

The Mission of the Jew/Yom Kippur Sermon/Rabbi Robert N. Levine/Congregation Rodeph Sholom/New York City

Whenever and wherever we travel, we certainly care about using our miles, we care about where we stay, we certainly care about when and where we are going to eat. After that, what do most of us want to know? Are there Jews here? Where do they live? We want to see our museums, our cemeteries, our synagogues. Many of you are more likely to attend a Shabbat Service in that distant locale than at your own Rodeph Sholom, as shocking as that fact may sound.

We feel that connection to Jews everywhere. We are *mishpacha*. No matter their skin color, level of observance, specific cultural predilections, we are members of one community and feel fierce pride in that connection.

Famed photographer Frederic Brenner has crisscrossed the planet lugging camera and tripod, finding Jews in Ethiopian mountain ranges, dusty Indian courtyards, Jerusalem's *Mea Sheream*, and Florida beaches. There, he captured a group of bearded, tattooed older men, gathered outside their Miami beach synagogue revving up their Harleys. He labeled a portrait of 16 Groucho Marx impersonators—the Marxists.

His depiction of Jews—playful, poignant, painful, winds up in Europe where he had to deal with the devastating losses of the Holocaust in his own family. But, Brenner insists that his photography offers incontestable proof that we are not only the children of the Shoah. We are the children of arguably the most remarkable story of continuity and resilience in all of human history. While Jew and non-Jew alike know how Jews died in the 20th Century, he rather wants to show us how Jews lived.

Despite unprecedented efforts to remove us from the world stage, we Jews have refused to go away. This is living proof of the promise God makes to Abraham, “There will be many dark days ahead, but my covenant with you is eternal.” Well, here we are, affirming that the people, the faith, the heritage, the State, the mission and the people of Israel shall live.

I have become fascinated with the little-told story of life after death for the Jews surviving the Holocaust in the Displaced Persons Camps in still Nazi-infested Europe. Not just Jews, but other nationalities and religions who were uprooted by the war. A million people did not go home due to fear of anti-Semitism or burgeoning Communist rule. For Jews, there simply was no place to go home to.

And yet, the remnant of the Jew came back to life. While relatives exchanged scraps of information, desperately wondering if any loved ones survived, educational programs sprouted up, political life including deep Zionist yearnings, sprung up in the Camps. Judaism was reborn. Army chaplain Rabbi Abe Klausner printed a new *Haggadah* and a Seder was conducted in the dining room of The Zeilsheim D P Camp celebrating freedom from the German pharaoh.

Many of our people who personally witnessed how cruel human beings could be to each other somehow found the capacity to love again.

Weddings took place and members of our own congregation were born in those camps. And in a story I just love, our own beloved Natalie Silverstein's parents, Ukrainian Catholics, met briefly in a DP camp. And after the war they spotted each other on opposite sides of Delancey Street on the lower East Side, re-engaged, married and gave us the extraordinary gift of Natalie and her family.

Throughout history our people have found ways to rebuild from the ashes and in some cases, to find their way back.

Some years ago a Mexican Catholic woman named Karrie Melendez reported that her paternal grandfather said something shocking to her in a dream, “We’re Jewish,” he declared, peeling the mask off history’s longest secret. From the time the Inquisition was established in Spain in 1492 until it was abolished in Europe and the New World in 1808, close to 32,000 Jews had been burned at the stake and nearly 300,000 were forced to convert. Since then many people passed down rituals they did not understand—lighting lights on Friday night, refraining from bread on Passover. Some reported that for many generations their ancestors married Jewish people. Studies show that genetic markers and diseases almost totally absent in the general Hispanic population have shown up in many people confirming their Jewish ancestry. Karrie Melendez woke up from that dream and went on a genealogical journey.

Driving through the Pico-Robertson neighborhood in Los Angeles, Karrie was attracted to a sign advertising an Intro to Judaism class. She began to attend services and practice Judaism regularly and now regards herself as a full practicing Jew.

How precious is our heritage.

How fragile!

We have always depended on an individual self-discovery leading to the explorations of the mystery and majesty of Judaism.

In fact, Judaism begins with a kind of intense self-confrontation called for on this holiest day of the year. I will assure you that the first Hebrew, Abraham, never heard a deep resonate Charlton Heston-like voice, *Abraham, Abraham*. No, what he felt was an intense dissatisfaction with a world that turned inanimate objects into gods, a world which inspired people to do little more than attain self-satisfaction. Thus it was a crisis of faith that moved him to *Lech Lecha*, get himself out to a land where a new spiritual paradigm could begin, where a transcendent God actually needs human beings to create a world where elevating others is at the heart of life's purpose.

