

Thou Shalt Not Remain Indifferent

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My friends. I do not need to tell you that we are living in uncharted times, uncharted territory. Neo-nazis marching proudly in Charlottesville and the glass wall of a Holocaust Museum in Boston being shattered. Swastikas rearing their ugly heads in Branford, in Guilford, and in Madison. The President of the United States equivocating between the evil of White Supremacists and those who would stand up to them. World War II veterans having to remind us that they went to war to *defend* America *from* the Nazis. We Jews made a post-Holocaust vow Never to Forget.

Today is Rosh Hashanah. The New Year of 5778, which falls, according to the secular calendar, on September 21, 2017. 2017. Who could have imagined that we would be where we are today, in the year 2017. Who could have possibly thought that, after the defeat of Nazism in World War II, after the horrors of the Holocaust, after Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech, after Marriage Equality for black and white and for gay and straight, who would have imagined that we would be here today needing to reckon with White Supremacy, with anti-Semitism and with xenophobia.

Who are our heroes from whom we can learn? Who are our role models? I think of one recently fallen hero, who passed away just over one year ago, from whom we need to learn again and again and again. In his magnificent autobiography, *All Rivers Run into the Sea*, Elie Wiesel reflects upon what it was that kept him alive through the horrors of the Holocaust. He writes: "Logically, I shouldn't have survived. Sickly, timid, fearful, and lacking all resourcefulness, I never did anything to stay alive...I was less afraid of death than of physical suffering..." Elie Wiesel considers that maybe it was "the will to testify - and therefore the need to survive" that helped pull him through. "Did I survive," he asks himself, "in order to combat forgetting?"

Elie Wiesel believes that he survived in order to combat forgetting. Rosh Hashana was created for many reasons, but one of them, surely, is to help us combat forgetting. That is why the rabbis named this holiday *Yom Hazikaron*, The Day of Remembrance. We can't build a positive future without learning the lessons of the past or, in Wiesel's words, by combatting forgetting.

Elie Wiesel famously wrote that "the opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference....And the opposite of life is not death, it's indifference." With this idea, Wiesel introduced a whole new moral category. Indifference is the gravest danger of all. Forgetting is the surest path to indifference. We are morally obligated never to forget. Wiesel's lifetime focus affirms that

conviction for he only rarely wrote about Hitler or Himmler or any other Nazi leaders. He pointed his finger at the indifferent ones: the leaders around the world who looked the other way; the people who knew something was wrong but turned their backs, those who paid no attention to those in need, and shrugged passively at the evil all around them.

Elie Wiesel dedicated his life to calling out the indifferent, the enablers, the people who dismissed and ignored the hateful rhetoric, who turned a blind eye because they liked that the trains ran on time, they liked that the economy was getting better, and so they did nothing. *“Lo ta’amod al da’am re’echa.”* “Do not stand idly by while your neighbor bleeds,” our Torah teaches. (LV 19:16)

Fast-forward to the challenges that face our country today: renewed anti-Semitism, outlandish White Supremacy, and a rejection of the foreigner in our midst. Elie Wiesel’s final cause before he died was the Syrian refugee crisis. A crisis of inconceivable magnitude, and yet there is no room for it on the front pages of our newspapers any longer as we need to make room for North Korea and hurricanes and what will happen to the Dreamers. How quickly we forget. How short our attention span. It is hard to remember yesterday’s headlines because today’s headlines are so big. The Syrian refugee crisis has not gone away. Elie Wiesel spoke of those refugees and of the brutal regime that caused those refugees. But true to form he didn’t focus his criticism on Bashar Al-Asad or on ISIS or other militants. Instead he singled out the indifferent ones. In particular, he singled out the Jews. A regime uses gas on its people and the Jews do not rise up?

One of the proudest things I can say about Temple Beth Tikvah is that our congregation has risen up. Together with our partners at First Church in Guilford, we have sponsored a Syrian refugee family and embraced them with love. What once was an idea has become a reality, a family with names, that is now a part of our lives. The mom and the dad: Ghedir and Nezar. And their three beautiful children: Rowan, Reda and Marya. One singular refugee family that so bravely made their way from their destroyed city of Homs in Syria, to Jordan for four long years where they had to sell all of Ghedir’s jewelry just to be able to live, through years of vetting by the United States of America, to the tarmac at JFK International Airport and finally, up I-95 to settle by us in New Haven, Connecticut.

It takes a village to welcome one immigrant family. Members of our synagogue have come together to welcome them with food, and shelter, and decorating an apartment and filling it with furniture, and struggling with a language barrier and a culture barrier, and navigating school systems and dentists and doctors and bureaucratic red tape and even the DMV. Helping them and learning from them. Taking the children on outings, taking pride in their accomplishments. Helping them find work and helping them find peace.

The Talmud teaches us that to save a single life is to save a whole world. We rightly take pride and satisfaction in helping to save one family, and not even stopping there, as we eagerly and hopefully await yet another family to our shores.

But the Golden Door through which all refugees are welcome has been shut closed by fear, fear of the other, fear of the unknown, fear of violence, fear of lost jobs. Contemporary America is full of fear. And a quick and false resolution of fear is to convince yourself that you are better than what you fear. And so the horrendous chants of the neo-Nazis: “Blood and Soil” and “Jews will not replace us.” “I am better than you.” “You have no rights.”

