

## AFTER CHARLOTTESVILLE

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Everywhere you look people are talking about “**post-Charlottesville.**” I myself have been on two webinars in the past few weeks with titles like: “How can we talk about X after Charlottesville?” Or “Thinking about Y after Charlottesville.” I bet some of you have as well. But here we are: this year, this Rosh Hashanah, in the *real* Charlottesville Virginia.

Charlottesville now stands for something, even for people who have never set foot here. It stands for many things: for **violence** in the streets of America; for the reality of the **hatred** that emerged from the internet; the strength of the “**pushback**” by those who consider themselves a white ethnic group; for the depth of their alienation. And in the aftermath: the certainty that **these feelings run deeper** than we wanted to believe. **The fear** that they may be influencing political actors.

So I want to share some thoughts with you this morning about the events of the summer. And about this moment where we are gathered together, Yom Hazikaron, the Day of Judgement, the New Year.

I think it is safe to say that many of us were surprised, and still are, at the intensity of the antisemitism that we saw in these streets, starting with the rally of the KKK in July. Even though the KKK represents and has represented the face of terror for the African American community, and their public appearance revived painful memories for many who experienced violence or intimidation at their hands—when they showed up on July 8, many of the signs they carried were anti-Semitic.

And perhaps we were even more surprised when the white nationalists showed up, ostensibly to protest the removal of a statue, at the chant that seemed to be their one rallying cry: ***Jews will not replace us.***

I want to suggest that this fact is something that we have not quite digested. And that we should resist the desire to completely digest it and move on, leaving it behind in the year that has passed. How you feel about the events of August 11/12 largely depended on where you were that day. And maybe on who you were on that day. It has been my experience, that the reaction of many in the African American community to seeing the marching gangs of white supremacists, with their shouts and their hatred, was to awaken painful memories of life lived under segregation. Memories of the racist atmosphere that permeated the south only a generation ago, feelings of vulnerability, and consequently also the **anger** that comes with those memories. It is an anger that we have sometimes heard expressed publicly. Together with a sadness that is more often expressed privately.

In the past few weeks in conversations all over town that were supposed to be about something else, I have heard many people tell their stories from the past. One woman shared with me her memories of seeing a lynching as a small child and the feelings of fear that accompanied it. Another shared their family’s fear of the police in our town, of the dreaded traffic stop that most

of us do not think twice about. And some of you have told me about similar conversations. Like the very successful African-American woman who shared that when she is not dressed in the business suit she wears to work, she is followed like a criminal when she shops in the department store.

All these conversations are surfacing as part of the reaction to seeing and hearing the shouts, the signs, the images, the hate marching on the streets of our town. It is good that we are having them. It is important for us to listen to them. These are conversations that are slowly changing, one by one, the way we understand our own community

We should resist the temptation to say: *I have heard this before*. These stories are connected to the *present* moment. Something has enabled or compelled them to be told again. And something is enabling them to be heard with fresh ears.

We in the Jewish community also need to tell our own stories. Perhaps we have not explored our own experiences with racism or shared our own experiences with antisemitism with one another quite enough. We may find stories within ourselves that we have not told before. And I hope we can find a way to be faithful to the telling of and the listening to these stories without allowing that process to become a competition among victims, especially since we live in a cultural moment and media climate that would like to reduce solidarity to competition.

### **ANTISEMITISM AND RACISM: THE CONNECTION**

And I am willing to bet that many of us are just confused. We don't quite know: What antisemitism has to do with the ostensible issue that brought these groups here? The statues that are to be removed from our public squares?

Let me also say that just as there are some stories that we need to hear, there are some stories we need to firmly reject. Such as the stories that the white nationalists bring to us.

They do not think about politics in terms of the ongoing progress of America, an America in which people of races and religions are seeking to undo generations of injustice and establish a more perfect union. Rather, they see the history of the past 50, or perhaps even 100 years, as a race war, an ongoing struggle between the white race that once ruled this continent, and others, black and brown and middle eastern, who are inferior to them and who seek to displace them from their rightful place as #1 in America.

