

## **Pushing Back The Darkness**

I was not going to give a sermon about hate again. That was not my plan for this Rosh Hashanah. I mean, I have focused on this before. For those who don't remember, just listen to what I said when speaking about the Iran Deal in 2015:

*I feel very strongly that the entire experience we have just been through in dealing with the Iran issue speaks to one of the greatest sins being perpetrated by Jews and non-Jews alike in today's world -- the sin of poisonous, vitriolic, and hateful speech that is divisive, dangerous, and completely counterproductive.... This hateful speech has distressingly become the norm.*

And in last year's sermon about the ways it felt like we were much more divided than united as a country, I asked:

*What has happened to us as a society? How is it that we have allowed our anxieties and our fears to lead us to such angry, dark, hateful, and divisive places? When did fear and anxiety win, and love, respect, and mutual understanding take a back seat? How exactly have many in our society moved away from instinctively playing nicely with other kids on the playground - instead choosing to only share the sandbox with those kids who play the games we like, or bring us the toys we want, or are exactly like us?*

When thinking about the possible themes for this year's High Holiday sermons, I reflected on these and other sermons and thought: They have heard this from me already. What could I add, that I have not already said, concerning the issues of hatred, divisiveness, and anger that we all sense swirling around us in America these days.

But then, just last month, in Charlottesville, Virginia, Neo Nazis marched with torches chanting, "Jews will not replace us." Shouting, "White Lives Matter." Screaming, "Blood and Soil," harkening back to the World War II era slogan of Germans wishing to declare that the Jews had no right to settle on German land, or to exist at all.

As Americans, we believe in free speech, no matter how reprehensible. But as Jews, we are constantly reminded that to be free means to be responsible first. Our words are no exception. But of course an analysis of the events of Charlottesville certainly goes well beyond a conversation about free speech. Protesters came armed with weapons, signaling a readiness for violent confrontation, and that is unfortunately what came to pass, as Heather Heyer, along with the two Virginia State Police officers- H. Jay Cullen and Berke Bates were killed and dozens more were injured.

Alan Zimmerman, the President of the Reform Synagogue in Charlottesville, VA, wrote about his experience at the synagogue that day:

*I stood outside our synagogue with the armed security guard... Forty congregants were inside. Here's what I witnessed during that time.*

*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 "Seig Heil" and other anti-Semitic language. Some carried flags with swastikas and other Nazi symbols.*

*A guy in a white polo shirt walked by the synagogue a few times, arousing suspicion. Was he casing the building, or trying to build up courage to commit a crime? We didn't know. Later, I noticed that the man accused in the automobile terror attack wore the same polo shirt as the man who kept walking by our synagogue; apparently it's the uniform of a white supremacist group. Even now, that gives me a chill.*

*When services ended, my heart broke as I advised congregants that it would be safer to leave the temple through the back entrance rather than through the front, and to please go in groups.*

*This is 2017 in the United States of America.*

In case any of us had been averting our eyes, ignoring the news, or pretending that the world has not changed, the Charlottesville episode certainly reminded us that these are frightening times. We look at our children, and our grandchildren; the most beautiful innocent and precious legacy that we could give to our world- and we wonder just what kind of a world they will be inheriting.

And so- it is time to speak about hate once again. Only this year I do not want to focus on how we speak to one another, or how we must learn to respect disagreements. This year, I want us to consider how to respond to the anger, the pain, and the vitriol that is poisoning our country and our communities.

If your experience is anything like mine, there are times where you simply want to avoid turning on the TV in the morning or checking your phones in the hopes that this nightmare of hatred, anger, divisiveness and destruction (of which Charlottesville was but one example) will simply go away. There are times where we simply want to run and hide; or, as Tina Fey suggested on a Saturday Night Live sketch following Charlottesville:

*"I would urge people, instead of participating in the screaming matches and violence, find a local business you support, maybe a Jewish run bakery or African-American run bakery. Order a cake with the American flag on it ... and just eat it."*

She wasn't being serious, of course. And, as often happens, her sarcasm and satire caused a bit of controversy as she kept shoving cake into her mouth in response to this latest round of hatred. But I think that she was tapping into a very real emotion that many people are feeling today, perhaps even in this room. That feeling that we would rather just ignore the world, shut out the haters, hide from the challenges of this increasingly divisive and dark time. We would rather just comfort ourselves with cake.

