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Erev Rosh Hashanah 1, Congregation Adath Emanu-El
September 29, 2019 1 Tishrei 5780

Pause, Find, Speak

I remember that Monday after the Pittsburgh shooting, when a white nationalist entered a synagogue on Shabbat and murdered eleven Jews. Eleven Jews praying in their home on Shabbat. I remember that Monday after, when I had to look into the eyes of my eleven students... and teach them an exciting lesson about Hanukkah. You don't forget -- where you were, what you were doing, or how you felt -- when you face or first hear about antisemitism.

I was still in bed. Cuddled up, nice and cozy. It was after a long week, and I had initially planned on sleeping late. But my little green parrot was hungry. And she *rudely* squawked me awake so I could give her morning carrots, seeds, and nuts. At the time I was living in a studio apartment near Prospect Park in Brooklyn. Bundled in my soft sheets and waking up to my parrot chirping, I first read the headline: "Active Shooter in Jewish Synagogue in Pittsburgh"

Eleven Jews were murdered by a white nationalist terrorist in what the Anti-Defamation League is calling the deadliest attack on Jews in the history of the United States,¹ for simply praying in their home, the Tree of Light Synagogue of Pittsburgh, on Shabbat.

For the past few years, I have had the pleasure of working as a Hebrew School teacher at the reform synagogue in Brooklyn Heights- last year with eleven beautiful third grade Brooklynites. Eleven third graders whose childhood innocence shielded them from hatred, bigotry, and xenophobia: cruelties that often plague our world. Like an instance that I encountered one day after teaching, a few months prior to the shooting in Pittsburgh. On my way home from teaching and still sporting my *kippa*, I had to transfer subway lines when I was approached by a man. As I was casually checking my email on my cell phone I heard, "*are you recording me?*"

Typically when you're living in New York City and some random stranger asks you an odd question, you don't engage. So I didn't. And I made sure that my phone camera was obviously pointed away from the random stranger. And he came closer.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw his deranged stare, "*are you, recording me?*" Again, I did not engage, and instead began playing a mindless game on my phone to try and take my mind off of the stranger. So he moved even closer.

"*Stupid Jew, can't you hear me? Are you recording me?*" I responded (cool and calm), "*no, I'm not.*" I turned. He exclaimed, "*good. Why couldn't you say that in the first place?*" And he began to walk away slowly and disgruntledly.

In the hopes of engaging further, he muttered, "*stupid fake Jew. Not even a real Jew...*" For the second time, I broke the sacred New York City code and I spoke out against his antisemitic words. He then proceeded to drunkenly follow me around the station until my train came, shouting derogatory slanders left and right. Antisemitism, is everywhere.

¹ "Audit of Anti-Semitic Incidents: Year in Review 2018." *Anti-Defamation League*, www.adl.org/audit2018. Accessed Aug. 30. 2019.

I remember where I was when I first heard that there was an active shooter at the *Chabad* of Palway on the last day of Passover. This time one Jew was murdered by a white nationalist terrorist for simply praying in her synagogue home on Passover.

It's everywhere. In Baltimore last year, do you remember when a theatre goer at a performance of *Fiddler on the Roof* stood up and shouted "*heil Hitler*" with his arm straight out?

It's everywhere. I'm originally from Rockland County -- where last month the GOP of Rockland posted a disturbing antisemitic video on their social media channels titled a "*Storm is Brewing in Rockland.*" The video scapegoats the ultra-orthodox Jewish population using colorful medieval antisemitic tropes such as their "*control*" and "*takeover*" of the county. Created to respond to a very real challenge we face as Rocklanders as the ultra-orthodox community grows, this propaganda film refers to the ultra-orthodox community as the "*Ramapo Machine.*"

It. Is. Everywhere. In Poland; Istanbul; Argentina; and in Moscow: where on the first evening of Passover, *Torat Chaim Yeshiva*, the largest Yeshiva in town, was set ablaze and spray painted with swastikas. It's in London; Paris; and in Melbourne, where in January, Neo-Nazis posted swastikas outside of a nursing home that housed Holocaust survivors.²

And here, antisemitism in the United States is nothing new. Arguably it began on this soil in 1654 when the first twenty-three Jews arrived on the shores of New Amsterdam. Escaping from the Portuguese Inquisition terrorizing Brazil, these twenty-three Sephardic Jews first encountered Peter Stuyvesant, the Director-General of the Dutch Colony. In some of his early writings, he described Jews as "*deceitful,*" "*very repugnant,*" and "*hateful enemies and blasphemers of the name of Christ.*"³ He did not want those twenty-three Jews to settle in New Amsterdam. Stuyvesant used the Jews of New Amsterdam as a scapegoat to further maintain his bigoted stronghold on religious communities, arguing that if they gave the Jews liberty than "*we cannot (then) refuse to free*" *Lutherans, Catholics, and Quakers.*⁴ Essentially, if we free the Jews: then it's all downhill from there.

