century, Nazis in Germany adopted [it]….Nazi uses of the symbol included the divisional insignia of two Waffen SS divisions….Following World War II, white supremacists in Europe, North America, and elsewhere began using the othala rune. Today, it is commonly seen in tattoo form, on flags or banners, as part of group logos, and elsewhere.”

The “elsewhere” now includes the red-white-and-blue design of the stage at the just-concluded Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), held this year in Orlando, Fla.

To be sure, CPAC’s organizers strenuously deny that the stage was deliberately designed to reflect any anti-Jewish sentiment, but any reasonable person looking at the stage must wonder why anyone would design a stage in so precarious a way that care must be taken not to fall off.

The only reasonable answer is that the design was meant to send the same message as othala rune tatoos on the necks and arms of White Nationalists: “We're taking our country back—and then we’re coming for you.”

Twitter, it should be noted, registered over 100,000 tweets last Saturday denouncing the CPAC stage design.

The denials coming from CPAC’s organizers are simply lame. A better response would have been to take down that stage and put up a more conventional and much safer one in its place.

Although the ADL acknowledges that the othala rune does appear at times in innocent contexts, it is clearly primarily used alongside the swastika in decidedly non-innocent ones. In August 2008, for example, German police raided a neo-Nazi children's summer camp where they seized all manner of neo-Nazi materials—including two towels, one with a swastika painted on it and the other with an othala rune.

To be sure, anti-Semitism exists on the left, too. It is from the right, however, that the threat is the greatest because its hate is often expressed through violence. As the ADL noted in its annual audit issued last May, in 2019, there were at least “270 antisemitic incidents attributed to known [right-wing] extremist groups or individuals inspired by extremist ideology….Sixty-one incidents took the form of [violent] assault…accompanied by evidence of antisemitic animus…..Eleven of the 61 assaults were perpetrated with deadly weapons such as guns or knives. The 61 assaults resulted in 95 victims, including five fatalities.”

As of February 28, there have been 54 anti-Semitic incidents recorded in the United States by the ADL in 2021. They include:

* An Atlanta, Ga., synagogue’s Shabbat morning service was disrupted by invaders shouting such slogans as “Kill the Jews” and “Hitler rules.”
* Neo-Nazi propaganda was distributed outside the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles that read, “Reclaim America.”
* The 9/11 memorial at a Miami-Dade, Fla., firehouse was spray-painted with the words “Jews did this.”

In Ashland, Va., fliers were distributed emblazoned with a swastika and a message that read: “We are everywhere.” And so they are. There have been incidents in Fremont, Calif.; Spokane, Wash.; Champaign, Ill.; Phoenix, Ariz.; Stamford and Fairfield, Conn.; Lake Oswego, Ore.; Acton, Mass.; Manasquan, N.J.; Brooklyn, N.Y.; Baltimore, Md.—the list goes on and on and no area of the country is exempt. Swastikas were found in parks in Montgomery County, Md., and Palm Coast, Fla., on a wall at the Rego Park Jewish Center in Queens, N.Y., among many other places, and on a bathroom wall at a University of Connecticut facility.

According to news reports, a man shouting “Heil Hitler” and “Go to Israel” harassed a Jewish family on an Upper West Side Manhattan street. On Staten Island, an alt right group, New Jersey European Heritage Association, distributed propaganda that read: “Antifa is a Jewish communist militia.” In Glendale, Calif., according to Stop Antisemitism.org, “an Israeli flag with blood and bones replacing the Star of David along with #COVID19” was found hanging on property belonging to the California Department of Public Transportation.

As an example of the hate that is out there, here is a “poem” cited by Talia Levin in her book, “Culture Warlords: My Journey Into the Dark Web of White Supremacy”: “Heil Hitler/Heil Bowers/Sieg Heil/Heil Roof /and Heil Breivik/Heil McVeigh.”

As to those references, Robert Gregory Bowers is awaiting trial for killing 11 Jews in Pittsburgh’s Tree of Life Synagogue in 2018. Dylann Storm Roof murdered nine worshippers in a Charleston, S.C., church in 2015. Anders Behring Breivik, a self-proclaimed neo-Nazi, murdered 77 people in two massive terror attacks in Norway in 2011. Timothy McVeigh is the 1995 Oklahoma City bomber.

We know that 2019 was the worst year in recent memory for anti-Semitic incidents in the United States—up 12 percent from 2018 according to the ADL, and up 14 percent according to the FBI. When the statistics for 2020 are released later this year, it is likely to be even worse because the COVID-19 pandemic has given the haters new areas to explore.

According to Flora Cassen, associate professor of Jewish, Islamic, and Middle Eastern studies and associate professor of history at Washington University in St. Louis, “[f]ar right theories on a Jewish-Chinese COVID-19 cabal” mushroomed in 2020 on “the infamously anti-Semitic dark web.” This includes “the idea of coronavirus as a grand plan engineered by the Jews and China together.” As one anonymous poster she cited put it, “The kikes get the credit for that one. It was the kikes. It’s ALWAYS the kikes.’” According to news reports, the COVID 19 villain of choice is Holocaust survivor and libefral philanthropist George Soros.

The 2020 election provided another source for the haters to fan their flames in 2020.

According to a study published in November in MIT Technology Review, written by staff writer Tate Ryan-Mosley, the haters often use Soros and even former Mayor Michael Bloomberg as their stand-ins for all Jews.

As one example, a week after it was reported that Bloomberg had donated $250,000 to help win over Jewish Floridians to Joe Biden, the Highlands County Republican Party publicly accused Bloomberg and Soros of trying to buy Florida votes. In October, the ultra-conservative American Action News, with over a million followers on Facebook, ran an ad that showed a picture of Soros and carried the caption, “Burn It Down: Soros planning nationwide chaos if Trump wins.”

As I have noted in previous columns, the rise of the Far Right is directly attributable to the rise of Donald Trump in mid-2015. He gave them license to come out of the dark holes they had been hiding in for decades. The stage at CPAC is a sign of how far they have come since then in trying to seize control of the Republican Party.

They wrap themselves in the flag, claim fealty to the Christian bible, and make golden images of Donald Trump. His rhetoric does the same.

American fascism, when it comes, James Waterman Wise warned, will “probably be wrapped up in the American flag and heralded as a plea for liberty and preservation of the constitution.”

These are the very things seen and heard this week at CPAC, including from Trump himself.

Be forewarned.