

### Courage to Live

Yom Kippur knocks the arrogance out of all of us. This incredible day reminds us that we can't lay out a grand scheme, plan each stage of life and serenely count our blessings.

The unforeseen arises, challenges overwhelm, the painful intrudes. We know not even who will live and who will die. Randomness is unescapable.

The question Yom Kippur poses is: What are you going to do about that?

Our Torah and our history provide stunning responses that we sometimes can even emulate.

Adam and Eve give birth to two sons: ecstatic joy. They love them both. Then, unfathomable tragedy. They lose them both. The Midrash comments that mom and dad were filled with despair and actually separated for a while. Somehow, they found the courage to make love again and bring another child into the world. Eve called him Seth which means "gift", a true gift from God.

Thousands of years later Chasidic Master Levi Yitzchak of Berdechev summoned the gumption to confront God:

Today you judge all your creatures both great and small. But I, Levi Yitzchak, proclaim it is you, God, who must be judged today. Your children are hungry, they are ill, they are persecuted, they are massacred. Where are you?

Ours is not a religion that expects us to be stoic, passive, suffer in silence.

God challenges us precisely because we are needed to do together what neither of us can do alone.

God does not dictate or direct the painful, even tragic things that happen to us. They are inevitable as too often they are random. God needs our courage, our strength, our protest, as we very much need God.

Throughout history we have responded. Examples abound: The Nazis had been in power for four months when my beloved predecessor Rabbi Gunter Hirschberg z"l became Bar Mitzvah in a grand synagogue with more than two thousand seats in the northwest section of Berlin.

Rabbi Hirschberg remembered:

As I stood on the Bimah of my synagogue chanting from the Torah, a group of storm troopers goose stepped by on the street singing songs of hate. I shall never forget that moment. Somehow it seemed that even then there were two voices pitted against each other—the raucous sounds of violence and the sweet chants that the synagogue inspired. It became very important that the Nazi voices should not drown out mine. I was completely hoarse by the time I finished reading Torah.

Rabbi Leo Baeck led the Berlin Jewish community when in 1943 he was sent to the Theresenstadt concentration camp. That same year the Vatican was approached to arrange a trade for Baeck's safety.

He would not desert his people. "In Theresenstadt," writes Baeck, "I was number 187894. I only had one thought: never to become a mere number and always to keep my self-respect."

Courage abounded after the war too. When the British denied certificates of entry into Palestine for barely alive survivors, three thousand organized protest meeting in the DP camps at Foehrenwald. A new Haggadah, written and printed by American chaplain Rabbi Abe Klausner in 1946, courageously proclaimed "God ultimately will bring us to the Promised Land." Miracle of miracles, two years later the Jewish State was born.

I said this to you before but it bears repeating: our enemies have tried everything to wipe the Jewish people off the face of the earth. In a classic essay "Israel, the Ever-Dying People" Simon Rawidowicz wrote, "There was hardly a generation in the Diaspora that did not consider itself the final link in Judaism's chain." Yet the Jewish people, greatly reduced in numbers, but not in resolve, continue to live. Moreover, never in history has a people been kicked off its land and had the courage and strength to reclaim that very land. The people of Israel have done so three times.

You can and should wrestle with the thorny geo-political issues Israelis themselves wrestle with. But do not expect a people that has been denied its land from the year 70 through 1948 to imperil its survival in arguably the world's most unstable region.

What makes the resurrection of the Jewish people and the Jewish homeland all the more incredible is the undeniable fact that country after country have slammed its doors in the faces of our parents and grandparents fleeing Nazi savagery.

In fact our country refused to even fill up its paltry refugee quotas. A virulently anti-immigration senator, Robert Reynolds of North Carolina thundered, "If I had my way today I would build a wall around the United States so high and so secure that not a single alien or foreign refugee from any country upon the face of the earth could possibly scale or ascend it." Sound familiar?

But, we must never forget. Our memory must inform our empathy and our attitudes towards those fleeing certain death and despair today. In 2019 there are 25.9 million refugees worldwide, the highest number ever recorded since World War II, double the total since 1912. Though Rodeph Sholom is trying hard to do our part, since 2017 the United States has decreased the numbers of refugees welcomed to the US more steeply than any other country. This Administration has pretty much stopped letting in anyone from anywhere. Catastrophes like capsized boats, which once produced horror, now produce yawns of indifference. But we Jews remember the *St. Louis* and are forbidden to remain indifferent.

And you might have thought that the greatest genocide in the history of humanity would make it unconscionable ever to see such anti-Semitic bigotry again.

You would be quite wrong! According to the ADL, the American Jewish community experienced near historic levels of anti-Semitism in 2018. 52% of reported hate crimes in 2019 have targeted Jews. The *New York Times* writes that there have been four times as many crimes motivated by bias against Jews as there have been against Blacks. Hate crimes against us have outnumbered those targeted at transgender people by a factor of 20.

Do you want real irony? All this is happening at the same time that Americans love Jews more than any other religious group according to the Pew Research Survey. 74% of Americans have a favorable view of Israel.

Fascinating. Anomalous. As you know, I have believed and still do believe that America is qualitatively different than any other of our historic experiences. With our constitutional laws and protections, it is fitting for us to truly call America home.

But that does not mean that we don't feel unsettled, scared even. Children all over this country are afraid to go to school because they don't know what will be unleashed there. And what is being done to address this widespread angst?