Self-confrontation—Moses Prince of Egypt, scion of privilege, goes out and sees the suffering of Israelite slaves. The Hebrew text is explicit

ויפן כה וכה וירא כי אין איש

He sees there is no one else to stand up against brutality. Without him there is no Judaism.

An utterly patriarchal society where women were viewed strictly as objects of male ogling, where queens were chosen by beauty contests, a woman named Esther found the courage to take on the man who strove to exterminate our people realizing that there something she had to do.

Judaism burst onto the world scene then because of the determination of individuals to do the right, when the world too often turned its back or pursued unspeakable immoralities.

Now a group of slaves stood at Sinai to do what had never been done before. There is no other instance in all of human history of a treaty made between a god and an entire people, a treaty in which that god rejects worship by subjects if that adoration does not lead to social betterment, to human dignity. Love of God must lead to love of each other or it leads nowhere at all.

Our job, embodied in that covenant at Sinai, is to uplift every society that has let us in, to make a contribution to the well-being of every ethnic, religious and racial group we encounter. The second president of the United States, John Adams, put it well,

“I will insist the Hebrews have contributed more to civilized men than any other nation. They are the most glorious nation ever inhabited this earth. They have given religion to three quarters of the globe and have influenced the affairs of mankind more deeply than any other nation, ancient or modern.”

We are in so many ways a remarkable people, a miraculous people. War correspondent Sebastian Junger wrote a most thoughtful book called, *Tribe*. His thesis is that soldiers in combat formed tight-knit bonds. These soldiers would do anything for each other. After the war those support systems disappear and soldiers coming home reported terrible high rates of PTSD and suicide. In contrast, the Israel Defense Forces have a PTSD rate of about 1%. His conclusion: Israelis have a shared public mission, so soldiers come back to a country who understand and nurture them.

All members of our community belong to the Tribe, a people of shared meaning who continue to partner with God to a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

Alas, our Tribe is not fully united. What a shock! It is impossible to find any moment in Jewish history when we were truly united. I'll tell you this: we had better try now. Our beloved brothers and sisters in Israel are now smack dab in the middle of the most intractable Shiite-Sunni war as any in our memory. Israel has always lived in the roughest neighborhood on the face of the earth. But today the situation is incredibly perilous.

Somehow, the New York Times editorial trumpets: The U. S. is at the boiling point with Israel.

Really?

Certainly, I share frustration with some policies. Settlements high among them. But, America is at a boiling point with Israel? When just kilometers to the north, there are tensions reminiscent of the Cold War between Russia's brutal attempts to keep Assad in power, and America's ambivalent forays, plus every Sunni and Shiite radical group battling it out, creating a heartbreaking humanitarian crisis. That is the boiling point, dear Paper of Record.

Given the actual war and the proxy war in Syria, our concern today must be with making sure that Israel can protect her citizens from Islamic holy war. You know that I am and have been passionately concerned with finding a solution to Israel's existential conflict with the Palestinians. As I have told you before, I yearn for Israel to do all it can and to sketch a vision for a two-state solution uplifting regional economies and providing a sense of hope for millions. But at this moment could anyone expect Israel to give up territory? To whom exactly? To a spineless, feckless Palestinian leadership which can play host to or be rolled by the Islamic State? And, in the midst of this chaos there are still calls for BDS, to boycott and divest from Israel as if Israel should unilaterally save the region from morass. BDS lives in a naïve world where there is no Islamic terrorism and some kind of functional, responsive Palestinian leadership. BDS is thinly veiled anti-Semitism masquerading as anti-Zionism. By the way where are the calls to boycott the Soviet Union, China, Iran, Turkey, etc. etc.? Tells you a lot.

Some say our kids are disengaged with Israel. They don't care about Israel as much as we do. I am not so pessimistic. There has never been in the history of the State so many kids who have been to Israel, engaged with the people, felt connected to their history and heritage, seeing how incredibly cutting edge Israel is in so many areas. That goes double for the kids in our schools who have remarkable personal, experiences with the Jewish State. They may be confused about the politics. They want peace. They want justice. They want Israel to live up to her ideals. Join the club. But their love for Israel and their instincts for Israel's wellbeing will be as they grow and mature as clear as ours is.

By the way, some in our community are upset when our kids voice empathy for the Palestinian people. Where do you think those feelings come from? From our schools, from your Seder table. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt so you must show compassion for everyone who is downtrodden. That is who we are. Perhaps they are not taking into account the complexities of diplomacy, of how difficult it would be to achieve peace with security. But I applaud their compassion and pray that one day a son or daughter of Sadat emerges to finally "Yes, welcome to the neighborhood. We recognize your right to exist. Let's get to work."

