

A few weeks ago I travelled with Jeanette and Dan to Newport, RI for the day for a very special event. Tamar Fishman, a friend of Dan and Jeanette's and the artist who made our ketubah, was commissioned to create this year's Hannukah stamp. The stamp was issued on October 16 jointly by the US Post Office and the Israeli Post Office with a dedication ceremony at the Touro Synagogue in Newport.

I am sure many of you have been to the Touro Synagogue. It is the oldest surviving synagogue in the US dating back to 1763. Its beautiful columns, stately Paladian architecture, and creaky wooden floors and chairs continue to welcome visitors including a congregation that prays there every Shabbat. The Touro Synagogue is particularly well known for the letter sent to it by George Washington. In 1790 George Washington visited Newport where he was greeted by its various religious communities. Following his visit, Washington wrote to each of those communities. In his letter to the Hebrew Congregation of Newport, Washington wrote:

*The citizens of the United States of America have a right to applaud themselves for having given to mankind examples of an enlarged and liberal policy—a policy worthy of imitation. All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship.*

*It is now no more that toleration is spoken of as if it were the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights, for, happily, the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens in giving it on all occasions their effectual support....*

*May the children of the stock of Abraham who dwell in this land continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants—while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree and there shall be none to make him afraid.*

The Jews of Newport sought security in their new homeland. Washington offered them that and more — gracious welcome and acceptance, a recognition of equality, a clear rejection of bigotry and hatred, and the acknowledgement of the full citizenship of all people in this new land..

Washington's letter was not only an important milestone in the history of the Jews in America but an important signal at the dawn of the nation of what we would stand for. Although Americans came from the British Isles, America was to be a haven for all peoples — e pluribus unum — from many one. The separation of church and state and the freedom of religion enshrined in the Constitution was to be a beacon of hope, as Washington so eloquently articulated, to oppressed peoples everywhere.

Sitting in the Touro Synagogue, witnessing the proceedings of the Stamp Dedication — an older man dressed in Revolutionary dress presenting the colors while a middle school band played the national anthem, a US Postal official and the the director of Israel Philatelic Service speaking about Hannukah with the American embassy in Jerusalem on the livestream, the artist, Tamar

Fishman, reciting sheheyanu, Jews in this historic synagogue in kippot — it felt like all the pieces of my identity coming together. I was a Jew and an American and there was no daylight between those identities. The two fit like gloves.

Less than two weeks later all that was shattered as we learned of the most deadly antisemitic attack on Jewish soil in our history. Suddenly all the pieces flew apart — are we safe on American soil? Is the American experiment unraveling? Am I the equal citizen that Washington proclaimed I was, or am I only tolerated or worse? Can I be an American and a Jew?

These are vexing questions.

I want you to make no mistake about it. This was not only an attack on Jews at prayer on Shabbat in a synagogue — in our holiest place, at our holiest time, at our moment of greatest vulnerability.

The proximate cause for the slaughter in Pittsburgh was HIAS's statement on the Monday before the attack in support of the caravan making its way to the border from Central America. Jewish financiers in his mind, are responsible for the caravan bringing dangerous people to America and HIAS will resettle them, just as HIAS brought Jews to these shores a hundred years ago. The Caravan, immigrants, refugees, Jews all represent people taking his rightful place in America, marauding invaders in a country he believes belongs only to white men. It is a direct line from Charlottesville to the demonization of George Soros to Pittsburgh.

Of course this rhetoric is not original to the murderer nor unfortunately is he the only person holding such views. And that rhetoric should ring alarm bells for us. In fact, much the same language was used to describe Jewish refugees in the 1930's and 40's who I daresay looked much like the people in the caravan: bedraggled, uneducated, tired, sick, needy.

At that time, Representative Jacob Thorkelson, a Montana Republican, said Jewish migrants are part of an "invisible government" tied to the "communistic Jew" and to "Jewish international financiers." Senator Robert Reynolds, a North Carolina Democrat, said Jews are "systematically building a Jewish empire in this country." "Let Europe take care of its own people," he said. "We cannot care for our own, to say nothing of importing more to care for." Reynolds told Life magazine he merely wanted "our own fine boys and lovely girls to have all the jobs in this wonderful country." President Franklin D. Roosevelt himself warned that Jewish refugees might be Nazi spies, coerced to do the Reich's bidding with threats against relatives back home.

In other words, the anti-Semitism we see today cuts to the very heart of who we are — not just simply an ethnic minority, nor even innocent and vulnerable people in prayer. But a people who came to America as vulnerable refugees and found safe harbor here. A people who staked its hope and future on the American dream.

And a people who have, for all of our history, held as our central founding myth, our story of the exodus from Egypt. Because we were strangers, because we were oppressed, we know the heart of the stranger. Never oppress the stranger. Love the stranger. No commandment is more repeated in the Torah; no idea more central. If a Jew knows one thing, they know this story, learned year in and year out, a catechism at the seder table. The message of the Exodus story is not only that we went free; it is that we went free to serve God and we serve God not primarily by worshipping Him in his Temple but by protecting the most vulnerable among us. We went free in order to ensure that others remain free; we fled oppression so as to ensure that no one would again be oppressed.