The events of these harrowing weeks are a wake-up call to our Jewish community. They are a wake-up call not only because we ourselves have been targeted but because racism is always wrong and we need to be on the side of naming it and rejecting it. The Talmud teaches that God created us all from Adam & Eve so that no human being could ever say, “my lineage is greater than yours.”

But just in case we thought the white supremacists were after someone else, or that the Confederate flag has nothing to do with modern day Nazi sympathizers, or that we were somehow safe in the fact that most - but certainly not all - Jews in America are white, those fiery torches illuminated another truth, one we learn and forget, only to learn again this day: if one minority group’s rights are threatened, we are all threatened. As Martin Luther King taught us, “We are all tied together in a single garment of destiny,” whether we are the least powerful or the most powerful person in our world.

Anti-Semitism is not the purview of Republicans or Democrats, of Left or Right. Make no mistake about it. Anti-Semitism knows no political borders. It comes from the political right and it comes from the political left. Even as we decry the sight of neo-Nazis marching in the streets, it should not blind us to the attacks against Jews that have been coming from the other direction.

The B.D.S. movement, which stands for “Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions,” focuses its energy on Boycotting Israel, Divesting in Israel and Sanctioning Israel. While Israel is far from perfect, the fact that the B.D.S. movement assigns 100% of the blame for the Palestinian condition on Israel and that they deny the right of Israel to exist, makes it clear that their anti-Zionism is, in actuality, anti-Semitism. They deliberately use an elaborate vocabulary that is couched in words of compassion for the oppressed, to validate their anti-Semitism.

Are you familiar with the term “intersectionality?” It was just added to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary this past April. According to Merriam-Webster, the word has been around since the late 1980's, but it has found a new popularity in recent days. ‘Intersectionality’ is a term used to refer to the way that “different forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap, and yes, intersect—especially in the experiences of marginalized people or groups.”

One peculiar phenomenon, however: while the term is meant to emphasize the connections between different groups of people who experience oppression, it is also somehow used to justify that people who oppose the oppression of blacks, gays, women or Muslims, are not required to oppose the hatred of Jews. In fact, the B.D.S. movement, in their own convoluted minds, can hate Nazis and Jews simultaneously, since they have a syllogism that equates the Nazis of the 1940s with the Israelis of today. They are, in their own way, as scary as neo-Nazis, especially as the views of the B.D.S. movement have a strong voice on college campuses throughout our nation, and they are gaining a foothold in centrist American politics.

Racism knows no political boundaries. Anti-Semitism is not in the platform of any one political party. Sexism transcends political partisanship. These are human issues. These are moral issues. And we face a religious challenge. For we are taught that all human beings have been created “*b’tzelem Elohim*,” in the image of God, and if we stand by and watch others being disgraced and humiliated for their religion or their gender or the color of their skin, then we are culpable.

In his acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize for Peace, Elie Wiesel said, “I swore 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.”

Therefore, today I join **hundreds** of my rabbinic colleagues across the nation in calling upon each and every one of us to rise up and say in thousands of ways, every day, as proud Jews and proud Americans: “We cannot dehumanize, degrade and stigmatize whole categories of people in this nation. Every Jew, every Muslim, every transgender person, every disabled, black, brown, gay, 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 the people are worthy of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

We must be vigilant against hate. Not just the hatred that we see so readily in others, but our own shadow sides, our own blindness to the ways in which we ourselves behave towards others, or have our own fear of others. We read in our Torah portion today the story of Sarah and Hagar and the casting out of Ishmael after Isaac is born. The story is not there because it is pretty. It is there because we need to remember that Sarah, the first matriarch of our people, was capable of going right up to Abraham and asking him to cast Hagar out of their home and out of the only land she ever knew, together with her son Ishmael. It is an important story for us to hear. It reminds us that even the best of us is capable of casting others aside. It challenges us to break the cycle, not to repeat and perpetuate the long arc of hatred.

Our own Torah portion, the blasts on the Shofar that we hear throughout our service this morning, and our Jewish heroes like Elie Wiesel, they all refuse to let us just live our lives; they refuse to allow us the comfort and peace of forgetting, of retreating into our own self-interest. They refuse to allow us the rationalization that this time, we can ignore it; that this bigotry or that hatred, this time we can excuse it.

Elie Wiesel did not point his finger at the Nazis. He pointed his finger at those who allowed the Nazis to flourish, at those who did not speak up, speak out and do what is necessary to combat hatred in our world.

On this Rosh Hashanah we must learn the most important lesson of all: that the world is being born each and every day, that freedom must be guarded each and every day, that the victories of yesterday are not guaranteed for tomorrow and we must never take our blessings for granted. The greatest danger to those blessings is our indifference.

We must enter into this New Year with a commitment to stand up and speak out for all humanity. Each of us. Every one of us. Our voices matter. Our outstretched hands matter. There is so much more that unites us than divides us. Black, white, Jewish, Christian, old and young. We are our brother's keeper. We are all each other's neighbors, on this one planet that we call home. On this day when we celebrate the birth of our planet, we vow to be the sound of the Shofar, to dedicate ourselves to equality and unity, to be passionate and engaged citizens, to be insistent advocates for tolerance and enduring kindness between the diverse peoples of our nation; to pursue justice to create a society that protects and enlivens every citizen. Let us be relentless, tireless builders of that society in the New Year and every year, on our shoreline, in our state, for our country and for the world.

*Ken Yehi Ratzon
May it be God's Will*