

# We Will Renew With What There Is

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By now I'm going to assume that most of you know I like to travel. Many of you have shared vicariously (and sometimes physically) in my journeys. To coastal Maine. I often hear — especially around this time of year — how you've followed my Facebook photo essays of sailboats, seascapes and sunsets. I've taken you to Israel, to Amsterdam, to our nation's Capitol, and to New York's Lower East Side. And a handful of you have accompanied me on trips to the Ukraine and (what was then) the Soviet Union.

I love being a tour guide. In fact I've fancied the idea as a post-retirement occupation. I'd even give it serious consideration were it not for the fact that I absolutely hate making sure everybody gets into the hotel lobby on time.

So this past November, as Leana and I were planning on visiting her mother who lives in Lugano, Switzerland, we decided to first spend four days in Venice. I had never been to Venice.

Those of you who've been there know — there's no place like Venice. It is the embodiment of romance. (And by that I don't mean...*romance*.) Think the "romantic" periods of music and art and literature. Think idyllic. Picturesque. Charm. This is Venice. It's the only city I've ever been in where the only option is to walk. (Unless, of course, you choose to hire some guy wearing a striped shirt and a funny hat push you in a baroque canoe throughout the city's historic web of canals.) Venice is, to paraphrase Sam Spade, the *place* "of which dreams are made."

Unless, that is, if you're a Jew.

For our people Venice holds a dubious place in the historical record. Venice was a prison for its Jews. For over 280 years, beginning 501 years ago in the year 1516, the Venetian authorities deemed it necessary to segregate its diverse population of Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews to a small island in this Italian urban archipelago. And then to lock them in at night. The site chosen for this forced marginalization had originally been home to iron foundries which, in ancient Venetian, were known as *geti*, a word most scholars believe was the source for what would become its infamous designation — Ghetto.

In hindsight the Ghetto seems not much more than a quaint chapter in Jewish history. In contrast with the Crusades and the Inquisition which immediately precipitated the establishment of the Ghetto, and the blood libels and pogroms and the Holocaust which would follow, forcing Jews to live in a particular part of town is, quite frankly, no big deal.

And especially today, with the gates long ago removed (by Napoleon) leaving only the notch in the stones where they had been attached, the empty plaza (where only the three wells remain from which the Jews would take their drinking water) which is now renovated with beautiful paving stones and small gardens, the Ghetto today is a beautiful tourist destination. It is home to Judaica shops, art galleries, museums, a kosher bakery and an Israeli-owned kosher restaurant. It bears little resemblance, I am quite certain, to the overcrowded squalor it once was. No doubt most tourists are completely oblivious to the fact that it is located at the extreme opposite end from the Piazza San Marco, the heart of Venice. "Let's keep the Jews as far away as possible."

Try to imagine how it must have felt for the Jews who were forced to abandon their homes and relocate to the Ghetto. Venice was at the center of the Western world in those days. Beyond beauty, Venice was enlightened. And sophisticated. For the Jews — especially those fleeing the Inquisition — Venice was sanctuary. That's why so many Jews were drawn to it. It was a cultural and commercial island. Both figuratively and literally. So to have the proverbial "rug" pulled out from beneath their collective feet must have been beyond devastating. No doubt for our ancestors, the mood must have been one of — "Here we go again." In multiple languages.

With this in mind, I want to share with you something I saw at one of the Ghetto's five synagogues — the *Scuola Canton*.

The word *scuola* is the Italian equivalent of "school" or as we know it from the Yiddish — *shul*. There were, in fact, five *scoulas* in the Ghetto. Four were home to the distinct ethnic groups living there: the German Jews; the refugees from Spain and Portugal; the Jews from Jerusalem and the Middle East; and the native Italian Jews. But here was a fifth *scuola*. It was a "private" *shul*. The *Scuola Canton* was built by and for four wealthy Ashkenazi families in the Ghetto.

Its "sanctuary", which was a small, upper level prayer space, was ornate and magnificent. Yet what struck me was not its beauty. Each of the Ghetto's synagogues were aesthetically stunning. What I found most striking and inspiring — to the point of breathtaking — was an inscription above the sanctuary's only doorway. Carved into a marble lintel and then filled in with gold paint were three Hebrew words — נתחדש של שיש. "We will renew with what there is."

At that moment I knew what I would be talking about on Rosh Hashanah.

Here I was, just days following our historic presidential election, standing in a synagogue of Jews who had lost their freedom, mesmerized by the words they chose to put over the doorway which led them from their ornate, extravagant, isolated, secluded, intimate, safe prayer space back out into the world of the Ghetto. נתחדש של שיש. We will renew with what there is.

I was smitten. They were not from the Bible. Nor were they drawn from the prayerbook. Even the tour guide had no idea where they came from. (Or what they meant, for that matter.) But I did. נתחדש של שיש. These were *their* words.