In this twisted way of thinking, it is inconceivable to them that white people would have *willingly* given up their dominant place as the rulers of this continent. How could African Americans—African Americans!!-- have gained the rights that they now have if they had not received support from some other power? Some power that is responsible for the betrayal and decline of white America? According to this way of thinking, all this could **only** have happened if white America was stabbed in the back. It could **only** have happened with the help of internal or external enemies, forces greater than them. Like the Jews, who control (tell me if you have heard this before) both Hollywood and the press to dominate the popular culture, Wall Street and globalization to weaken America economically, and liberal and left-wing lawyers and activists

who imposed affirmative action and any number of other Un-American ideas on helpless white people. When they chant **Jews will not replace us**: this is what they have in their minds.

No one who knows history should be surprised by this. This was exactly the kind of thinking that Germans used to explain to themselves how the great German Army could have been so defeated in World War I and the nation so humiliated by the terms of Versailles. What **is surprising to us** is that this conspiracy theory is still alive and well and recirculating in the popular culture, like some kind of a zombie that will not die.

What gives us pause, what makes us uneasy, is that we dare not be too quick to pronounce this a crackpot belief held by only a small minority.

I want to believe that it is so. But I have been surprised by the ferocity of the hate. And so I admit that I too, am a little more uneasy now. I sometimes wonder, when I am speaking to someone who expresses thinly veiled racist views, whether they harbor anti-Semitic feelings as well. Perhaps you do, too.

### **SARAH'S WORDS**

It is easy to identify the evil of this us-and-them thinking when we hear it expressed in this way. But perhaps it is harder to wrestle with the germ of this logic when we find it a little closer to home. We are about to read the Torah portion from Genesis. It describes the birth of Isaac. How God remembers the promise to Sara that she will bear a child after years of childlessness. The child is born. The promise is fulfilled. But no sooner does this happiness settle in, but the years pass quickly (it takes only one verse in the Torah) and before you know it there is trouble. Sarah sees her boy Isaac playing with his older brother Ishmael. And she is troubled.

The amazing thing about Torah is that each year we read it with different eyes. From a different place. If we bring our whole self to this moment of revelation, sometimes we will see or hear things we never saw before. The words which Sarah speaks to Abraham sound very different to me this year:

*the son of the slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac*

If I may restate her claim, with a slightly different rhythm:

**He! shall not! replace us!**

**He! shall not! replace us!**

There it is.

In another year I might have, and still may, try to get in touch with the fear on the part of Sarah, that her son is being eclipsed by another. That for whatever reason he will lose his status. I might have offered a historical explanation for the difference between the world she lived in and the one we live in. But this year I found myself pushing back against Sarah's cry: **it is him or me/ It's them or us.**

I reject this as a teaching to be emulated. But I am thankful for being presented with it as a teaching to be wrestled with. I am thankful for the opportunity to pay more attention, perhaps to take some responsibility, for how often our Torah **does** seem to express itself in us-versus-them language. And to consider how this kind of language permeates our sacred texts and perhaps our own thinking.

Perhaps I am not the only one who did not pay enough attention to the force of these words. What about Abraham in this story? When he hears Sarah's request that Ishmael be banished we are told: ***The matter distressed Abraham greatly for it concerned a son of his.***

Torah mentions Abrahams distress. But can it really be that he did not see this happening before—in his tent? In his backyard? The jealousy, the rivalry—the potential explosion that was brewing? Did it never occur to him that he was complicit in this arrangement that brought about such a crisis? Was there nothing he could have said or done to influence the outcome?

There is in all of us, this quality of Abraham. And this quality of Sarah. We know the desire to think about protecting “our own.” And we know what it is like to know something for a long time and to not know how to face it. We have all been or will one day find ourselves in this aspect of Abraham at this moment. An event brings things to the surface in our life and we suddenly cannot avoid dealing with it.

