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SHARING FAITH and FATE

Many millions of people have read the diary entries of the most famous of hidden Jews of World War II: Anne Frank. What is far less well-known are the increasingly desperate efforts her father, Otto Frank made to get his family out of the Netherlands before emigration was impossible. As of June 1940, the United States State Department had toughened the visa application process and reduced the number of immigration visas granted. In fact, only 21,000 Jewish refugees were admitted to this country during the war years, just over ten percent of the permissible quota at the time. Historian Paul Johnson wrote that national surveys conducted in the United States during the second world war revealed that Jews were seen as a bigger threat to America than any group except the Japanese and the Germans.

The Frank family had already emigrated from Germany to a country they thought much safer. The Nazi invasion destroying their illusions. Mr. Frank clearly did not have the money needed for the scarce transit visas. So Otto writes several anxious letters to his college friend Nathan Strauss Jr., son of Macy's co-owner. Ironically, Otto had worked for Macy's in New York after graduation in 1908 but went back to Germany after his father died.

Mr. Frank did succeed in obtaining visas for his entire family to go to Cuba, but after Germany declared war on the United States in December of 1941, the issued Cuban visas for Frank were cancelled and the rest, of course, is incredibly tragic history.

The cruel irony here is that throughout history the way many countries tried to get rid of us was by expelling us. In fact, it is hard to think of a country that has not done this. According to one research report, since 250 AD, we have been kicked out no fewer than 109 times. As comedian Jon Stewart has quipped, "Jews and Blacks come from the same history of degradation. Blacks sing the blues, Jews complain mightily, but never put it to music."

The Nazi's had something permanent in mind of course—the exterminating of a third of our people, two-thirds of European Jewry in less than five years.

Even today we implicitly know that Europe is not through with vicious anti-Semitism. To be sure it is not state-sponsored. In fact, many top government officials have condemned hatred of Jews in no uncertain terms, but anti-Semitism clearly is pernicious and on the rise. For example, Jean Marie LePen, head of the far-right National Front Party in France, responded to one Jewish critic, "We'll include him in the next batch."

Sorry to disillusion you, Monsieur LaPen, but we're not going anywhere. The following comments made by a colleague of our member, Steve Lipin, resonate with me. She writes from London:

In the last few months I have allowed the hatred of anti-Semitism to penetrate deep inside me.

Well, no more.

To the people on public transportation who whispered anti-Semitic remarks, you have made me more proud. To the actors and musicians who denounced Israel as an apartheid state, but have never been there to see just how laughably wrong they are: you have made me more proud.

Proud enough not to allow you to invoke terms like genocide and war crimes to chastise Israel for acting in self-defense. There is no aggression greater, she writes, than the promise to be wiped off the face of the earth.

As we know, Israel has already been destroyed, first by the Babylonians then by the Romans. As Rabbi Alex Schindler reminds us, never in history has a sovereign state been wiped out and resurrected as a living entity. An absolute miracle! And yet this modern state has been attacked constantly by enemies, Jew-haters and critics far and wide.

When I was a student at Columbia, many years ago beginning in 1969, Israel was bashed every day on campus in stronger terms than even the anti-Semitic BDS movement uses. The assault did fill my head with questions which were answered during my junior year abroad at Hebrew University. All year I travelled the length and breadth of that incredible land. One day a bunch of us camped on the Lebanese border until we saw convoys of trucks with their banks of headlights illuminating the entire area. The PLO had penetrated and the soldiers made the not-to-subtle suggestion that we ought to hop on their vehicles. They didn't have to ask twice.

That year, I once again, fell in love with Israel's beauty and resilience. When we travelled on the West Bank we could see that Israel was on one side of the road and the Palestinian territories were on the other. When you are on the ground Israel certainly does not look like an imperial power. Then and now Israel is living jaw-to-jaw with people that really do hate us, people who have forced Israel to defend her very existence and are responsible for inflicting great pain on their own population.

Notice that the Arab world has finally figured out that what really threatens their regime is not Israel but Islamic fundamentalism. While Israel battled Hamas over this painful summer, the surrounding Arab countries, Egypt, Jordan, UAE, silently cheered Israel on, gave Hamas zero support. And they have now

joined that shaky coalition with United States battling ISIS and other terrorist entities in that increasingly volatile region.

