

Dear Tweens and Teens of Temple Shalom,

For those 7th grade and younger, I apologize in advance for the movie spoilers.

In 1995 I was on my synagogue's 7th grade retreat.

We sat on the floor of a big room and watched *The Wave*.

The Wave is based on the true story of high school teacher Ron Jones (in the movie named Ben Ross) and his class in Palo Alto in 1967.

Ross's students were skeptical about how the Nazis could rise to power, so Ross started an experiment where he instituted a series of stern rules in the classroom, which among other things, dictated how the students sat in their chairs, the way they were to greet their teacher, and the manner in which they were to answer questions.

They wore armbands and saluted with hand motions, proclaiming, "Strength through discipline, strength through community, strength through action."

The Wave quickly spread beyond the classroom to the school. Those refusing to be a part of the movement were ostracized and threatened. Those who had once found themselves bullied and on the outside had found their place in The Wave. The experiment got out of control.

Ross, recognizing how quickly this lesson turned into something quite dangerous told his students that they were actually part of a national movement and that there would be an assembly during which their leader would be broadcasting a message to students around the country.

The students militantly gathered after school for the assembly.

And Ross projected the “broadcast” onto the screen.

It was a video of Hitler.

The students were dejected and horrified as Ross explained to them that there was no national movement, but their actions, their obedience, and their being swept into this movement so quickly caused them to act as the Nazis would have.

I sat on the floor, mouth agape, thinking to myself, “Oh my God. I totally would have been one of the kids in that class! I would have been caught up in that movement.”

My friends felt the same way.

How easy, it seemed to us, to get swept up in a movement.

When I came to Temple Shalom I found out that watching *The Wave* was also part of *our* 7th grade retreat.

But many of you reacted to it differently than my friends and I did.

When debriefing the film several years ago one of you said, “No offense, but those kids were pretty dumb. I mean, no one would ever do those things that the teacher asked them to do. If a teacher told us to sit up straight, we’d probably all just respond by slouching over more. We would never get caught up in a group like that.”

The rest of you agreed.

Are you sure, though?

I sat behind you all as you watched the movie. When Mr. Ross directed the class to sit up straight, you all adjusted yourselves in your seats in response.

It's easy for us to get caught up in a charismatic movement.

Those that are fundamentalist and fascist.

And those that really are not.

There is no place I would have rather been on January 21, 2017 than marching with over 200,000 people on the Mall, including many of you here, in the Women's March.

I loved every moment--from the poster-making to the pre-March service, to the fact that there were so many people that it was impossible to hear the speakers, to the sore feet and exhaustion afterward. I felt deeply connected, supported, empowered and that the rights, dignity, and power of women were being amplified in the most significant of ways.

I deeply *believed* in, and *continue* to deeply believe in, what the Women's March, at its core, stands for.

But I also came to feel deeply *conflicted*.

Conflicted when Jewish women were left out of the list of oppressed women in the Unity Principles.

Conflicted when the leadership would not denounce the support that one of its leaders showed for Louis Farrakhan, a rampant anti-Semite.

Conflicted when questions began to arise as to whether there was room for Zionists in feminism.

How could a movement that brought me to march with hundreds of thousands of other people of all genders around the world deny who I was and what I stood for.

It's so easy to get caught up in a movement.

And so hard to know what to do when very slowly the movement begins to imply that what you believe has no place.

Do you stay in the movement and closet yourself?

Do you walk away?

Do you fight from within?

Forget about how easy it could be to get caught up in a fascist movement.

What do you do when you get caught up in a movement where you agree with 90% of what it espouses, when you are part of a movement fighting for 90% of a world that you want to live in?

Just as easily as you adjusted yourselves in your chairs when a teacher in a 38-year-old film demanded you sit up straight, you might also find yourselves getting swept up in something that you don't entirely agree with.

And in that case, it's so hard to know what to do.

You are justice warriors. You stand up for the rights of others.

You walk out of school, you march, and you protest. You stand up for women's rights, for trans rights, for the rights of immigrants, and for climate justice.

You get caught up in the movements.

And thank God you do.

We've handed you a pretty broken world, and you are relentlessly working toward *tikkun*, toward repair of it.