Antisemitism does not remain inside the realm of one ideology or even one political party -- right or left, this xenophobic bigotry aimed at the Jewish People is everywhere.

And it continues in all of our backyards-- like in Brooklyn. A few weeks after the Pittsburgh shooting, a Reform Synagogue in Brooklyn, only a twenty minute walk from my home, was vandalized with the words "*Jews better be ready*" and "*Hitler.*"⁵ Soon after, swastikas were found in a Brooklyn Heights park named for a member of the Jewish Beastie Boys.⁶ Ultra Orthodox men are regularly assaulted in Crown Heights and Borough Park in Brooklyn. According to the Anti-Defamation League, antisemitism spiked by 105% in 2018 in regard to physical antisemitic assaults in the United States.⁷

² "Global Anti-Semitism: Select Incidents in 2019." Anti-Defamation League, www.adl.org/resources/reports/global-anti-semitism-select-incidents-in-2019. Accessed 5 Dec. 2020.

³ Jacobson, Matthew Frye. *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*. Harvard University Press, 1999, 171.

⁴ Zhu, Wei. "The Forgotten Story of the Flushing Remonstrance." SSRC The Immanent Frame, 26 June 2017, tif.ssrc.org/2014/01/15/the-forgotten-story-of-the-flushing-remonstrance.

⁵ Brown, Nicole. "Union Temple of Brooklyn Vandalized with Anti-Semitic Messages, NYPD Says." *AmNewYork*, 3 Nov. 2018, www.amny.com/news/brooklyn-anti-semitism-1.22769440.

⁶ Kozloff, Nikolas. "In Brooklyn, Anti-Semitism Takes A Different Tack." *Tikkun*, 24 July 2019, www.tikkun.org/in-brooklyn-anti-semitism-takes-a-different-tack.

⁷ "Audit of Anti-Semitic Incidents: Year in Review 2018." *Anti-Defamation League*, www.adl.org/audit2018. Accessed Aug. 30. 2019.

There is too much to take in.

What can we do in the face of ignorance and evil? What do we do when we feel hopeless? What can we do when we face complete disbelief about the state of humanity? What happens when it over consumes us?

What do we do when it hits so close to home? Twelve American Jews, twelve members of our collective Jewish family, have died since last Rosh Hashanah in their synagogue homes.

In this new year of 5780, I think we have three responsibilities.

Number 1: Recharge our batteries. Recharge our batteries so that we find comfort in the darkness. Our prophet Isaiah declares,

“*nachamu nachamu ami yomar Eloheichem*”

"נַחֲמוּ נַחֲמוּ עַמִּי יֹאמַר אֱלֹהֵיכֶם"

“God says: All of you, offer comfort to My people.”
(Isaiah 40:1)

When the Tanakh repeats a verb verbatim, it indicates that the verb is important.

“nachamu nachamu”

"נַחֲמוּ נַחֲמוּ"

“All of you, offer comfort”

This verse is a reminder to both *find* and *offer* comfort. We need to recharge our batteries so that we can see properly in the darkness.

How do you recharge your batteries when you feel at your lowest? When you are overstimulated by the constant reminders of evil in our world? What do you do?

What do I do? I take a break from social media. I call a family member. I watch a movie or read a book, I do something that makes me laugh out loud or that I find gives me immense meaning. Let’s turn off the news when it becomes too much. Take that walk, enjoy time with your cat, sit down and watch your favorite show on Netflix. Let’s spend more quality time with our grandchildren, our partners, and our friends.

We have each other.

Rabbi Rachel Rosenblatt writes “*it's our job to comfort one another. And when we do, we bring God's presence into the world and into our lives. When you listen to someone pour out their worries, you are God's ears, listening. When you place a hand on someone's shoulder blade, or offer an embrace, you are God's hands, soothing.*” She argues that this is the meaning of the doubling of the verb “נַחֲמוּ”: comforting one another.

Rabbi Rosenblatt continues, “*when you offer comfort, you are God's presence, comforting.*”⁸

⁸ Rabbi Barenblat, Rachel. “We Find God When We Bring Comfort: A d’var Torah for Shabbat Nachamu.” Velveteen Rabbi, <https://velveteenrabbi.blogs.com/blog/2012/08/we-find-god-when-we-bring-comfort-a-dvar-torah-for-shabbat-nachamu.html> Accessed 29 Aug. 2019.

If we cannot see through our tears, if we cannot see through the darkness, if our batteries are not recharged: we cannot stay engaged and help fight for a better world.

Number 1: Recharge our batteries and find comfort in the darkness.