Yet, after all these wars, repeated attacks by the enemy who wants to consign us to the dustbin of history, Israel does find herself in control of people who daily rage against her.

You and I struggle with this monumental dilemma and with this moral complexity and so do Israelis. Journalist Ari Shavit articulated this dilemma in his powerful book, *My Promised Land*:

For as long as I can remember, I remember fear.

For as long as I can remember, I remember occupation.

Israel is the only nation in the West that is occupying another people. On the other hand, Israel is the only nation in the West that is existentially threatened. Intimidation and occupation have been the twin pillars of our condition.

Many of us find this dilemma to be excruciatingly painful. Of course, our Israeli brothers and sisters live and die with it. This past Tuesday, Aviva and Noy Ifrach, the mother and sister of a handsome twenty-one year old sharp-shooter, named Tal, in the elite Egoz anti-terrorism unit, who was killed in July in Gaza, talked to our high school students and parents. Behind them, a slideshow of Tal's life was presented, like we might show at a Bar or Bat Mitzvah reception. Here is adorable Tal as a toddler, becoming Bar Mitzvah at the Western Wall, in the embrace of a beautiful, young woman who was to become his wife. Here he is in his uniform, looking spiffy in his beret. Here he is now in a coffin draped by the Israeli flag.

Tal was killed in an intelligence gathering mission during the war in Gaza in July. What his unit discovered in the building in which he was killed were plans to burst through the complex tunnel system in large numbers, to use chemical and conventional weapons, to slaughter as many Israelis, young and old, as they could find.

"We are humble people," she said. "I was overwhelmed that there were three thousand people coming to our house each night for shiva, all telling me that Tal is a hero helping to save our country."

As proud as Aviva is but she could barely speak. Her heart was shattered. "He was my whole life," she gasped in Hebrew. Of course, she had the same dreams we all have for our children which has been true for so many parents in this endless war.

If I were making policy of Israel today, I would spend the majority of my waking minutes, of course, on security, making sure, for example, the iron dome anti-missile system is functioning well. Can you imagine what could have been? But then, I would spend time not building and thickening more settlements, but publicizing a vision for the West Bank, Gaza and the Middle East. A vision of what life

could be like if an agreement were achieved—rebuilding of communities, education and training leading to jobs and opportunity, more freedom, fewer checkpoints for moderate Palestinians, the dignity of statehood, if only they would simply accept Israel's existence as a Jewish state. When will the Palestinian people stop tolerating a hopeless future for their own precious children?

How inspiring it would be for Israel to be espousing the values expressed both by our Torah and by her own Declaration of Independence. Instantly Israel would feel far less existentially lonely. If you think about it, Judaism has survived and thrived for four thousand years precisely because we have had a vision of life that is more compelling than any other, a vision that breeds hope even among those who have forgotten how to dream of a better life for their children. As Elie Wiesel reminds us, the goal of our lives is not to make the world more Jewish, but to make the world more human.

It disturbs me that there are so many Jewish communities here and in Israel who want to condemn rabbis in the pulpit and anyone else for expressing pain for the death of innocent life, Jewish and Palestinian. Let the day never come when we as Jews lose our compassion. Do we not remember Abraham's thundering challenge to God when he was told of the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah would be destroyed? "What if there are innocent people there? לא יעשה משפט כל הארץ Shall the judge of the whole earth not do justice? We must weep for the death of innocent children on either side of this historic divide." Let us always strive to live up to God's commandment to Abraham, to all of us, והיה ברכה, "Be thou a blessing."

Just think of why you are a member of this people, why you are a member of Rodeph Sholom, why you educate your kids here, why you have invested in this congregation sometimes three, four, or thirty or forty years and in some case, three, four, five generations. Probably because you want your life to be about more than individuated success, because you want to help carry on the miracle of Jewish life, because you want to be a part of a community that takes care of each other, a community doing sacred work, repairing the world as best we can.

We cannot trumpet the vitality of our people and our faith loud enough. I want our children to be Jewish, not because of our degradation but because of our resilience, not because anti-Semitism gives us no other choice, but because of our values which have inspired the entire world. They should behold Judaism not as burden but as joy. I want them to come into this sanctuary and be uplifted by song and blessing. To be inspired by a series of practices, festivals and laws which are a gateway to a life that matters, a life of real purpose.