The emotion of wanting to run away, wanting to hide, not wanting to face that which is so incredibly anxiety provoking and frightening is not unfamiliar to me. As I consider all of this, I am brought back to a time when I was 11 years old and my grandmother was dying. She had come to live with us a

year earlier following a stroke and we had become very close as she spent her final months living in our home. We had meals together, watched TV together (she loved wrestling), and I tried to help her recover her speech in my own 11 year old way, by trying to get her to read off of a pretzel box to pronounce the words "Mr. Salty." Finally, one afternoon I was told that the end had come. She was dying and did not have much time left. I was home alone with her nurse who asked me to call my dad and tell him to come home from work as soon as possible. I remember being frightened and scared. My instinct was to run, to hide. I simply could not face the pain that was in that space at that time. So I did just that- I ran. I ran up to my room, quickly called my dad, and waited for him to come home curling up in the corner of my room while reading an Archie comic book and hoping that my grandmother dying downstairs was all just a nightmare. Hoping, against all hope, that my dad would come home, and everything would be fine. After all, he was a doctor. It would be fine. It had to be fine.

But it was not fine. A few hours later she died. And I remember that one of my first feelings was that of shame. I felt ashamed that I ran, ashamed that I missed being with her. I was only 11. Wanting to run away was a perfectly normal, human emotion, especially for a child. And wanting to run away is a

perfectly normal, human emotion for all of us when facing difficult and scary moments, in our own lives and in the world around us.

And yet- as we grow older, we have to learn how to avoid running sometimes. We have to learn how to avoid hiding in our rooms. We may want to stop, to shut everything out, to eat cake- but we cannot. We must, instead, bravely face the unknown future, meeting the hatred and divisiveness of our society with love, tolerance and respect as we work toward creating a just and pluralistic society where everyone behaves, and is treated, like one of God's creations.

In some ways, our Torah portion that we will read tomorrow morning, the Akeidah, or binding of Isaac, is about learning how to face fear instead of running away from it. Imagine Abraham's fear and anxiety as God told him to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac. He *must* have wanted to run- but he didn't. In the end, disturbing as it is to us today, Abraham was prepared to face what he had to face. Answering in a single word- "Hinneni." *Here I am, ready to face what seems so impossible to me. Ready to face what seems so dark, disturbing, and problematic. God, I am ready to face the uncertain, with faith that you will be by my side along the journey to the Mountain of Moriah, the mountain where we will learn to see things clearly for what they actually are.*

My friends- we have reached another *Hinneni* moment as a society. I know that many of us are tired of the hateful rhetoric. I know that many of us are frightened by what we see as an increasing and corrosive divisiveness in American society. Many of us have many opinions about who is to blame for all of the hatred that is rearing its ugly head once again. We feel hesitant about what to do next. Many of us are overwhelmed, anxious, and tired. I know that many of us would rather just eat cake, or maybe a bowl of ice cream! But, as Ruth Messinger, the former head of AJWS used to say, "we cannot retreat to the convenience of being overwhelmed." We must act. We must, like Abraham before us, say "Hinneni," here we are, ready to make a difference, ready to help, ready to fight hate with love.

In a remarkable paper written on race in 1963, Dr. Abraham Joshua Heschel (z"l) wrote:

There is an evil which most of us condone and are even guilty of: indifference to evil. We remain neutral, impartial, and not easily moved by the wrongs done unto other people. Indifference to evil is more insidious than evil itself; it is more universal, more contagious, more dangerous. A silent justification, it makes possible an evil erupting as an exception become the rule and being in turn accepted....

...an honest estimation of the moral state of our society will disclose: Some are guilty, but all are responsible....

Racism is an evil of tremendous power, but God's will transcends all powers. Surrender to despair is surrender to *evil*. *It is important to feel anxiety, it is sinful to wallow in despair.*

What we need is a total mobilization of heart, intelligence and wealth for the purpose of love and justice. God is in search of man, waiting, hoping for man to do His will.

*The most practical thing is not to weep, but to act* and to have faith in God's assistance and grace in our trying to do His will.

This world, this society, can be redeemed. God has a stake in our moral predicament. I cannot believe that God will be defeated....

*The greatest heresy is despair*, despair of men's power for goodness, men's power for love...

Daily we should take account and ask: What have I done today to alleviate the anguish, to mitigate the evil, to prevent humiliation?

Let there be a grain of prophet in every man.

What we need is the involvement of every one of us as individuals. What we need is restlessness, a constant awareness of the monstrosity of injustice....

How sadly relevant are Rabbi Heschel's words today. We must not be indifferent. We must find a way to act and we must not despair because that is the "greatest heresy."

Our youngest son Isaiah will be three next week. He may never hear a survivor of the Holocaust speak to him in person. By the time he is old enough to understand the horrors of the Shoah, there will be few, if any, survivors left to tell their tale. But those of us who have heard these stories first hand know that the words "never again," must not become a slogan. We know exactly what can happen to the world when senseless hatred, malicious and toxic language, and violence are left unchecked. We know



what happens when people don't speak up. As a child, as a teen, and again as a Rabbi, I have made promises to countless survivors who survived the Shoah that I would not forget, that I would remind others to act. I looked into their eyes. I saw the numbers on their arms, and I gave them my word. You gave them your word. That has to mean something in today's society. Those of us who were naive enough to think that anti-Semitism and hatred based on race, sexual orientation, gender, or religion, were a thing of the past were simply wrong. Years ago I used to think we had made major progress. Now I know that even with the progress that has been made, we still have a long way to go.

