

Stand Up for Justice

Rosh Hashanah Morning 5778 – September 21, 2017
Temple Beth Torah – Fremont, California
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I experienced anti-Semitism for the first time when I was nine years old. During the early 1960s, in Long Beach, California the public school system allowed two hours every week for children to receive religious education. During “release time,” my Christian classmates left school for Catholic or Protestant instruction. Out of 25 students in my 4th grade class, only 2 of us remained behind. Both of us Jews. Beverly Gerber and I.

I have no recollection of what Beverly and I did during those two hours while our classmates were away. But I do have a burning memory of what happened one day when I was walking to school. Kids I knew, my classmates, were lined-up along the fence and they were screaming at me that I was a Christ-Killer.

I was terrified by the hatred I saw in their faces. I was stunned that my classmates, most of whom I had known for years, were accusing me of a crime I did not comprehend.

I turned and ran home – which didn’t take long since my family lived across the street from Prisk elementary.

My mom was in the family room. After tearfully telling her what happened, she looked at me and said, “Don’t try and fight them. You just have to be better than them.”

By the time I went back, class had already started. I got a tardy slip from the teacher. The shouting at me went on for a few more days, until something happened that put an end to it. I will share why the harassment ended later.

What I will tell you is that being screamed at for being a Jew made a searing impression on my soul. For a long time, I felt insecure about whether I fit in with everyone else in America. But as I grew older, that doubt got buried as I constructed an active and proud Jewish identity. I studied Jewish history in part to learn about anti-Semitism and the conditions that fed it. I committed myself to Jewish communal activities that asserted our rightful place in American life. I became a rabbi and aligned myself with progressive Jewish causes that espouse an America that is tolerant and diverse and accepting not only of American Jews but also people of all races, religions, and sexual orientations.

If you had asked me only a few years ago: Do I think anti-Semitism is a threat to America’s Jews? I would have emphatically said: No. Of course I was aware of

occasional anti-Semitic acts. But I had become desensitized to sporadic hate crimes against Jews. Though I knew about acts of vandalism such as windows broken in a synagogue or tombstones overturned in a Jewish cemetery, I did not view these manifestations of anti-Semitism as serious threats.

But in the past year, something has fundamentally changed. Vicious voices of Jew hatred have seeped out of the dark recesses of America. Representatives of the alt-right continually spew noxious streams of anti-Semitism. In the past year, journalists who are Jewish have been savagely attacked online. According to the Anti-Defamation League, anti-Semitic vandalism and bullying at public schools have more than doubled this year compared to last and there are still three months remaining in 2017. Swastikas, that most potent symbol of hate, as well as other acts of anti-Semitism have taken place here in Fremont at Irvington High School and Horner Middle School.

Harassment and bullying are serious concerns. Bomb threats and cemetery desecrations are despicable acts. But against this backdrop of growing concern, what took place five weeks ago in Charlottesville, Virginia, was utterly shocking. This college town, home to the University of Virginia, had been a bastion of tolerance. But over the weekend of August 11 & 12, it became a howling center of aggression and violence by right-wing extremists, including white supremacists, neo-Nazis, and members of the Ku Klux Klan. They marched through the town proclaiming the purity of the white race and chanting: "Jews will not replace us." Marchers displayed swastikas on banners and shouted slogans like "Blood and Soil" a phrase derived from Nazi ideology. They also posed a direct threat to a Charlottesville synagogue.

The president of Congregation Beth Israel, Alan Zimmerman, offers an eyewitness account of that horrible time. He writes, "On Saturday morning, I stood outside our synagogue with the armed security guard we hired after the police department refused to provide us with an officer during morning services. . . Forty congregants were inside.

For half an hour, three men dressed in fatigues and armed with semi-automatic rifles stood across the street from the temple. Had they tried to enter, I don't know what I could have done to stop them, but I couldn't take my eyes off them, either. Perhaps the presence of our armed guard deterred them. Perhaps their presence was just a coincidence, and I'm paranoid. I don't know.

