

**Rabbi Allison Vann**

**Rosh Hashanah 2018**

**Standing Up**

I need to offer an apology.

The problem is: I'm not sure to whom to address it.

Let me explain.

In 2012, my second high holy days here at Suburban Temple-Kol Ami, someone approached me after, I believe, Rosh Hashanah evening services. He came up to me to suggest a subject for subsequent sermons. He passionately argued that antisemitism in the United States was on the rise, and that I needed to preach about it. During our brief conversation, we neglected to exchange formal introductions.

While I was moved by his passion, the headlines, as I knew them, didn't include an upswing in anti-semitism in the United States.

For example, in 2012 we fretted about the Syrian war, stewed about impending hurricanes, were angry about police violence and

grieved about mass shootings. We argued about healthcare—aka Obamacare-- celebrated gay marriage and began to learn about Behngazi.

Yet, the conversation stuck with me as the years have gone by. And now, here we are, in 2018. And whoever you were, my advice giver from 2012—sadly, so sadly—you were right.

Thank you for sharing your passion and your worry with me. I am sorry I didn't listen.

When translating the *vidui*, our alphabetic confession which we recite on Yom Kippur, for the letter “x”, the authors of the Reform high holy day prayer book used the word “xenophobia”.

Xenophobia: an aversion to persons unfamiliar, or deep-rooted fear towards foreigners.

Today, hate groups and extremist individuals, formerly crouched in the dark corners America, now feel comfortable moving toward center stage. In the most simplistic terms, they are nostalgic for

their fantasy narrative: “the good old days” when our country was allegedly white, Christian, and Anglo-Saxon. Feeling, perhaps, unnerved and dis-empowered, this white and largely male population is now openly competing for the minds and hearts of Americans. Openly xenophobic, they preach a myth of a different America—an American narrative that they are desperately trying to recapture- and an America that, perhaps, never existed. The ascendancy of these groups has opened the path for increased racist, homophobic, and antisemitic behavior.

Emboldened by governmental permissiveness and cultural divisiveness, racism, intolerance, and hateful behavior is now more and more a part of daily life in America. We hear about instances seemingly regularly on the news. Rashon Nelson and Donte Robinson, for example, walked into a Starbucks in Philadelphia and sat down, early for a meeting. The manager approached them, asking if they were going to something. They said they weren't.

Two minutes later, a squad car pulled up, and the men were arrested.

Rashon Nelson and Donte Robinson, as I'm sure you've guessed, are black. I can guarantee that's never happened to me. The outrage over this incident was swift. While only a beginning, Starbucks did react decisively—the manager was removed, and 8,000 stores were closed this summer for diversity training.

However, far too many are still on the receiving end of escalating hatred.

Hate crimes in the nation's 10 largest cities increased by 12 percent last year, reaching the highest level in more than a decade, according to a report issued by the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism at California State University at San Bernardino.

According to the FBI, a hate crime is a "criminal offense against a person or property motivated...by an offender's bias against a race, religion, disability, sexual orientation, ethnicity, gender, or gender

identity." Just last year, many synagogues in Cleveland received threatening phone calls. Categorized as a hate crime, that caller is now behind bars. And, this summer in Indiana, very close to a summer camp affiliated with the Reform movement, a house and a synagogue were covered in swastikas.

13 months ago, almost to the day, in Charlottesville, Virginia, the Unite the Right—an extreme right-wing white supremacist group—held a protest. Their flaming torches were lit as Shabbat began. On Shabbat morning they marched through the city, some of them carrying flags with swastikas and giving Nazi salutes. They shouted the old Nazi slogan "blood and soil." They shouted, "white lives matter." Heather Heyer, peaceful protester, lost her life that day.

President Trump's statement about the riots did not condemn the far-right protesters. As we may remember, he denounced "hatred, bigotry, and violence on many sides". Even after significant

criticism he continued to defend his statement, referring to "very fine people on both sides". President Trump, by not condemning hate, has fueled the torches of racism.

The current administration continues to stimulate discriminatory beliefs and practices. For example, the President, working to support his anti-immigration tactics months ago, said this: "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending the best. They're not sending you, they're sending people that have lots of problems and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs...And some, I assume, are good people." Over time, that led to what we now know is a crisis at the border, when, at one point, over 2000 migrant children were separated from their parents in about a 6 week time period. and, as of August 27, approximately 500 children are still separated. Zero tolerance immigration meant that these children will be scarred for life.