Number 2: “Look for the Helpers”

Apropos to Mister Rogers’ famous statement following the 9/11 Terror Attacks, it is critical that we always “*look for the helpers.*”

I am constantly inspired by the Muslim-American Community and by Churches of Color who have come out in mass in support of the Jewish Community through all of our recent pain. Supporting us in sermons, in activism, on social media, and by providing us friendship; these fellow minority groups bring us comfort. As do many Jews when we comfort them in their pain.

For instance last year at my student pulpit in southern Maryland, I was happily surprised to see a group of Muslim men at Shabbat services. They came with one major goal in mind: to express their love and support of the Jewish Community. They engaged with us in a moment of communal mourning and solidarity-- just weeks after the terror attack on the Mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand; and in response to a local antisemitic and racist incident. In a nearby neighborhood, a wave of horrible fliers targeting both the Jewish community and just generally, people of color appeared on people’s doorsteps, mailboxes, and places of worship via the Ku Klux Klan. And those Muslim men were there to comfort us.

Look for the Helpers.

They always have been here ready to help. Remember that nasty man Peter Stuyvesant who refused to allow the first twenty-three Jews to settle in New Amsterdam? Well, his superiors in the Dutch West India Company in Amsterdam overruled him in all that he said, arguing that he was intolerant. And not only that, the inhabitants of the town of Vlissing, Flushing today, had declared that “*the law of love, peace, and liberty*” extended to “*Jews, Turks, and Egyptians.*”⁹

A month prior to the Pittsburgh terror attack, American-Muslim human rights activist and Virginia native Qusim Rashid tweeted “*Jewish friends: I see the anti-Semitism you’re suffering through. Know this—I’m a Muslim [and] I stand w/you against the hate.*” Tweeting his own scripture, Rashid continues, the “*Prophet Muhammad(sa) wrote 1400yrs ago. [that] Muslims & Jews are one nation. No Jew shall be wrong for being a Jew. The enemies of the Jews shall not be helped.*”¹⁰

Muslims feel it because they face similar evils.

Rabbi Jonah Pesner-- the director of the *Religious Action Center*, the social justice hub of the Reform Movement-- writes “*white supremacist ideology, especially in the United States, teaches that Jews, black people, Muslims, anyone not of white Christian descent, are somehow lesser in their very humanity.*”¹¹

⁹ Zhu, Wei. “The Forgotten Story of the Flushing Remonstrance.” SSRC The Immanent Frame, 26 June 2017, tif.ssrc.org/2014/01/15/the-forgotten-story-of-the-flushing-remonstrance.

¹⁰ Rashid, Qasim (QasimRashid). “Tweet Message.” Oct 6, 2018, 3:53 PM. Tweet.

¹¹ Rabbi Pesner, Jonah Dov. “Our Enemies Will Not Defeat or Define Us.” Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, 28 Apr. 2019, rac.org/blog/our-enemies-will-not-defeat-or-define-us.

Rabbi Angela Buchdahl writes that white supremacist “*ideology traffics in the fantasy that Jews possess an invisible, outsized, even supernatural power.*” She quotes writer Luke O’Brian, who adds that, in this twisted belief, they believe that “*it’s all a plot to undermine traditional white patriarchy so Jews can maintain a *parasitic dominion* over the Earth.*”¹²

Antisemitism is only one fabric of this disgusting ideology. Rabbi Pesner writes that fighting against white supremacy, “*requires deep partnership across all communities affected (in addition to those that aren’t)...*” He believes, and I agree, that, “*we must continue to deepen existing [relationships], and create new relationships across lines of faith, race, and difference...[because] these relationships model the world as we know it should be, the world we are striving to create.*”¹³

In the face of evil, we need to look for the helpers, and become the helpers for each other. Those who denounce bigotry and hatred stick together. Like the Women for Reform Judaism says, “*We are stronger together.*”

Look for helpers, and become a helper.

Our sage Elie Wiesel believed that “*peace is our gift to each other.*” He explains, “*just as despair can be given to me only by another human being, so too can hope be given to me only by another human being.*”¹⁴ We gain our strength by strengthening others, and find comfort in each other.

Number 1: Recharge our batteries and find comfort in the darkness.

Number 2: “Look for the Helpers”

Number 3: We use our voice.

On Yom Kippur morning, Jews around the world will read the words of Isaiah :

“*K’rah v’garon al-tachshoch ka’shofar!*”

“*קרא בגרון אל-תחשך כשוֹפָר!*”

“*Call out with a full throat without restraint like a shofar!*”¹⁵

How should we use our voice? The prophet says, like the shofar, “*to unlock bonds of wickedness... to let the oppressed go free...*” and used to “*not to ignore your own family.*”¹⁶ But first, I think that we have to recharge our batteries and find helpers, so that our voices are even stronger.