Several times, parades of Nazis passed our building, shouting, 'There's the synagogue!' followed by chants of 'Sieg Heil' and other anti-Semitic language." Mr. Zimmerman went on to state, "Soon, we learned that Nazi websites had posted a call to burn our synagogue. I sat with one of our rabbis and wondered whether we should go back to the temple to protect the building. What could I do if I were there? Fortunately, it was just talk – but we had already deemed such an attack within the realm of possibilities, taking the precautionary step of removing our Torahs, including a Holocaust scroll, from the premises."

He could not believe that "This is in America in 2017."

In Charlottesville, the most virulent Jew hatred in memory burst out of the dark. There were other casualties that weekend. A car driven by a white supremacist plowed into a group of anti- Nazi protestors and Heather Heyer was killed. Two police officers, Berke Bates and H. Jay Cullen, died in the line of duty when their helicopter crashed.

In the aftermath of Charlottesville, the president of the United States failed to unequivocally condemn the anti-Semitic extremists. In drawing a moral equivalence between the alt-right and those who stood against them, he proclaimed that “there were some very fine people on both sides.” In my view, the president gave credibility to the perpetrators of bigotry. For white supremacists, Charlottesville is a victory.

But for America’s Jews, Charlottesville should be a wake-up call. We cannot afford to sit on the sidelines. Elie Wiesel, of blessed memory, warned us “We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere.”

On this morning of Rosh Hashanah, the blasts of the shofar call us to attention. Wake-up Jews from your slumber! The ancient sounds of the shofar rouse our souls. Tekiah – listen to the blast of hatred spreading across our country. Sh’varim – heed the calls of those broken by a society that cares not enough for the poor, the uninsured, and the weak in our midst. Teruah – sound the alarm, fear is rising in the land. Sound forth a Tekiah G’dolah so that we commit ourselves to righteous deeds that will last throughout the coming year.

On this morning of Rosh Hashanah, let us commit ourselves to not be silent. Let us heed the sound of the shofar calling us to justice. Let us state loudly and clearly:

Anti-Semitism is evil.

Hostility toward Muslims is evil.

Hatred of immigrants is evil.

Bigotry against gays and lesbians is evil.

Violence against people who are transgendered is evil.

Jews across America are hearing the sound of the shofar this Rosh Hashanah calling us to action. Take heart in knowing this. We are not alone. Our Reform congregation is linked with 900 others throughout North America. As progressive Jews, our understanding of Torah commits us to the same core values: the sanctity of every human being created in the Divine image, a profound commitment to Tikkun Olam, repairing the breaches in our society in which the poor and the disabled and people of color face injustice. As Reform Jews we embrace the full inclusion in our community of people who are LGBTQ. We feel responsibility for Jews in the United States and around the world. We fully support a vibrant Jewish state in the land of Israel.

Temple Beth Torah is not isolated as a Reform congregation. We find strength when we align ourselves with the one and a half million members of the Reform Movement. We are imbued with a vision of a more just society. We stand with our Movement’s efforts to protect immigrants and to reform the criminal justice system. At last week’s meeting of the Temple’s Board of Directors, the officers and members

committed our congregation to focus our social action efforts this year on protecting the environment and safeguarding transgender rights.

In addition to the strength we find as members of the Reform Movement, we also should take heart that as a minority religious community in Fremont, we are not alone. Earlier this year I had an incredibly heartwarming experience. It came during a time when there were bomb threats against Jewish Community Centers across the country. During this trying time, I received not one, but numerous phone calls and emails from local Muslim leaders who expressed their concern for our members' well-being. They offered their support and reassurance that we did not stand alone but they stood with us.

Here all along, I thought it was our job as Jews to stand with others. From our position of privilege and power in America, it was our responsibility to reassure those who felt vulnerable. It was both a surprise and a relief to know others had our backs.