It is interesting that in some ways the Tribe is not all that splintered. The voting patterns of the Jew since they have been recorded for about a hundred years shows a remarkable consistency of political behavior. Why? Why do we vote the way we do? We vote in a way that is not necessarily in our economic self-interest. I firmly believe that we vote out of Jewish conviction. Since Egypt we have realized that when any people is threatened all peoples are threatened. Since Egypt we face an absolute imperative to reject bigotry of all kinds. So, we have been in the vanguard of working for the rights, dignity and justice of women, African-Americans, gays, lesbian and transgender people as a statement of values and as a statement of self-interest.

This is an election in which the insidious prejudice of some members of the American citizenry have been allowed to be articulated and celebrated. It is barely believable that there is a voting block that has been unwilling to accept the fact that an African American is legitimately a president of the United States. He was not born here. If he was, he belongs to an unacceptable religion, he is the parent of world terrorism. These statements are so shocking that we almost inured to them.

Shock is daily currency in presidential election 2016, the strangest and the most confounding in our memory, but let me just say this:

From the beginning of human history until today, there have been people who have been unable to accept the equality and advancement of women. You may recall that there are two creation stories in Genesis. In Chapter One the text says “We were created in the divine image, male and female God created them. At the same time, absolutely equal.” Chapter Two, “A woman is created from the *tzela*, the side or rib of man.” So what happened to this woman created equal to man? According to our tradition her name was Lilith. She was seen as too powerful, too independent, so she was banished from the face of the earth, never to be seen again. Later in the Purim story Vashti, was vixenized because she refused to humiliate herself and dance naked before intoxicated men.

Women who took stands, who strove to make it in a man’s world have been undermined, marginalized. I would like to be wrong, but I do believe that even in 2016 there are large segments of the population who will not accept the equal status of women, who are threatened by women’s advancement, authority and leadership. This is bigotry which must be resisted no matter what political party we feel allegiance to.

This election has produced a new term: The Alt-right. It sounds cool, like alternative rock. The Alt-right is a collection of hate groups positing ideas with absolutely no place in the American landscape. There are characters like Jared Taylor who has written, “If there is no territory that white Americans can call their own, we ultimately will be pushed aside.” There is the *Daily Stormer*, an openly neo-Nazi media outlet. There is an anti-Semitic blog called, *The Right Stuff*, which runs a podcast entitled, *The Daily Shoah*.

There can be no coddling, no rationalization, no recruitment for votes among people who insinuate poison into the body politic, who can provoke the hate-ridden to lock and load their guns and go off to make this sick vision a reality.

Our tentacles are raised, particularly because we lived through the darkest era in human history when shocking rhetoric led to unimaginable action. Our history compels us to respond to another policy imperative. The treatment of immigrants. This is central to who we are as Jews. Today an unprecedented 65.3 million people have been displaced from their homes. Once again all immigrants are being blamed for everything—loss of jobs, loss of identity, terrorism of all kinds. Blamed and hated once again.

I recently read a poll stating that after Kristallnacht in 1938, 94% of Americans disapproved of Nazi treatment of Jews, but 72% objected to admitting a decent number of Jews.

And our people were not saved. Through the leadership of our Social Action chair, Peter Ehrenberg, we are fashioning a response to the refugee crisis. Of course, we might feel some ambivalence: most Syrians despise Israel and probably Jews as well. But we are Jews, bound to remember that we were once degraded and humiliated, we too had nowhere to go and desperately looked to the world and asked, “Won’t anyone give a damn?”

When we hear rhetoric about keeping immigrants out, every one of us should return in our minds to July 1938 when thirty-two nations met in Evian, France to discuss the refugee crisis. Nations stood up to rationalize why they were not going to lift a finger to rescue the Jews. Golda Meir was an observer representing Palestine. She was not permitted to speak at Evian but later wrote this:

“I wanted to get up and scream. Don’t you know that those so-called numbers are really human beings? People may spend the rest of their lives in concentration camps or wander around the world like lepers if you don’t let them in.”

As prophetic as she was, Golda could not have imagined what awaited. That is why our impulse must be to open our hearts and our borders to those fleeing certain death.

In fact, what happened to us on our journey through history never made us introverted, never made us bitter. What happened to us has inspired us to uplift every society that has opened the door to us by even a crack. Rather than retreat to a self-centered posture, we looked around and asked, “What can we do to repair the world, how can we continue to respond to God’s commandments given first to Abraham and then to us, “Be thou a blessing.” That is our purpose here on earth, the very reason why we were created in the first place. For we have taken to heart the words of the late modern prophet Elie Wiesel, “the role of the Jew is not to make the world more Jewish, the role of the Jew is to make the world more human.”

May it ever be so.

Amen