As I mentioned on Rosh Hashanah, 2015 will be my 25th year with this congregation and I am positive there is no better congregation anywhere! And I am totally objective! My vision is that ours will be a literate, deeply committed community which cares for each other and strives to make the world a more fair and peaceful place. I also want our community to feel fully enfranchised. When you join Rodeph Sholom you are covenanting with us. It is the way we commit to each other. In our midst we have many different family configurations and want each to feel appreciated and involved. We have worked hard to engage members of color, those

from LGBTQ families, families with Special Needs, families with one parent who was not born Jewish but still feels part of the Jewish family. We have worked hard to make all of us feel at home.

To those of you who were not born Jewish let me say that I'm very much aware that in many cases you have had to give up a lot, that you may have family who are not comfortable with your desire to be part of the Jewish community. Many of you have told me that often, in fact, the partner who was not born a Jew has been the driving force guaranteeing Jewish life in your family or at least an equal partner in that sacred endeavor. I appreciate your struggle and your decision more than you know. As a result we have clearly stated that even if you are not Jewish you are a full member of our congregation, welcome on our bimah to recite blessings, to be active in our committee structure and when the time comes, to be buried in our Jewish cemetery.

Yet, heretofore, neither I nor our other clergy have officiated at interfaith marriages. In my mind this has never been a judgment on anyone's relationship or depth of love. Looking at the statistics, which show that too many people who intermarry disappear from Jewish life, I did not want to give any endorsement that would lead to a greater diminishing of our numbers or strength. For every parent who says to their kids, "I want you to date and ultimately marry a Jew," I did not want your child to be able to retort, "Stop bothering me, even the rabbi doesn't care who I marry," which in fact is not true.

So I have found and still find it hard to take a categorical position. However, after study and reflection I want to say that for you who have joined Rodeph Sholom, shown your commitment, proven how much a part of the community you are, you have raised Jewish children and then, if they fall in love with someone who is not Jewish, and they in turn commit exclusively to a Jewish family and agree to study with us, I and the clergy team will happily officiate at that marriage. Precisely because you have covenanted with us all these years, we will covenant with you and treat you with love and respect we have in every other theatre of life. I want you to feel in every fiber of your being, "I really belong in the Rodeph Sholom community," because in every way you really do.

We want you and your children and theirs to continue to be proud of the community and clergy you have invested in and really know we are inclusive, pluralistic and live the values we espouse.

I close with a slightly emended *Statement by a Woman Who Has Chosen To Be a Jew*:

I began this journey because I loved one Jew.

Now that is no longer good enough for me.
Now I love not only the man I chose to marry
but also the Jewish People, my People.
Where they go, I will go,
and if that means estrangement and exile,
I choose to be the stranger and the exile with them.
I would not lie at this most awesome moment
saying it is, has been, or will be easy.
Whether my family understands or not is not irrelevant,
for they bore me and raised me,
wished only the best for me, and loved me.
They are my parents.
Whether or not they stand by me
as I assume my Judaism—
they will always deserve my love.
But you must stand by me, *you*, my People,
for you have known the heart of the outcast.
I have been warned:
when the hate of Jews appears in any of its many faces,
each one uglier than the next,
I know:
the curses and stares,
are aimed at me.
and I accept that
as much as I accept all promised joy
that comes to me as a Jew.
If—sitting across the room at some dinner
you see this face,

so different from those all around me

because of my Irish grandparents,

I am not a guest or sympathizer.

I belong there.

Your tragedies of old and of today are mine;

I take them as I take the Simchas:

the Land of Israel, Mitzvot, Shabbat in all its glory.

foods I choose not to eat.

I take the name Ruth as mine.

On this most meaningful day, you are my Naomi.

May I and my children be worthy parents'

of the Redeemer of Israel.

I will work to make sure that *am yisrael chai*, the people of Israel shall live through me and shall bring dignity to all of God's children.

Finally I will never cease to try to live up to Hillel's words when he said,

אם אין אני לי מי לי "If I'm not for myself, who will be for me?"

אני לעצמי מה אני If I'm only for myself, what am I?

ואם לא עכשו אימת? "If not now, when?"

May we always strive to be worthy of her.

Amen.