It could be a thought will not go away—a statement that we have heard ourselves say that returns to us again and again. Maybe even a comment someone else makes that suddenly we recognize as true and that threatens to upend our way of thinking. And then something has to be done:

So here is the question I want to think about this morning. What does one do when an event, or the sight of something, or one too many restless nights, or one too many afternoons of tears—makes one realize that we can no longer think about things in the same way? That we must make a change in our life? Why is it so hard to just move ahead? What happens when we reach a place in our life when we are no longer able to avoid seeing something that we might have known but did not really want to see:

- you really need to see the doctor
- you really need to talk to a therapist again
- you have a relationship with a friend, a parent, a spouse that is hurting or failing
- you are not succeeding in something you wanted to do
- you are profoundly unhappy about something at work, in your own life
- you suspect that you are slowly losing your soul

When these things arise clearly in our mind, things suddenly become very unstable. But it is precisely at this moment, the one brought on by this realization, that we have the possibility of moving ahead, of entering a different place.

What holds us back?

Partly it is a loss of faith in ourselves. Once we admit that we have been on the wrong path we

leave ourselves exposed. If our judgment has been wrong in the past, what makes us think that it will be a good guide in the future? And sometimes we cling to beliefs or habits or patterns because we are afraid of the alternative, that if we concede the alternative we will find ourselves ungrounded.

### THE SLIPPERY SLOPE

Part of working through our difficulty is to pay a little attention to the obstacles that stop us from letting the head hear what the heart has been speaking. In my own life I have discovered that one of the things that stops me from taking steps in my life is what we call “the slippery slope.”

I imagine that all of us who have been living in Charlottesville and following the discussions about our monuments have encountered this slippery slope kind of thinking. As I did, and do, in my own thinking. It goes like this:

The moment one begins to think about removing the Lee statue from our public space, a thousand other thoughts come tumbling in:

Does that mean I need to rush out and remove it right away?

Does it mean that we now need to remove the statue **of Jackson too**?

And if it was not okay to have a statue of a person who **fought** for slavery then should we not also remove the statues of those who **had** slaves?

What about those who did not have slaves but who **approved** of slavery?

Or who wrote disparaging about other races? Or religions or ethnic groups?

Or who adopted the “science” of eugenics (for it was certainly considered scientific at the time)?

Will there be no place in the public square, in other words, for flawed individuals?

Will we have to remove every statue and every **name** of every person who used language that was hurtful or even hateful about this group or that?

Will there be no way to honor the achievements of men and women who were not 100% in accord with what we now believe (which is just another way of saying, who were **products of their times**, and not ours)

And what about me? Will I be remembered for all the lousy things I have done in my life? For all the sins I am about to beat my chest about in a few days' time? And not for the integrity of my struggle to overcome my flaws?

These were the thoughts that ran through my mind. And still do. The last question—about myself—is a good question. But the path that led me there is a bad one.

The slippery slope is like an automatic way of thinking. It's a habit, an instinct we have been trained to honor. But it is not the right metaphor for us in our lives. When it comes to our lives there is no slippery slope. There is only the next step. The slippery slope is an obstacle that we turn into a shield or perhaps a fig leaf, one that we hide behind to avoid our insecurity about moving forward.

## **TESHUVA**

This is why it is so important that we understand the meaning of one word that we will hear a lot of in the next few days. That word is *teshuva*.

Martin Buber tells the story of, Shneur Zalman, a rabbi of the Lubavitch tradition who found himself in prison in Russia, perhaps as the result of a betrayal by the Jewish opponents of early Hasidism. He is challenged there by the chief of the gendarmes. who wants to catch him in an inconsistency about the Bible:

The gendarme asks: *How are we to understand the significance that God, who is supposed to be the all-knowing asks Adam: Where are you?"*

He is referring to the moment, in the story of the story of the Garden of Eden, after Adam and Eve have eaten from the fruit of the tree of knowledge. We don't know where Eve goes. But we do read about Adam. He hides in the Garden. And God calls to him:

## **Where Are You? AYEKA**

The gendarme tries to engage the rabbi in a dispute about what seems to be a problem in the text, i.e. that god would not *know* where Adam is. But the rabbi gives the gendarme a different answer.

He says: *Do you believe that Scripture is eternal, and that every person in every generation Is included in them?*

The man answered: *Yes.*

*Well then, he said: In every era God calls to every man: Where are you in your world? You have lived forty six years—and where are you?*

When the man heard this answer—he trembled.

