

**“Acharei Poway”**

Parashat Acharei Mot

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This past Monday I took a wonderful walk with a friend along Swains Lock. Unlike Great Falls Park, just down the road from here where the Potomac River pours over jagged rocks and churns through rapids and over waterfalls, at Swains Lock, several miles upstream, the waters are calm and placid. My walking partner, Roy Howard, who is the pastor of St. Mark Presbyterian Church on Old Georgetown Rd., is an amateur ecologist. He can identify plants, and animals, and birds: In fact he pointed out a real live Baltimore Oriole, which he identified by its chirping! They really do have that black and orange coloration, just like the baseball team logo. We stopped to observe whole families of turtles sunning themselves on fallen logs along the river. The scene reminded me of that classic Dr. Seuss book *Yertle the Turtle*. These turtles...box turtles, snapping turtles, painted turtles, were basically stacked on top of each other as they took their afternoon snooze on river. But just as soon as Roy and I took a step closer to admire them, their heads and legs shot inside of their shells, and others torpedoed themselves into the water for safety. Roy remarked that these turtles are a metaphor for our world today. Just before we admired the turtles we were discussing the tension of how to keep our synagogues and churches safe, while also not turning them into forbidding fortresses; how to take the necessary security precautions without depriving people of ready access to their literal and metaphorical sanctuaries. Then we watched the turtles instinctively, reflexively take shelter in their shells and beneath the surface of the water at just a hint of another species stopping to look at them.

Yes, my dear friends, this is the world we live in. In the parasha this morning, the Torah's words are almost unnerving in their coincidence: *Acharei mot sh'nei b'nei Aharon b'korvatam lifnei Hashem va'yamutu...* after the deaths of Aaron's sons who died while coming close to God's presence...How can we read those words this week without thinking of Lori Gilbert-Kaye, of blessed memory, a name that has become as familiar to us in the space of one week as the name of any other member of our family. But the difference; the stark, unsettling, tragic difference is that Nadav and Avihu committed a trespass; they did something illicit, something unsanctioned,

something forbidden in the sanctuary, which caused their death. But what did Lori Gilbert-Kaye do? What was her crime? She came to shul last week to say Yizkor for her beloved mother. And she happened to be standing in the wrong place at the wrong time. Just like our holy brothers and sisters at the Tree of Life Synagogue six months ago. Their misfortune too was to be the first people in the line of a diabolical, anti-Semitic monster, bent on eradicating the world, or at least America, of Jews.

My friends, it is clear to me that there is a revival of white nationalism in this country. Some have observed that America was never really cleansed of anti-Semitism, bigotry, racism...it just went into hiding, lurking in the shadows, staying just beneath the surface until such a time as it could raise its ugly head again. This seems to be one of those times. And today's anti-Semitism has the additional layer of being politicized like never before. Today people talk about left-wing anti-Semitism and right-wing anti-Semitism. Whole political parties are accused of harboring anti-Semites; and the football is kicked back and forth as each side declares that the cause or the root of the problem is not us, it's them.

The truth is that while it may be politically expedient for some to attach an ideological label to anti-Semitism, when Jews feel afraid or intimidated to come to their shuls or their schools, it really doesn't matter. I am so grateful to all of you who came to shul today. I'm sure that some of you had serious conversations before coming to that decision, maybe even at the breakfast table this morning. But friends, the day that anti-Semitic incidents keep us away from our places of worship and gathering, that is the day that the bad guys win, and we lose. The gunman in California ranted about other people going out to attack Jews; the Pittsburgh shooter threatened Jews to get out of this country on his social media platform. The alt-right marchers in Charlottesville infamously chanted Jews will not replace us. But the courageous, heroic Rabbi Yisroel Goldstein of Chabad of Poway, his finger shot off and his hand wrapped in a bloody tallit, stood on a chair in the middle of his shul, after the gunmen fled the scene and declared: Am Yisrael Chai! The Jewish people live! We will not be afraid, we will not be intimidated! We're not getting out of this country! By being here, today, you too proclaim that we will not be forced to stay away or to go into hiding. Even though we said in the Passover Haggadah so recently *she'bechol dor va'dor omdim aleinu le'chaloteinu*...that every generation witnesses

threats and dangers like this, but *Hakadosh Baruch Hu matzileinu miyadam*, but, with God's grace, we continue to survive time and time again!

Rabbi Goldstein wondered aloud in a press conference, 'how does a 19 year old, a teenager come to believe and espouse such radical hatred? Such virulent anti-Semitism?' And I would add that this tragedy should compel us to ask why Poway CA is the newest addition to an infamous, heinous list that includes Aurora, CO, Newtowne, CT, Las Vegas, NV, Southerland Springs, TX, Parkland, FL, Pittsburgh, PA, where another AR 15 assault rifle, a weapon designed for war, found its way into the hands of a deranged killer.

You know, ever since my walk on Monday, I've thinking about *Yertle the Turtle*. You remember the story? Yertle the Turtle was the King of the Pond, in the faraway Island of Salamasond. But Yertle decided that he had a problem. He had a lowly throne, that was made of stone...which meant that he couldn't see all of the realm over which he ruled. So he commanded 9 turtles to stack themselves up—not so different from how they were sunning themselves on Monday afternoon, and Yertle climbed up on their backs for a much better view. He was astonished and struck by all that ruled, like a cow and a mule, and a house and a bush. But after a while, a simple turtle named Mac, who was all the way down on the bottom of the stack, started to complain that the weight of all the turtles was hurting his back, and cracking his shell. But Yertle the king, commanded him to be silent, even ordered 200 more turtles to the pile, so that he could see even more. Although poor Mac at the bottom of the stack was feeling great pain, Yertle was enjoying the vast panorama of his view. Yertle decided he would like to go all the way to heaven, so he ordered another turtle call up of 5,607! But by that point, poor Mac at the bottom of the stack decided he had enough, and toppled the tower, causing Yertle to plunge all the way down. "Today the great Yertle, that marvelous he, is called the King of the Mud, because that's all he can see. " Long after my childhood, which was shaped by Dr. Seuss books, I learned that most of his clever rhymes and made-up words were actually metaphors for very real problems in the world. Remember the Lorax, and his environmental critique? Well it seems that Yertle the Turtle was based on none other than Adolf Hitler, who desired to climb higher and higher on the backs of others who unquestioningly obeyed his orders and propped him up...that is until the tower started to shake, and he was cast into the mud, or the bunker, where his reign of terror ended. Friends, I think it's time to disturb the towers that are propping up hatred and

anti-semitism; it's time to shake their foundations and cast them into the muck and the mud where they belong. That begins right here, right now. As long as we stand proudly, united, strong, undeterred, unintimidated, as patriotic American Jews, not only fighting for our rights as citizens of this great land but also for others who are the targets of extremism and terrorism, then we will indeed shake the foundations and topple the towers that continue to make this benighted hatred possible, even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. *Am Yisrael Chai, ad be'li dai*: the Jewish people lives...today, tomorrow, forever!