In his Nobel prize acceptance speech, Elie Wiesel (z"l), who we were honored to have here with us just a few years ago, taught the world:

...never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere. When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant. Wherever men or women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must – at that moment – become the center of the universe.

Heschel, Wiesel, the survivors of our youth- they are no longer with us. But their memories should inspire us and our failure to live up to their faith in us should haunt us.

So what I am asking you to do? First, I want us all to take a deep breath. I am serious. Close your eyes and on the count of three- let's just breathe together.

We cannot solve all of our nation's problems at once. But what we can do is come together, as loving, caring human beings and Jews who care about our society, who care about our country, and who honor the idea that we have a responsibility to bring healing, wholeness, and God's love of humanity into this world. We have seen the worst in humanity in recent months, but we have also seen goodness, for example, in the ways individuals, communities, and leaders have stepped up and come together to help in the wake of Hurricanes Harvey and Irma.

The first thing that we have to remember is that as individuals, we have incredible power to make a difference. Our rabbis remind us that it only takes one person to make a difference and remind us that: *b'makom she eyn anashim, hishtadel l'hiyot ish*. In a place where no one is standing up to do the right thing, we must nevertheless stand up as individuals to make a difference. (Avot 2:6).

So ask yourself- *what can I do* to bring down the level of hatred and viciousness in our society? Should I post less and learn to listen more?

Should I engage with those in my family who have different opinions that I do in a kind and loving way? Should I become more involved politically on a local, regional, or national level? Should I go and visit the Center for Holocaust, Human Rights and Genocide center at Brookdale, or the Holocaust Museum in NY or DC? And who should I bring with me? Children, grandchildren? How much money do I give to organizations that fight hatred, bigotry, racism and anti-Semitism? And what about my own racial biases? Am I honest about them and if I know that I have them, if I know that I cross the street or hold my purse tighter when I see someone of a different race, or dressed a particular way, or even if I think about it -- why? And what should I do about this? How do I work on that part of myself?

And what about us as a larger synagogue community? This year, I think we have to take time to work on our response as a collective. We must ask ourselves what *we can do*, as a congregation, to respond to the anger, divisiveness, and toxic culture of hate that we see all around us? Different communities respond in different ways. Some protest, some get involved in multi-faith coalitions, some focus on speakers and education, some raise funds to support worthy organizations doing this work. What are we going to do about this other than post, yell, and worry. How are we going to work

together to make a positive difference in the world? How are we going to respond to our mandate to say "Hinneni-" here we are?

I don't have answers to these questions, but I know that we have to engage with them and start coming up with some concrete solutions. The time for hiding and eating cake is over. That is why I need your help. If any of this resonates with you. If you are tired of the hate. If you are struggling with how to respond. If you are anxious about the future and want to try to make a difference, to bring *tikkun* (healing) to the cracks that exist in our society- I invite you to join me for a communal brainstorming session on just how we might respond. I invite you to share your thoughts with me about what we might be able to do as a community to bring some love, wholeness, and peace into our society.

Join me for a brainstorming session this week- Tuesday night, September 26th immediately following minyan. We will meet right back here at 7:30pm to start a conversation. If you cannot join us, but are interested in seeing what comes out of this- simply send me an email. I will make sure that you are kept in the loop with the communal response. Everyone is welcome on Tuesday night. But no blame allowed- only thoughtful constructive conversation. If you are not sure that you can do that, I would kindly ask

that you refrain from joining us. We will even have something to nosh as we talk. Tuesday night- 7:30, clear your calendar and join us.

The narrative of the binding of Isaac is an instructive one on which to close.

For just when Abraham feared that all was lost, just when things looked the darkest- an angel appeared renewing his hope for the future, ensuring a

future for his son Isaac and for the generations that would follow. The

Hebrew word for angel used here, *malakh*, is related to the word "*melakha*," meaning work or task. Being an angel requires work. It is a sacred task.

Today, it is we who must be God's angels. It is each one of us who are called

to task to do the sacred work, of ensuring a brighter future for our children

and grandchildren. I am convinced that it is not too late. There are ordinary

people like you and me who are filled with love and goodness; who are

ready to be human angels and make a difference by bringing our individual

and collective light into the dark places of our society.

It is not too late.

It cannot be too late.

The time for worrying, for hiding, and for screaming is over.

See you on Tuesday night at 7:30. It's time to be a *malakh*. It's time to be

an angel, a messenger. It's time to get to work.