The situation of Adam is also every person's situation in every generation. We hide from what is uncomfortable, from what we do not want to know. We establish elaborate ways of not seeing what is right in front of us. We are afraid of asking questions, because we fear that we may find ourselves in a situation where we are unable to find an *answer*.

To these fears, Buber writes: *"Everything now depends on whether the person faces the question. Of course, every person's heart will tremble when he or she hears it. But her system of hideouts will help to overcome this. For the voice does not come in a thunderstorm which threatens our*

*very existence. It is a still small voice, and easy to drown. But so long as this is done, whatever success a person may achieve...her life will remain without a way, as long as she does not face the Voice. Adam does face the voice, perceives his enmeshment, and avows: **I hid myself**. This is the beginning of a person's way."*

Buber's point is that it is in our nature to hide, and even to be attached to hiding. But we also have the capacity to uncover this hiding. And to face the question: *Ayeka: Where are You?*

In past years I have understood this word: *Ayeka?* the way Buber describes it: as a **challenge**. As if God suddenly confronts me and draws me up short. And requires me to give an accounting, an **answer**. Now.

But this year I understand it differently.

When God says **Ayeka** to me: *Where are you?* I want to understand this as a commandment. Meaning: we are commanded to **ask** ourselves *Where are you?* and to **try** and come up with a way to **respond**.

*Where are you?* is not just a question to be answered now. *Where are you?* is a task we have been given. *Teshuvah* means both "answer" and "response." But the two are not identical. Sometimes our response is only the first step towards an answer.

We already know how difficult the work will be, since our common ancestor Adam expressed it so well. He said: ***I was afraid, because I was naked, so I hid.***

I guess that just about says it all. When we taste from the tree of knowledge, when our eyes are opened to something, when we can no longer deny a situation that we feel, we are naturally *afraid*. Afraid of all the questions that suddenly arise to which we have no answer.

We feel *naked, exposed*. We are afraid of what this new insight will reveal about our old self, about this so-called Garden of Eden we thought we have been living in.

Our defenses have fallen, so we look around for something behind which to *hide*. We look around for a new truth. Immediately.

Does this sound familiar? We children of Adam, of Abraham and Sarah, are not too good at living with uncertainty. So we need to be especially diligent about looking at these moments, when we feel insecure or challenged, as moments of great opportunity. I have been learning from my own mindfulness practice, that the task is precisely to **pay attention**, even or perhaps especially to something very uncomfortable. To pay attention to it, without rushing to judge it. To inhibit the instinct to explain it, or to explain it away.

Even or perhaps especially those thoughts and experiences that cause us pain. Or memories of when we have caused pain to others. The goal is to be **curious** about them, to spend some time with them, to seek neither to banish them nor to be pulled into them. But just to notice them—to

dwell **with** them but not to dwell **on** them—so that we can learn to be less afraid of them, until we can gain the confidence to take the next step.

*Ayeka: Where are you?*

We are here. Together. In this synagogue, at the beginning of these ten days of repentance. In Jewish time, these are the days when we are invited to do the *cheshbon hanefesh*, the soul's accounting. To dig a little deeper and to ask some harder questions.

*Ayeka: Where are you?*

We are here in Charlottesville. We are living in a town that has become a symbol for something. We did not choose to make Charlottesville a symbol for all those things I mentioned a few minutes ago. We may want to forget those things and go back to the way we understood ourselves before. But the way back is blocked. Not by an angel with a flaming sword. But by the questions that are still hovering in our minds.

And we should not rush to answer those questions too quickly. We should honor the commandment: *Ayeka*. To continue to ask uncomfortable questions and to engage others in our questioning. To respond by not rushing to answer.

If we remain curious and concerned about who we are; if we resist the temptation to close this chapter, to look away from the pain we feel and that others feel, and perhaps even the pain we have caused others; we will be able to go deeper, to the root of things.

And then hopefully this community, with all the tremendous talent and knowledge and dedication that is present in this room, can make a *teshuvah*. We can help this town, and maybe even this country, find the healing it so deserves.