Our incredible frustrations reminds me of a story: Steve Stein goes back to his old neighborhood in Cleveland. He had served as a soldier in Vietnam and has not been back since. So much has changed except that Kleinman's Shoe Repair is still in business. Stein suddenly remembers that before he went to Vietnam, he left a pair of shoes that he never picked up. He wonders if they possibly could still be there.

Believe it or not, Mr. Kleinman is still bent over his work space in his leather apron with one eye nearly shut.

"Excuse me, Mr. Kleinman," Stein says. "I used to live around the corner, and forty years ago I left a pair of shoes with you for repair. Is it possible you still have them?"

Kleinman looks at Stein and says, "Vas dey black ving tips?"

"Yes. They were!"

"And you wanted a half sole mit rubber heels?"

"Yes," says Stein. "That is exactly what I wanted. Do you still have them?"

Mr. Kleinman looks up and squints. "Dey be ready Vendsday."

So, what will happen in our country this or any Wednesday? Nothing underscores how broken and ineffective our political system is more than their inability to debate and pass laws that will make the slightest dent in controlling the proliferation of deadly weapons in our country. The debate over whether people should be able to possess handguns, assault rifles with huge magazines on them and on and on, that battle seems to be won by the NRA. In fact no one even debates the core question of guns in this country.

By the way, have you read the United States Constitution lately? You know I could become a fan of the Second Amendment. Have you read it? It is very short:

“A well-regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.”

I read English pretty well, I understand modifiers. Am I missing something or does the Second Amendment only talk about the need for well-regulated militias, not for the right of individuals to bear countless arms to inflict unspeakable destruction anywhere they so choose in the United States of America?

Carnage continues and political courage is nowhere to be found.

As you well know, we are coming up to the one-year anniversary of the horror that took place at the Tree of Life Synagogue. We'll never forget this tragedy. To compound the pain that shule has not been and may not be reopened. Their shofar blower and many key members were slaughtered. As commemoration, we are offering a great program on anti-Semitism on October 30 and I hope you will attend. Now one year ago were we afraid to enter our synagogue after the tragedy?

Just the opposite. We flocked here in huge numbers, understanding that the synagogue is the place to come to feel the security of community, to sense God's presence and to be an ally against hatred of all kinds. We are the descendants of Gunter Hirschberg and will stand tall in the face of those who would choose for us not to stand at all. That is why we will continue to enhance our security which you cannot help but notice as you enter our beautiful newly refurbished lobby.

We shall come to Rodeph Sholom to celebrate our faith and heritage, because this is our home and no one will dislodge us from our home.

At the same time we shall insist that bigotry does not accrue to any people, race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. We will stand up whether voices of hate come from the left, right, or even from the Oval Office in Washington, D.C.

Speaking of her father, Abraham Joshua Heschel, daughter Susannah once wrote,

My father used to remind us that the Holocaust did not begin with the building of crematoria and Hitler did not come to power with tanks and guns; it all began with

uttering words of defamation and propaganda. Words create worlds, he used to tell me.

This, pray tell, is not Nazi Germany but anti-Semitic, anti-Zionist, racist and homophobic words are the poison that can seep into constitutional protections, and undermine this country's greatness and goodness. Our words create worlds too when people are either embraced or shunned.

I want to reiterate what Rabbi Harold Schulweis wrote quoted in our Rosh HaShanah Machzor. Christianity marks Anno Domini, the year of our Lord, the birth of Jesus, son of God. Muslims began their calendar in 622 AD celebrating Muhammed's flight from Mecca to Medina.

The Jewish calendar does not celebrate the birth of a Jewish savior, nor a particular historical event. The calendar does not even celebrate the birth of Judaism. No, we celebrate the birth of the world and humanity. This is a universal vision. We are created in the image of God precisely so we can take care of each other and our planet as if God were actually walking among us.

We are not doing a very good job at either but we are heartened by the fact that Jewish values, Jewish living, can put us in touch with that very mission, can bring out the best version of yourselves and can make you proud of who you are becoming.

For on this sacred night we will declare: They cannot intimidate us or dissuade us from our sacred task.

So, let's do it.

Let's live as proud Jews.

Let us reclaim practices that might have slipped away just beyond our grasp.

Come and be inspired by Friday night services and continue the Shabbat celebration with dinner on our fifth floor or get together with friends for Shabbat dinner even if it's at a local restaurant. Do Mitzvah Day and mitzvot throughout the year. Spread the word about what being a part of this amazing community can do for those in search and in need.

Look closely at our beautiful mosaic in the lobby and see the solitary diamonds making their way into the synagogue, into Jewish life. That may be you. That may be your child or someone's child. If all of us open our hearts and extend our arms they too can come home to their heritage and identity.

What Judaism has taught us is that courage comes from purpose. Our Torah, our Reform Judaism, our faith demand that we look beyond the borders of our own personal and parochial concerns and to work to ensure the safety, opportunity, and well-being of our fellow human beings. That is who we are, that is what it means to be proud Jews.

As Elie Wiesel reminds us, "The mission of the Jew is not to make the world more Jewish, it is to make the world more human."

May we always be as worthy as the courageous woman who chose Judaism:

I began this journey because I loved one Jew. 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 have left my family to be at one with you. I will not lie saying it has been, or will be, easy. So, 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 mere 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, now that I have walked so proudly over the line. 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.

We welcome you, Ruth, to a people that refuses to go away.

To a people with resolve that no matter how often they tried to bring us low, how often they tried to plunge us into darkness, we summoned the courage to overcome, to bring the light of God's love, the hope for human betterment into our world.

No matter how often they have sought our death, we will, now and always, choose life.

Amen.