I've tried to imagine the deliberations the authors must have gone through before deciding on these three particular words. This was more than just a Hebrew inscription. It was a statement. An affirmation. A credo. A mission statement. And while no doubt they chose those words for themselves to see — a reminder for each time they closed their prayerbooks and returned to the world of unwelcome reality — their message still rings true today. It still speaks to any and all peoples who would live in dreaded apprehension of what lay outside.

They certainly speak to me. Especially today.

Please do not misconstrue what I am trying to say. I am by no means equating the world of the Ghetto to the state of America today. We remain very much free and empowered in this land. And yet I must admit — never have I feared so much for our nation and our world as I do today.

I will not burden you today with matters of partisan politics or policy. God knows we all need respite, a place to escape the tensions which often overwhelm us. This is Rosh Hashanah. This is the day wherein we seek hope. This is the time and the place we choose to gather, to remind ourselves that — despite whatever differences might distinguish us from each other — we are

one people. The Ghetto of Venice reminds us of that. Alas, so does the hateful rhetoric we heard coming out of Charlottesville.

By the same token, we will walk back out those doors. Back into the world of social and partisan divisiveness, of racial and ethnic and religious prejudice, of global man-induced perils. What possibly might we do in order to emerge with restored courage and vigor to confront the challenges of a nation at odds with itself? How might we reclaim not the greatness but the beauty that is America?

For me it's all about the inscription atop that synagogue doorway in Venice:

נתחדש של שיש

We will renew with what there is.

I have three initial thoughts about these words.

First, these were undoubtedly composed for the first day of the New Year. Rosh Hashanah is entirely about renewal. As such, they are a message of hope. The word *נתחדש* — let us renew — is in the future tense. There is an optimism to the phrase. A kind of spiritual bravado. It's a Jewish way of saying, "We Will Overcome". Never abandon hope. We *will* renew.

Which brings me to my second thought — the phrase is stated in the plural. It is a reminder that I am not alone. We are in this together. Even more, *נתחדש* is a "reflexive" verb. The *Hitpa'el* verb-state in Hebrew is something you do *to* yourself. Those words atop the lintel of the Scuola Canton were not a prayer asking God for help. The process depended, as far as they were concerned, entirely on themselves. In those three words they were affirming that they were both the agents and the objects of the renewal. The renewal is a process which we can and must do together.

And third. Most important. The potential for renewal and transformation is always at hand. *נתחדש של שיש*. We will renew *with what there is*. We will not cry over spilt milk. We will not focus on what is or isn't, on what has been lost, on what we no longer have. We will move forward with what we *do* have. As my mother of blessed memory would always say, "We will make do."

We will renew with what there is.

America's Founding Fathers bequeathed to us many gifts. Just as our Venetian ancestors undoubtedly used the Jewish tradition to sustain them in their days of uncertainty, so we in America have a written tradition which was forged and designed for precisely that end — to sustain us through days when questions outnumbered answers.

There is a reason our immigrant forbears saw this nation as a *Goldene Medina* — a Golden Land. Because it was founded on principles which were welcoming and just. It was a nation built on the rule of law which proposed that the rights of the individual were paramount. Not just freedom *from* but freedom *for*.

A few years ago I spoke about my visit to the Norman Rockwell Museum in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. There, in its rotunda, were the artist's four most celebrated works — his renditions of Franklin Roosevelt's "Four Freedoms". There was the Thanksgiving feast illustrating "Freedom from Want"; and the image of the parents putting their children to bed showing us "Freedom from Fear" as the father held a newspaper emblazoned with headlines

announcing more news from the war; and there was “Freedom of Worship” showing the beautiful tapestry of American racial, ethnic and religious diversity. (The original World War II full-size poster hangs in my office.) But my favorite will always be the man standing up at a town hall meeting and speaking his mind — “Freedom of Speech”.

Now I appreciate that there has been much said about this primal value of American democracy of late. The events of Charlottesville still reverberate in my heart and on my tongue. Let us be clear: Freedom of speech was never intended to grant *carte blanche* to all kinds of rhetoric. Just as we are prohibited from maliciously yelling “Fire” in a crowded theater, so the diabolical and poisonous words of hate speech, while Constitutionally protected, should — at a minimum — be condemned. Always. Unequivocally. Especially from those we elect to uphold that Constitution.

But by the same token, what has made America the beacon of hope to millions is this very principle of free speech, and nowhere is it more potently demonstrated than in the guarantee of freedom of the press. To my eyes, more than anything else during this past year, the attacks on the media embody what portend to be the greatest threat to this republic. But make no mistake about it, the press will be America’s saving grace.

When I apply the words of the Venetian synagogue to America today, when I consider what we have at hand with which we will move forward, which will strengthen us to renew, I think of the power and the hope afforded us by a free press.