In an interview with NBC following the antisemitic attacks on the Chabad in Palway and the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, Holocaust historian Dr. Deborah Lipstadt spoke out about the power of words: She argued that as a society we cannot fail to use our voices against people who engage in acts of antisemitism-- even just rhetoric. She explains, “*because we know [that] the rhetoric leads to violence.*” And this violence, she continues “*begin(s) with words.*”

¹² Rabbi Buchdahl, Angela W. “Yom Teruah: Sounding The Alarm For Anti-Semitism (Rosh Hashanah 5779/2018).” Central Synagogue, www centralsynagogue.org/worship/sermons/detail/yom-teruah-sounding-the-alarm-for-anti-semitism-rosh-hashanah-5779-2018. Accessed 2 Sept. 2019.

¹³ Rabbi Pesner, Jonah Dov. “Our Enemies Will Not Defeat or Define Us.” Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, 28 Apr. 2019, rac.org/blog/our-enemies-will-not-defeat-or-define-us.

¹⁴ “Elie Wiesel: A Retrospective, Week #8 | Elie Wiesel Center for Jewish Studies.” © 2019 Boston University, 14 Aug. 2017, www.bu.edu/jewishstudies/2017/08/14/elie-wiesel-a-retrospective-week-8.

¹⁵ Isaiah 58:1.

¹⁶ Isaiah 58:6-7.

Dr Lipstadt compels listeners to condemn the words, because “if you’re not condemning the statements, if you’re using words that [many] think are a dog whistle, a wink wink, nod nod, you’re enabling them, you’re emboldening them.”¹⁷ Use your words. Raise your voice.

Our voices are powerful. In our Jewish creation story, God says, “יְהִי אֹר” “let there be light.” And there is light. With words God creates, and so do we. Words could be used negatively to hurt us, and as, in the words of Dr Lipstadt, as a “rhetoric that leads to violence.” Words led to the “Unite the Right” White-Nationalist event in Charlottesville where neo-Nazis chanted the Nazi-era slogan “Jews will not replace us.”¹⁸ These words partially, arguably, were a part of the spike in antisemitism in our nation.

Words could also be used to create light:

*Baruch atah Adonai Eloheinu melech ha’olam
asher kidshanu b’mitzvotav v’tzivanu
l’hadlik neir shel Yom Tov.*

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם
אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ
לְהַדְלִיק נֵר שֶׁל יוֹם טוֹב .

[Blessed are You, Adonai our God, sovereign of the world
who hallows us in Your mitzvot, commanding us
to light the Yom Tov Lights]

Words can bring comfort: Solidarity. Friendship. Compassion. And light.

Jewish Musician Elana Arian writes:

“nachamu nachamu ami yomar Eloheichem”

"נַחֲמוּ נַחֲמוּ עַמִּי יֹאמַר אֱלֹהֵיכֶם"

Comfort us, comfort us in our wilderness.

Comfort us, comfort us as we struggle to take care of one another”

As the Yom Tov lights brightly glisten, may we find the *shalom* that we need when recharging our batteries, so that we could find and become helpers. So we could see in the darkness, so that we could use our voices against those who cause us and others pain and terror. So maybe we could leave the world safer for the next generation of adorable religious school students:

Avinu Malkenu Sh’ma Koleinu

אָבִינוּ מֶלְכֵנוּ שְׁמַע קוֹלֵנוּ

Hear our voice

Avinu Malkenu Sh’ma Koleinu

אָבִינוּ מֶלְכֵנוּ חַמּוּל עָלֵינוּ

Have compassion on us.

v’al olaleinu v’tapeinu

וְעַל עוֹלָלֵינוּ וְטַפֵּינוּ

Have compassion on us and on our families.

¹⁷Deborah, Lipstadt, and Hayes Chris. “Tracing the Roots of Anti-Semitism with Deborah Lipstadt: Podcast & Transcript.” NBC News, 15 May 2019, www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/tracing-roots-anti-semitism-deborah-lipstadt-podcast-transcript-ncna1005711.

¹⁸ Rosenberg, Yair. “Jews Will Not Replace Us’: Why White Supremacists Go after Jews.” *Washington Post*, 14 Aug. 2017, www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2017/08/14/jews-will-not-replace-us-why-white-supremacists-go-after-jews.

Avinu Malkenu kaleh chol tzar umastin ma'aleinu אָבִינוּ מַלְכֵנוּ כֹּלֵה כָּל צָר וּמִשְׁטֵיַן מֵעֲלֵנוּ,

Avinu Malkenu, halt the reign of those
who cause pain and terror upon us.

Avinu Malkenu chadeish aleinu אָבִינוּ מַלְכֵנוּ חֲדָשׁ עָלֵינוּ

Renew us.

chadeish aleinu, shana tova. חֲדָשׁ עָלֵינוּ, שָׁנָה טוֹבָה.

Renew us, for a new year of goodness.

For a sweet new year, Avinu Malkenu.

Shanah Tova.