Get caught up in the good fights.

But not so caught up that you forget to read the fine print. That you forget to see all of what the movement stands for.

Don't forget to notice when a movement, or something smaller than a movement--a political figure, a classmate, an actor, a friend, a teacher--espouses anti-Semitism.

Don't forget to notice, but more importantly, don't forget to do something about it.

You see, growing up Jewish was a lot easier for me than it is for you.

When I was your age, I was never afraid to be Jewish.

I remember there being a noticeable police presence all of one time at my synagogue growing up and I don't even remember why they were there.

There were no codes to get into the building. Perhaps there were cameras. If there were, I didn't notice them.

I learned from many Holocaust survivors.

There were a lot more living when I was younger than there are today.

They shared their stories of brutal treatment and torture by the Nazis, the extermination of their families, the grit and mostly luck leading to their survival.

It was history. Palpable history. History we could touch and see and breathe. And we knew darn well how lucky we were to be growing up *where* we did *when* we did.

The world was different for us as Jewish teens than it was for our grandparents.

When I was in college, my Sociology professor said that we were living in an era where it was “cool” to be Jewish.

And so we were public with our Judaism.

We wore our Judaism proudly, with Jewish stars around our necks. Our camp and NFTY shirts were wardrobe staples.

We were unapologetically Jewish.

Granted, I grew up in a large Jewish community and the experiences of my peers in other parts of the country were not quite the same as mine.

But, for the most part we didn’t live in fear. Occasionally ignorance, but not fear.

In some ways we did the same things that you did. We had our “Jew crews” wrote notes in Heblish to each other as a secret language, and we rushed off to religious school between play practice, sports, the school newspaper, and homework.

I grew up in a time of racism, sexism, homophobia, and after 9/11, Islamophobia.

But anti-Semitism was not part of my upbringing.

It may have been happening in Europe.

Or the Middle East.

My Jewish-Israeli cousins lived through gas mask drills during the Gulf War and bombings during the Intifada.

But that was different.

And, at least, far away.

Anti-Semitism, as far as I was concerned, was a thing of the past.

Never Again meant Never Again for any *other* group.

It meant I would speak up and fight for those who were victims.

And those victims rarely involved the Jewish community.

It wasn't that long ago.

And yet it could have been a lifetime ago.

Because it's different now.

The Holocaust, to some of you, feels like the very distant past.

And you, too, have learned the lessons from it--to speak out for the oppressed. To not stand idly by the blood of your *neighbor*. To do everything you can to make sure that no one is subject to the horrors of institutionalized ethnic cleansing.

But Never Again no longer only means fighting against genocide when it happens to *others*.

Never Again now also means that we need to fight against *anti-Semitism*.

And I don't mean, in any way, to suggest that we are headed toward another Holocaust.

Because we live in an age where hatred toward us it is not state-sponsored.

We live in a time when 11 innocent Jews are murdered during prayer one morning in October and the newspaper doesn't simply report it as fact. Rather the Pittsburgh Post Gazette's front page headline read, in Hebrew, "*Yitgadal v'yitkadash shmeh rabah,*" the opening words of the Mourner's *Kaddish*.

When we are violently persecuted, *most* of our nation is outraged.

People stand *with* us.

But there are less visible and traumatic acts of anti-Semitism, and no one will be outraged by them if we aren't outraged first.

For others to stand with us in anger, we first need to stand up for ourselves.

Know this.

There are no small acts of anti-semitism. There's no such thing as something being "kinda anti-Semitic."

The swastika your classmate etched onto the wall of the bathroom. It's anti-Semitic.

The terms JAP and "Jew down" are anti-semitic.

Louis Farrakhan comparing Jews to termites is anti-Semitic.

President Trump questioning Democrats' loyalty when it comes to Israel is anti-Semitic.

Representative Ilhan Omar tweeting "It's all about the Benjamins baby" is anti-Semitic.

A University of Michigan professor reneging on his commitment to write a recommendation for a student to study abroad on the basis that the student is going to Israel is anti-Semitic.¹

Poland passing a law that says it's illegal to accuse Poland of having responsibility in Nazi crimes committed during the Holocaust is anti-Semitic.