It is natural to feel afraid right now. I am the kind of person who tends to minimize tragedy. Upset as I am about Pittsburgh, it didn't lead me to feel afraid in our own shul. And then, Thursday morning, a guy from my Hartman group, a burly, tough, well-built kind of rabbi, posted that he was afraid and didn't sleep last night. He wrote that in his community, Beacon, NY, a charming, sleepy town near Vassar, an hour and a half from New York City, three congregants' homes had been sprayed with swastikas this week. If he feels scared, if he isn't sleeping, if I am reaching out to comfort him, I feel scared.

Jonathan Safran Foer writes, "Jews have six senses. Touch, taste, sight, smell, hearing...memory. While Gentiles experience and process the world through the traditional senses, and use memory only as a second-order means of interpreting events, for Jews memory is no less primary than the prick of a pin, or its silver glimmer, or the taste of the blood it pulls from the finger. The Jew is pricked by a pin and remembers other pins. It is only by tracing the pinprick back to other pinpricks – when his mother tried to fix his sleeve while his arm was still in it, when his grandfather's fingers fell asleep while stroking his great-grandfather's damp forehead, when Abraham tested the knife point to be sure Isaac would feel no pain – that the Jew is able to know why it hurts. When a Jew encounters a pin, he asks: What does it remember like?"

So many of us carry those fears deep in our conscience. On the one hand, we were told stories of the Holocaust when we were far too young to process their meaning. On the other hand, no one was really there to listen to our fears about those stories — we needed to button it up and get by and do well and not show fear. Is it any wonder we are afraid? Is it any wonder that each pinprick brings up painful memories going back generations.

What can we do?

We can come here and sit together and hold each other's hand and love one another and show the haters that even if we are afraid we are also courageous. Fear and hate will not win the day.

Know that we are not alone. I was incredibly touched by the many emails from Christian and Moslem colleagues that filled my inbox Saturday night. I was moved by the all the pastors who showed up at the JCC on Sunday and particularly by the words of the AME pastor — he of all people knows what we have been through. And I was deeply moved by the Muslim community

in Pittsburgh raising over \$200,000 to help the synagogue and offering to physically protect them, to stand there with their bodies to shield ours.

We can keep working for the things we believe in, the things we learned at the seder table, the America George Washington envisioned: we can work to keep guns from the hands of those who would harm us. We can work to hold America to her best vision of herself, to redouble our efforts to welcome refugees because we know that this is who we are as Jews and Americans, that America is America because it has been created and recreated by each generation of new immigrants to its shores. As the HIAS logo reads, “Once, we helped refugees because they were Jewish. Today we help refugees because we are Jewish.”

We cannot let fear eclipse our values. Values are not nice clothes for sunny days. Values become real when they are tested. If we as Jews and Americans relinquish our values for some notion of self-defense and safety, we ultimately relinquish who we are. We see that happening in America today. We cannot be part of that backslide.

We can remember that we are all responsible for our discourse, for how we speak to one another, the language we use and the language we countenance. We cannot count on politicians to restore American discourse to a level of civility. If we want to look like the nation Washington so generously envisioned, it will have to begin with us. Let us make sure that our speech is worthy of the people who gave their lives this Shabbat.

We can and must vote and get others to vote for what we believe America is and was meant to be. The election is only three days away. It is not too late to make a difference. Our nation’s future hangs in the balance.

And finally, as tempting as it is, do not give despair a seat at your table. Yes, we can cry, we can mourn, we can be afraid, we can be angry. But a week has gone by. Shiva is over. It is time to act.

Rebecca Solnit writes, “Hope is not a lottery ticket you can sit on the sofa and clutch, feeling lucky. It is an axe you break down doors with in an emergency. Hope should shove you out the door, because it will take everything you have to steer the future away from endless war, from the annihilation of the earth's treasures and the grinding down of the poor and marginal... To hope is to give yourself to the future - and that commitment to the future is what makes the present inhabitable.”

Know that we will sit together. And we will stand together. And we will not give up. And we will be courageous because being courageous does not mean not being afraid — it means being afraid and going forward all the same. And we will not rest, because our lives depend on it. Our children’s lives depend on it. Our grandchildren’s lives depend on it. Because two or three or four generations ago somebody came to America at great risk and with great difficulty so we could be here. We owe the same to our descendants. In the words of Langston Hughes, “O, yes,

I say it plain, America never was America to me, And yet I swear this oath—America will be!

We will walk forward in love, and friendship, and hope, and faith because we have no choice but to walk forward. Because our ancestors walked into the sea not knowing if the waters would part. Because our grandparents fled their homes and burning villages, leaving everything behind so we could be here. Not only fear but hope runs deep in our veins too. We will ensure that we are safe here and that others are safe, “that each of us shall sit under his own vine and his own fig tree and no one shall make them afraid.”