When we are isolated, there is defeat. When we stand together, there is strength. E Pluribus Unum. Out of many, is unity.

“Let us never grow numb to brokenness, but let our pain fuel our vows to respond – with peaceful protests, and with public calls for healing, by building alliances and by speaking in unison with other minorities and faith communities.”¹ We have an opportunity to do so every month by participating in a Vigil that is held in Fremont the fourth Thursday of every month. This Vigil is co-sponsored by the Tri-City Interfaith Council. People of all faiths and backgrounds stand in solidarity to celebrate our diversity as well as our unity. I know that a growing number of Temple members are participating in the Vigil. Come join us a week from today at 5pm. Flyers with information are located in our hallway.

I began this sermon by telling you of a story of when I was a boy and I faced virulent anti-Semitism. After running home crying to my mother, she told me to return to school and show that I was better than those haters. I did go back.

For many years I have thought about what my mom told me and I do not think she gave me the best advice. Her basic message was for me to be passive - to not engage those kids who were screaming at me that I was a Christ killer. My mom's advice to me was that I should be silent in the face of their hatred.

I wish Mom had said something different to me that day. That I should be proud of being Jewish and that I had nothing to be ashamed of. That I should go directly to my teacher and tell her that I was being bullied. And that my mom, along with my dad, would speak with Mr. Williams, the principal, and let him know that their son was being harassed at school and that this was completely unacceptable.

In America in the early 1960s, in the growing city of Long Beach, it's easy to rationalize how a Jewish mother might advise her son not to stick up for himself. Maybe

she feared what would happen to me if a group of boys assaulted me. Maybe she was timid about going to school authorities and saying this was wrong. Maybe she thought this was just a temporary difficulty her son faced and it all would soon end.

In part, she was right. The harassment did end. But the reason why it stopped was because I got into a fight with one of the boys who stood at the fence shouting at me. Paul Smith was the ringleader of the group of kids at the fence. When he called me out to fight after school, I really had no choice unless I wanted to be a complete coward.

When school let out that day, the boys formed a circle and Paul and I squared off. Believe me, it was no boxing match. We were nine year old boys. We mostly wrestled on the ground, neither one of us getting the better of the other. Minutes later, a neighbor came out and told us to break it up.

And we did. The next day, the yelling and the screaming at the schoolyard stopped.

What is the lesson of this story?

It is that standing up for yourself takes action.

It is that sometimes the right way to respond is through words.

It is that sometimes you have to be willing to fight for what's right.

Sometimes we have to fight on our own.

But we are stronger when we stand with others who share our beliefs, our values and our principles.

On this day of Rosh Hashanah, let us commit ourselves anew to standing-up for what is eternal in our sacred heritage. As proud Jews and proud Americans let us rise up and say in this country you cannot "dehumanize, degrade and stigmatize whole categories of people in this nation. Every Jew, every Muslim, every gay, transgender, disabled, black, brown, white, woman, man and child is beloved of God and precious in the Holy One's sight. We the people, all the people, are created B'tzelem Elohim, in the image of the Divine. All people are worthy of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."²

Our Torah says, Behold God places before us the blessing and the curse, life and death. So let us choose life and blessings in this New Year.

Let us feel called today

To give our gifts

To listen to the heartbeat of a broken world

To heal the fragmentation of a people and planet.

Let us feel called today

To participate in the work of our time

Let us feel called today
To be at one with the universe
To be touched by God
Let us feel called today³
To begin this New Year with abiding love and enduring hope
Let us work toward the day when the shofar of freedom will be heard across
the land and justice and peace will embrace all the inhabitants of the earth.

1. From *One Voice for the New Year, 2017* co-authored by Rabbis Elka Abramson and Judy Shanks
2. *Ibid.*
3. Adapted from poem, "I Know," by James Conlon, *Mishkan HaNefesh for Rosh Hashanah*, page 283.