Shootings in synagogues are anti-Semitic.

1

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2018/10/11/university-of-michigan-promises-to-discipline-faculty-in-israel-boycott-controversy/>

These are all anti-Semitic acts.

They are not all equal acts.

But they all need to be taken extremely seriously.

Every. Single. One.

Does it mean that all of the individuals who committed these acts are anti-Semites?

No. Not all of them.

But all of these actions--spoken and physical--demand our attention.

And all of the people representing these viewpoints demand our attention.

Not only when it leads to people being gunned down in a synagogue.

But when it happens in the classroom.

In the hallways.

During a meal.

Because anti-Semitism is not going away by itself.

The Anti-Defamation League reported 1879 anti-Semitic incidents in 2018, up significantly from 1267 anti-Semitic incidents in 2016. This includes a dramatic increase in physical assaults and a significant number of incidents at K through 12 schools and college campuses.²

These are places you find yourselves regularly.

The Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, the Tree of Life massacre, the shooting at Chabad of Poway, these are the realities of being Jewish in America today. This should not be normal, and it does not need to be the reality of being Jewish in America *tomorrow*.

This is the world we are giving you as an inheritance, but you can improve and repair it.

So what can you do?

Speak up against anti-Semitism.

Speak up against anti-Semitism that stems from ignorance, anti-Semitism masked as something else entirely, speak up against blatant anti-Semitism.

² <https://www.adl.org/2018-audit-H>

Sometimes anti-Semitism is masked as anti-Zionism. Some anti-Zionism is expressed by people you know and care about.

Is all anti-Zionism anti-Semitism?

There are many who would say “yes.”

I don’t think so.

But be aware that they are often tied together.

Know that Judaism and Zionism, especially in the Reform movement are inextricably linked.

The Principles for Reform Judaism state: “We are committed to a vision of the State of Israel that promotes full civil, human and religious rights for all its inhabitants and that strives for a lasting peace between Israel and its neighbors.”³

That, my friends, is a vision of Zionism.

I pray that you will proudly hold the Z-word as part of your identity. Both the extreme right and the extreme left have co-opted the term Zionism, turned it into a partisan issue, and have morphed it into what they believe it represents.

Extremists should not be given the right to dictate what Zionism is. What you stand for. They should not be given the right to make assumptions stated as fact about what you believe in if you believe in the existence of a Jewish home in the land of Israel in some way.

³ <https://www.ccarnet.org/rabbinic-voice/platforms/article-statement-principles-reform-judaism/>

The extreme right and extreme left don't get to dictate that as a Zionist you are pro-occupation. They don't get to dictate that as a Zionist you are inherently not feminist.

Because those are false dichotomies.

And that is the place where many of our movements will begin to push us out, staking the claim that we can't believe in a Jewish homeland in Israel and still truly support the mission of the movement.

I want you to be an *unapologetic Zionist*, an *unapologetic critic* of Israel's unjust policies, actions, and institutions, and an *unapologetic pursuer of justice* in the land that is your spiritual homeland.

It is no different than the way I want you to be an *unapologetic American*, an *unapologetic critic* of America's unjust policies, actions, and institutions, and an *unapologetic pursuer of justice* here in the U.S., your physical homeland.

Don't let extremists define Zionism for you. Be a proud Zionist. And speak up loudly as one. Be a Zionist who believes in the establishment of a Jewish state in Israel, one that is just, pluralistic, and democratic. Just. Pluralistic. And Democratic. For *all* its inhabitants.

Don't shy away from this part of your Jewish identity.

Our movements, some of our really wonderful movements, the ones where we agree with 90% of what they stand for, have been known to explicitly and implicitly, and sometimes unintentionally, hold anti-Semitic positions--by excluding Jews from lists of vulnerable minorities, by excluding Jews by denouncing part of their identity when they say Zionism is not welcome.

The leadership of the Women's March, until recently, espoused those positions.

And people fought and spoke up.

And now Jewish women are included in the Unity Principles.

And many of their anti-Zionist leaders have stepped down.

The solution *was not* perfect.

But it was a start.

Tweens and teens.

Speak up.

Speak up when it's hard to speak up because you are going to offend people you care about. That's perhaps both the hardest way to fight anti-Semitism, and the most effective.

