



Robert Leikind Remarks
Director
AJC New England Diplomats Seder
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Thank you, Rabbi Perlman. What a gift to have you lead tonight's program.

And my thanks to all of you for being here to share in our 19th Annual Diplomats Seder. There are so many people to thank this evening: our fabulous co-chairs; AJC's awesome Seder staff team led by Diane Lieberman; the truly magnificent members of AJC New England's regional board led by Jonathan Dorfman; the scores of people who participated on our taskforce and Host Committee; and those who stand with AJC day after day. Thank you.

Not long ago I had the good fortune to be in Rome on a Friday evening. My son and I decided to walk to a nearby synagogue to welcome the start of the Sabbath. The synagogue was in a beautiful old building, but as we got closer it took on the aura of a fortress with a tall fence, cameras, barriers, two police cars deployed in front, police patrolling on foot and a security booth outside the rear entrance of the building. When we approached the gate to go in, we were politely told to wait across the street and watched as locals were permitted to enter. Then the rest of us, one by one, went through a security check before being admitted to pray.

It was evident that the Italian government was going to great lengths to keep their small Jewish community safe. But, it also occurred to me that none of the beautiful historic Roman churches that I had visited, many of which house priceless works of art, had visible security. Even at the Vatican, I did not see such a show of force.

The threat of anti-Jewish violence has been and remains an enduring element of Jewish life, in Rome, Paris, even in Boston. It is a symptom of a much larger problem. This problem comes from an idea that has been embedded in European culture for centuries and has recently spread to other parts of the world. The idea acts like a virus that periodically emerges, devastates a community and then goes dormant for a period before once again emerging.

The idea posits that Jews and their faith are a destructive and immoral force which, left unopposed, will corrupt and endanger people, communities, nations, even civilizations. You can recognize this idea in claims that:

- Jews control Washington and the media;
- Jews are Christ killers;
- Israel, among all the nations of the world, is uniquely deserving of condemnation for actions real and fabricated;
- Jews use the blood of Muslim children to make Passover matzoh, as recently portrayed on both Egyptian and Turkish TV;
- The list goes on.

For centuries there was no antidote to the idea that Jewish treachery is responsible for so many of the world's ills. But, a few hundred years ago a radical new idea emerged. It proposed that all people have rights which exist independently of their beliefs, what they look like, where they come from, or how they earn their living.

This new idea gave birth to modern democracy and has provided Jews and many others – African-Americans, women, people who are LGBTQ and other vulnerable communities – the tools to fight back against their oppressors and gradually improve their lot.

In the twentieth century, democratic values spread around the world and many were confident that support for them would only grow. But, today a wave is washing over the western world and shaking the foundations of the western democratic tradition. Even here in the United States, support for democratic values seems to be slipping. According to David Brooks of The New York Times, nearly a quarter of Americans think democracy is a bad way to run a country and one in six, of all ages, support military rule.

These numbers are supported by things we witness almost every day:

- Young black men facing traffic stops for no other reason than the color of their skin;
- Leaders of the Women's March trafficking with Louis Farrakhan, a notorious anti-Semite and homophobe;
- National leaders saying deeply offensive things about Mexicans, Muslims, and others;
- White supremacists reemerging as a part of mainstream political discourse; and
- Neo-fascist student groups, masquerading as "progressives", relentlessly trying to suppress Jewish voices.

Democracies need to demonstrate commitment to the rights of all their citizens. This is why we are here tonight.

The Passover Seder is a meditation on the idea of freedom. It is an opportunity to affirm Dr. King's dream for our country. It invites us to pause and think about what freedom means for each of us and what it requires of each of us.

For 112 years AJC has done exactly that - working to end persecution of Jews in America and around the world. We conceived of our struggle as part of a larger effort to advance freedom for all Americans and became a pillar of the American civil rights movement.

Today AJC works to advance democratic values, co-existence and cooperation around the world. We are proud of our efforts to break down barriers and forge relations in Latin America, Europe, the Far East, Africa and, of course, here in New England.

We believe that Zionism is the national liberation movement of the Jewish people and we work for a strong and secure Israel.

We are committed to the pursuit of peace between Palestinians and Israelis based on a two-state solution. We hope that one day Israel's neighbors will accept its presence and legitimacy, so peace can blossom.

At home, AJC continues to work for a humane immigration policy that supports secure borders but respects a fundamental truth about this nation. We are a nation of immigrants. We cannot turn our backs on the innocent and vulnerable living among us.

This is a core lesson of the Passover Seder. We were strangers in the land of Egypt. We know what it means to be oppressed. It is our obligation to welcome the strangers among us.

Freedom is not a state of nature like air and the sun. It is an idea that is given force and dimension through the will of the people. You can deploy police to protect a small synagogue, but police cannot keep the synagogue and its community safe, if its neighbors conceive of them as alien.

Tonight, we remember this and recommit to the task of defending our values and defining our world. We are all participants in a journey to ensure that our children know the freedoms tomorrow that we enjoy today.

It is a privilege to share this journey with you.