The lifeblood of a free nation pulses through the pursuit of truth. To be sure, what may seem true for me may not necessarily feel true for you. Two people can look at the same picture and see very different images. But that is not necessarily a bad thing. In a free society where a respectful exchange of ideas is not merely permitted but encouraged, it is precisely our diversity, our differing backgrounds and perspectives, which help us to discover truth. This is why a *free* press is so essential. This is why a *free* press bears the seeds of hope and redemption.

There are no guarantees that the press has the truth. But it is only through the safety of an open marketplace of ideas and opinions that truth has any chance of emerging. Simply put, if this is a nation of, by and for “the people,” then we — the people — depend on the media to help us function as a nation.

Therefore most troubling is this Administration’s attempt to undermine our confidence in a free press.

For me the absolute worst part of this past year — and there’s been a lot to choose from — has been the relentless attack on the media by the President and his minions. The demonization of media outlets that dared to challenge the President’s narratives. The games played with the White House Press Corps. The constant invoking of “Fake News”, a phrase that has now become ubiquitous in American discourse. But as Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi propagandist, said, “If you repeat a lie often enough, people will believe it, and even you will come to believe it...”

In this case the *lie* is the simple but odious and repetitive mantra that the media is not to be trusted.

Fake News. Alternative Facts. Dishonest Media. Or as the Germans termed it: *Lügenpresse* — “Lying Press”. This is the enemy of freedom. Because at its core it seeks to sow doubt. To challenge your instincts and your intellect. It is a fundamental tool of all authoritarian regimes

to make you think only the government has the truth. It hopes to disempower you from thinking. It is a form of intellectual enslavement. And we Jews should know. We've been on the short end of this stick before.

America is better than this.

For me, the heroes of America are the mainstream media. They don't try to stop you from thinking; on the contrary, they challenge you to think. They don't by-pass the facts, they protect them. They put them out there for you to see. Because they appeal to your intellect, to *your* ability to distinguish fact from fiction. Well we know, not all journalists are equal. And not all journalists are honest. But in a free society, with a free press, we — the people — are the final arbiters of truth. Truth might be elusive but it is not subjective. There are no such things as “alternative” facts.

And well we all know, with the unfettered access to the Internet, with the ability of individuals or nation-states to use the Internet to murky the waters of truth, the mainstream media is more essential than ever. Only leaders who fear the truth will seek to suppress those who publish it. When that line in the sand is drawn, we must all fear.

In 1922 William Allen White published an editorial entitled “To an Anxious Friend”. It was directed to Governor Henry J. Allen of Kansas, who felt that the post World War I tumult was threatening to Kansas and was deeply suspicious that a free press would undermine his desire to bring law and order to the state. White publicly responded to him in his newspaper, *The Emporia Gazette*:

“You tell me that law is above freedom of utterance. And I reply that you can have no wise laws nor free entertainment of wise laws unless there is free expression of the wisdom of the people — and, alas, their folly with it. But if there is freedom, folly will die of its own poison, and the wisdom will survive. That is the history of the race. It is proof of man's kinship with God. You say that freedom of utterance is not for time of stress, and I reply with the sad truth that only in time of stress is freedom of utterance in danger. No one questions it in calm days, because it is not needed. And the reverse is true also; only when free utterance is suppressed is it needed, and when it is needed, it is most vital to justice.

“Peace is good. But if you are interested in peace through force and without free discussion — that is to say, free utterance decently and in order — your interest in justice is slight. And peace without justice is tyranny, no matter how you may sugarcoat it with expedience. This state today is in more danger from suppression than from violence, because, in the end, suppression leads to violence. Violence, indeed, is the child of suppression. Whoever pleads for justice helps to keep the peace; and whoever tramples on the plea for justice temperately made in the name of peace only outrages peace and kills something fine in the heart of man which God put there when we got our manhood. When that is killed, brute meets brute on each side of the line.

“So, dear friend, put fear out of your heart. This nation will survive, this state will prosper, the orderly business of life will go forward if only men can speak in whatever way given them to utter what their hearts hold — by voice, by posted card, by letter, or

by press. Reason has never failed men. Only force and repression have made the wrecks in the world.”

The editorial won the Pulitzer Prize.

This is our reality today. There is much out there about which to be concerned. The way we speak to each other. The way we judge each other. The way we allow our narrow-minded parochialism, our fear of the other, our selfish desires for immediate gratification — to undermine the “unity” in a nation that pretends to be “united”. We have laws to protect us from each other, but we can violate those laws. Or worse, we can change them. But it all depends on what we know. Our only hope — as it has always been in this nation which celebrates freedom — is to nourish and foster and protect and respect those who endeavor to discover and report to us...the truth.

נתחדש של שיש

We will renew with what there is.

It is a new year. And we no longer live in a ghetto. But that doesn't mean that ghettos don't still exist. Or that fear of the other doesn't continue to poison the soul. There is much about our land that should worry us to the core. By the same token, we are rich with tools of renewal. And more important, they belong to us. The people. If we use them wisely, there is reason to believe we will once again feel the pride of a nation which was founded to pursue The Good.