Speak up when it means going against the grain.

Speak up when someone says "There's no place for a Jewish Pride Flag in the Dyke March!"

Declare, "Yes there is!"

Explain why you stand for what you do and why these policies and statements are anti-Semitic.

I'm not saying don't join the movement. Although some of you may choose not to or to step out of it. I am asking you to, at the very least, fight from within.

Work within your networks to shut down anti-Semitism.

As historian Dr. Deborah Lipstadt advised in this year's commencement speech at Brandeis University:

“We must become the unwelcome guests at the dinner party. It is not uncommon at a Thanksgiving dinner...for our host to remind us that Uncle XYZ...who is a committed racist, homophobe, anti-Semite, or purveyor of any other prejudice, is coming. Our hosts may ask us to just keep quiet to ensure a peaceful gathering. We can't afford to do that any longer. Though, if you want to be invited back, I suggest you warn your host first that you cannot sit idly by.

...You probably won't change the mind [of that person] but you will telegraph a message to all the people there, especially, but not only, the young people, that such talk is not to be tolerated, that such ideas are beyond the pale.⁴

Remember, no genocide of any kind in any place ever began with action. It begins with words.”

No one wants to be the unwelcome guest.

No one wants to speak out against their friends. Or their friends' friends.

But you must do it.

⁴ <https://www.brandeis.edu/now/2019/may/lipstadt-speech.html>

Speak up when a friend uses an anti-Semitic slur that they may not even realize is anti-Semitic.

Sometimes when your friends say anti-Semitic things and draw anti-Semitic images, it might just be because they are clueless.

Dig deep and call them out. Explain why what they said, wrote, or drew is inherently anti-Semitic and why they can't do that anymore.

It will be awkward, but you have influence over your friends. They might actually change.

And if they continue to do it, speak louder and to more people. Put pressure on them.

And, finally, speak out against those who espouse anti-Semitism no matter where they are on the political spectrum--and especially if they are people you tend to agree with.

As Dr. Lipstadt continued in her commencement address:

“...Those on the right [of the political spectrum] are quick to recognize it on the left, and those on the left have no trouble seeing it on the right. But they are often blind when it is happening right next to them. They have weaponized the fight against antisemitism and turned it...into a political cudgel.

Fighting all kinds of prejudice, not just antisemitism, is not about scoring political points. And if we cannot call out our political compatriots on these issues, then how can we call out those on the other side of the political fence?”⁵

⁵ <https://www.brandeis.edu/now/2019/may/lipstadt-speech.html>

On Yom Kippur morning we read a *Haftarah* portion from Isaiah that reminds us that a fast where we afflict our body and soul is not actually what God desires of us. Rather, God asks us to break the bonds of injustice, to let the oppressed go free, to share our bread with the hungry, to take those who are homeless and poor into our homes.

God requires of us justice and action--not just self-affliction.

And at the end of this list of how we must help out those who may or may not be part of our Jewish community, God also adds that we are never to neglect our own flesh and blood.⁶

It's an interesting addition as it's the only one that's particular to the Jewish community. It tells us that living a life of justice includes fighting for justice for the Jewish people. We can never get so wrapped up in all the other calls for justice that we undermine the needs of our ourselves.

Im ein ani li mi li. If I'm not for myself who will be for me?

Lots of people will be for you after tragedy strikes, but it's in those quieter, subtler moments, the ones that you will notice because your ears and heart and mind are primed to pick up on anti-Semitism, those are the moments where you must be *for yourself*.

Where you must be *for us*.

⁶ Isaiah 58:6-7

Oh, and Tweens and Teens, please make sure the adults in your life join you in speaking up.

A lot of them are learning or relearning what it means to live with anti-Semitism.

It's new for me.

For you, unfortunately, it's become old news.

Help me, help us, to be better at speaking up and taking action, too.

Our Jewish community depends on it.

Gmar Chatimah Tovah, May You be Sealed for a Year of Goodness.

May the Jewish community be sealed for a year of goodness.

Of Safety.

Of Security.

Because you, because we, spoke-up for ourselves.

Sincerely and in Solidarity,

Rabbi Rachel

