

THE SOUNDS OF SHOFAR: IN SOLIDARITY WITH CHARLOTTESVILLE

It was a surreal moment.

Approaching the Robert E. Lee Monument in the center of Charlottesville, VA, a few days after the horror, a young black woman, Aliya, joined her white friend Tom in placing a placard in front of the statue.

The placard covered the name “Robert E. Lee.” Instead it read: “The Heather Heyer Memorial,” in honor of the 32-year-old woman who was murdered when a car driven by a white supremacist rammed into a crowd of counter protesters at a white nationalist rally.

Together with my colleagues Rabbis Shmuel Herzfeld, Etan Mintz and Uri Topolosky, we asked if we could join in this memorial to Heather. Together we sang “We Shall Overcome.”

White supremacists try to divide America declaring “it’s us vs. them.” We were humbly responding – it’s us, all of us, we, together.

We had come to Charlottesville to express solidarity - solidarity with the beleaguered Jewish community and with all of Charlottesville’s citizens. But as the day progressed, we realized that solidarity alone was not enough. A lack of protection given to the Jewish community deeply worried us, and we believed it merited an investigation by the US Justice Department.

We first discovered this upsetting situation when sitting down with Rabbi Tom Guthertz, rabbi of Congregation Beth Israel. He shared with us that he had received a call on Friday from municipal officials, telling him they had picked up information that the synagogue was under threat. The rabbi asked for protection and was told that not enough personnel was available.

He then told us that on Saturday, during Shabbat morning services, three neo-Nazis were standing in front of the synagogue with semi-automatic weapons as congregants assembled for prayer. The rabbi again asked for protection, but none came.

His account echoed an article posted by synagogue president, Alan Zimmerman, where he stated: “On Saturday morning, I stood outside our synagogue with the armed security guard we hired after the police department refused to provide us with an officer during morning services,” he wrote.

Incensed, we walked a few blocks to the Charlottesville City Hall, insisting that we see the City Manager, Charlottesville’s highest government official. One of the Assistant City Managers, Mike Murphy, sat down with us. Rabbi Herzfeld chastised the Charlottesville Police for not offering the synagogue protection. We added: “It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out that with many, many hundreds of neo-Nazis marching through the streets of Charlottesville on Friday night with KKK type torches, declaring ‘Jews will not replace us,’ the synagogue needed to be guarded.” That protection should have been automatic, without any request coming from the synagogue at all.

As I recall that moment, my mind wanders to the shofar sounds we are hearing these days – the sound of *Tekiya*. Rambam writes, it’s the sound of *uru yesheinim ha’kitzu mi’tardematchem*, which can be interpreted – STAND UP, STAND UP and GATHER ROUND and RAISE A VOICE on behalf of the vulnerable – demand they be secure and protected.

Subsequently, we and others spoke to Charlottesville’s police chief, Al S. Thomas. The story became national. Many many demanded more protection – and lo and behold Charlottesville police were in front of the synagogue.

We made our way to the University of Virginia Medical Center. Rabbi Mintz who had served there as a chaplain years ago, knew the supervising chaplain, Mildred Best. Mildred shared with us that the open lobby where one enters the hospital had been transformed into a closed emergency center during the hours of crisis on the Saturday the violence erupted. Mildred arranged that the full chaplaincy staff join us in a prayer service. It was important that we show support to the spiritual healers who had been there, offering help during the crisis. Even healers need healing.

We formed a circle as Rabbi Topolosky, on his guitar, led us in Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach’s heart wrenching song of one word – *Ruach*. *Ruach* literally means

“wind” but more deeply refers to the image of God, a spirit that unites all of humankind. Some of the chaplains were in tears. We held hands as we offered the blessing: *Hashem yishmor tzeitcha u’voacha me’atah ve’ad olam* – “May the Lord guard your going out and coming in forever.” We offered comfort to the bereaved and prayed for the renewal of body and soul for the injured.

Here again, the sounds of the shofar reverberate, this time with the brokenness of *Shevarim-Teruah*. *Shevarim* is a wailing sound of woe – *ke’adam ha’goneach mi’lebo*. *Teruah* is the cry which is so deep it beats with a staccato rhythm, like a person who can’t catch his or her breath. And so, Onkelos explains *Teruah* as *yevava* - a weeping sound. Together *Shevarim-Teruah* reflect the caring and empathizing with those in need. We must all feel the pain of Charlottesville.

Over the years, America’s leaders have done just that. Republican and Democratic presidents have been “healers.” To wit: President Reagan after the Challenger exploded, President Clinton after Oklahoma City, President Bush in the rubble of 9/11 and President Obama singing Amazing Grace in Charleston. But in Charlottesville the White House fell short; if there was a *Shevarim-Teruah* it was a whimper.

What we heard instead was a moral equivalency when there was none in Charlottesville. There were no fine people amongst the marchers. Fine people don’t march like KKKs who are unhooded.

And let me add: for me, a spiritual activist is one who calls out those on their extreme flanks. From this perspective, it’s the special obligation of Conservatives to call out the KKK and white-supremacists, even as it is the special obligation of liberals to call out BDS and Antifa

As I left Charlottesville, my mind wandered to the moment, perhaps the most piercing of our day's visit, when we stood at the very spot where Heather was murdered. Flowers and notes were everywhere. As we looked up, we could see a police car blocking the intersection. If only the police would have placed a car there on that Saturday two weeks ago – Heather would still be alive. ***Tekiya***.

And then with those assembled there we shed tears for Heather and her family. ***Shevarim-Teruah***.

We began to sing “We Shall Overcome Someday.” Many many years ago, I sang this song with millions of others during the dark days of the Civil Rights Movement. Never would I have imagined then that decades later we would still be facing similar times, singing the same melody, the same simple but piercing words.

Then and there I offered a silent prayer: O God, We Shall Overcome Someday. “Someday” no longer works for me. America cannot wait. The world cannot wait.

In the spirit of the crescendo sound of the shofar, the *Tekiya Gedola*, the call for redemption, and in the spirit of the word *Hayom*, the first word we say after the shofar is blasted in the repetition of the Rosh Hashana *Shemoneh Esreh*, let us declare: We need more Aliyas and Toms, more Mildred Bests. We need White, Black, Brown and Yellow, Jewish, Christian, Muslims singing together – We Shall Overcome – not someday, but today, today, today.

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