

MITCH ALBOM

Mitch Albom: Ghosts of past, present and future issue ominous warnings for Jews



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Every Sunday at noon, when many are eating brunch or getting ready for a football game, a room full of chairs awaits in the Zekelman Holocaust Center on Orchard Lake Road. Maybe a few dozen people show up, sometimes more, sometimes less. They come to listen to an old person speak.

That old person, one of a small, rotating group, is, at this time of year, a ghost of Christmas past. Someone who made it through the Holocaust.

Through 12 straight Decembers, from 1933 to 1945, Jews in Europe were terrorized, humiliated, dehumanized and stripped of their homes and businesses, eventually herded like cattle, imprisoned in concentration camps, and systematically murdered.

Irene Miller was a ghost of Christmas past at the Holocaust Center last week, part of their Sunday Survivor Talks. Miller is 90 years old. She spoke of her life as a child in Poland, being smuggled out to escape the Nazis, living in frozen fields, drinking snow, eating boiled grass, enduring two years in a Siberian labor camp.

When she was asked why others didn't help her and her family, she said, "Everyone was so afraid."

Too afraid to stand up to tyranny.

Too afraid to say "this is wrong."

Ghosts of Christmas past.

Hate on the rise

Last week, a Dearborn man named Hassan Chokr was charged with ethnic intimidation after appearing at a Bloomfield Hills synagogue as children were going to school. He allegedly screamed antisemitic insults at the Jews there, including the kids. On a video that he recorded and later posted, he can be heard yelling “Jew f---” at a young girl and “F--- your synagogue” at adults.

Days later, when Chokr appeared before a judge via computer, the prosecutor read some of the man’s Instagram posts, quoting, “Your Jew tactics will only backfire on you. You have no place on this earth, Jew (expletive), Jew mother(expletives). A storm is coming to wipe you all out of our lives.”

MITCH ALBOM: Holy day brings a sad reminder: Antisemitism is always around

Chokr’s response was to pull down his pants and show his naked backside to the judge.

Hassan Chokr is a ghost of Christmas present. While his family claims he has mental issues, that is of little comfort to Jewish observers, who see the words, “A storm is coming to wipe you all out of our lives,” and harken back to a time when sentences like that were uttered with glee by government officials.

According to the Anti-Defamation League, 2021 was *the highest year on record* for documented reports of antisemitism. New York City last month reported a 125% jump in antisemitic hate crimes from the November before.

A 125% jump?

Violent acts and virulent words happen regularly against Jews today, at the least known and most well-known levels. In recent weeks, Kanye West, one of the most popular recording artists of our time, unleashed a string of hateful and Holocaust-denying statements in one interview after another, saying things like “I like Hitler” and posting plans to “go death con 3 ON JEWISH PEOPLE.”

Supporters dismiss West, once again, as “crazy,” but it doesn’t sound crazy to Jewish people. It sounds terribly familiar, like a bad memory that rematerialized.

Ghosts of Christmas present.

Here's how history repeats itself

When you read about the history of the Holocaust, what jumps out is its insidious roots. It didn't begin with gas chambers and mass graves. It began more quietly, with:

1. People casually blaming Jews for Germany's problems. Claiming they ran too many businesses. Had too much power. It advanced to ...
2. Accusing Jews of having their own agenda. Not being real citizens of the countries they lived in. Supporting their own issues. That blossomed into ...
3. A tolerance for harassment, negativity, intimidation and a dismissal of Jews' suffering as overblown, which ultimately permitted the horror of concentration camps and Hitler's "final solution" — to wipe Jews off the Earth entirely.

Now think about what's happening today. You have:

1. People again blaming Jews for their problems, high-profile people like West complaining that Jews control industries, or Dave Chapelle on "Saturday Night Live" saying "I've been to Hollywood and this is just what I saw ... it's a lot of Jews" — and having an audience laugh and applaud.
2. You have men like Chokr screaming Jews should be ashamed of their support for Israel. It's typical of antisemitism disguised as criticism of Israel, which is happening everywhere from synagogues to college campuses, all the while echoing old sentiments that Jews have their own agenda. This leads to ...
3. A tolerance of harassment. Despite the wild increase in antisemitism, you don't hear anywhere near the outrage over it that you do for other forms of bigotry.

These ingredients embody the ghost of Christmas future, a world in which hate for Jews is so widely tolerated, it allows for horrible acts to occur.

Don't think that could happen? Think twice. The mantra for the Jewish community has always been "Never again." Never again, will they go through what they went through during the Holocaust. Never again will they let the world try to exterminate them.

But that determination is not in their hands. Small acts lead to bigger acts. Big acts lead to policies. Policies cover up shameful behavior.

The old men and women who speak every Sunday in that room full of chairs at the Holocaust Center know this: You don't change the future if you forget the past. So they keep talking about it. We all should. There are ghosts in every act of antisemitism committed today. And they're warning us.

Contact Mitch Albom: malbom@freepress.com. Check out the latest updates with his charities, books and events at MitchAlbom.com. Follow him on Twitter @mitchalbom.