Xenophobia.

The fear of the “other” has risen.

I share these words written last year by my colleague, Rabbi Elka Abrahamson, “But just in case we thought the white supremacists were after someone else, or that the Confederate flag has nothing to do with modern day Nazi sympathizers, or that we were somehow safe in the fact that most – but certainly not all – Jews in America are white, those fiery torches illuminated another truth, once we learn and forget only to learn again this day: if one minority group’s rights are threatened, *we are all threatened.*”

On Rosh Hashanah, we remember this: Rosh Hashanah has another, beautiful name. It is also known as Yom Harat Olam—the birthday of the world. Why is this beautiful?

Because, if today is the birthday of the world—then today, we celebrate the creation of *all humanity*. We affirm that all people are created equal. All people are holy. No matter our religion, our

gender, our sexual orientation, our abilities, our beliefs, the color of our skin-- *every human is holy*.

Our sage, Rabbi Ben Azzai taught that the most important teaching in all of Torah is that God created us as *one human family*. How did God do this? God began the creation of all humanity from a single being, Adam, so that no one could ever say: “My lineage is great than yours.”

In 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King was jailed in Birmingham for his protest work. From jail he wrote an open letter to other clergy, who criticized his protests as “unwise and untimely.” In response, King wrote, “I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.”

In essence, Martin Luther King, Jr, was echoing a Talmud passage—a teaching from our ancient rabbis-- which states, “If you

see wrongdoing by a member of your household and you do not protest it— *you are held accountable*. And so it is in relation to the members of your city. And so it is in relation to the world.”

We are held in a network of mutuality. We are responsible for ourselves *and* our families, *and* our cities, *and* the world. When people act, or speak unjustly, we are obligated to speak up-- *or we are held accountable as well*.

*This means that when we hear people promoting intolerance or hatred, we must condemn it. No one's lineage is great than another's. We are all held accountable. We are all holy.*

Rosh Hashanah has yet another name. Another beautiful name:

*Yom Teruah*, the Day of sounding the Shofar. The shofar, that sound like no other. The piercing, haunting tones that awaken the soul.

Those tones are like a siren. As Rabbi Jonathan Prosnit teaches,

“What happens when we hear a siren? We look around - we know

that there's trouble. Something is happening nearby. There is an emergency in the world around us.”

What do we do when we hear a siren while driving? We pay attention to what is happening nearby, and we *do* something about it: we stop. We pull over.

So too, the shofar calls urge us to pay attention. To pay attention to what is happening in the world, and then to do something.

The shofar is my siren. I am paying attention. And it calls me to speak out.

Today, I speak out against our leaders, who have failed to unequivocally call out hatred and prejudice. Today, I speak out as a rabbi—as your rabbi. I can no longer allow anyone to dehumanize or degrade another human being. Today, I call out our government whose moral negligence and abdication fuels hatred and division in our beloved country.

Today, I share the words of my colleagues, who have said, “You cannot dehumanize, degrade and stigmatize whole categories of people in this nation. Every Jew, every Muslim, every gay, transgender, disabled, black, brown, white, woman, man and child is beloved of God and precious in the Holy One’s sight...All the people are worthy of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

Today, I ask that you hear the shofar, our sacred siren, and speak out with me. Together, we will speak out boldly whenever we hear words of hate.

Second: we speak with our civic power. Our vote is the boldest, most important way we make our voices heard. It even says in our most ancient Jewish texts: "A ruler is not to be appointed unless the community is first consulted" (Babylonian Talmud Berachot 55a). Casting a vote makes sure our country reflects values that are meaningful and holy to each of us. As you leave today, you’ll receive a voter pledge card (show card). Please fill out the card,

which pledges your commitment to vote, and send it in. The card has a beautiful blessing for voting. I encourage you to bring the card into the voting booth with you. Vote your values; vote your heart. Speak the blessing while in the voter booth-- celebrating speaking out!

This year, may the shofar be truly a siren. A siren that encourages us to speak out, to insist that this is the year that the great shofar of freedom will be sounded for all.

On this day—this Rosh Hashanah; this Yom Harat Olam, this Yom Teruah: may we celebrate all humanity by hearing the call of the siren. May we remember that everyone is holy, and it is our responsibility to fight against intolerance in all forms. And may we be inspired to use our voice and our vote to speak out for justice everywhere and all the time.