

“Do Not Remain Indifferent!”

Rosh HaShanah Morning 5778

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August 17, 1915 - a tragic day in American Jewish history. It was the day that Leo Frank was lynched for the crime of being a Jew.

Leo Frank was a Texas born, New York raised, American Jew who had moved to Atlanta in 1908 after he graduated from college. He was active in the Jewish community there; married a local Jewish girl, and became the president of his B'nai B'rith chapter. He worked at a pencil factory owned by his wife's family. Then in 1913, a young girl, little Mary Phagan, was found murdered in that factory.

Leo Frank was framed, charged, and convicted of her murder. During his trial, from inside the courtroom could be heard chants from outside calling for the death of the Jew.

In a great act of political and personal courage, Georgia's governor, John Slaton, commuted Leo Frank's sentence from capital punishment to life imprisonment. Not long after that, on August 16, 1915, Leo Frank was kidnapped from prison by armed men. The next day, August 17, in Marietta, Georgia, in front of picnicking onlookers, he was lynched. Pieces of the rope that hung him and picture post cards of the hanging were sold as souvenirs.

Three things happened in response to that horrible event. First, the B'nai B'rith created the ADL – the Anti-Defamation League – which to this day, has as its central mission combatting anti-Semitism, in the courtroom and in the court of public opinion.

The second thing that happened because of the Leo Frank trial and lynching was that the KKK experienced a huge resurgence of popularity and power.

And the third thing that happened was that Southern Jews got the message loud and clear that they should keep their heads down, and their mouths shut, and try to assimilate the best they could. And from 1915 to 1946 the Jews of Atlanta tried to be as inconspicuous as possible.

But in 1946, another northern Jew moved to Atlanta, and he was destined to be as impactful on the Atlanta Jewish community as Leo Frank had been. Just after returning from serving in WWII, Rabbi Jacob Rothschild, moved to Atlanta to assume the position of Senior Rabbi at what is known there simply as “The Temple.”

Rabbi Rothschild had been deeply affected by his service in WWII, and profoundly influenced by his childhood rabbi, Samuel Goldenson, who had fought tirelessly against the exploitation of workers in Pittsburgh. These experiences heightened his outrage at segregation and the legalized discrimination he saw everywhere in the South, and created within him a sense of urgency to do something about it.

Starting with his High Holiday sermons of 1947, Rabbi Rothschild began what would become his lifelong work of advocating for civil rights, and helping his congregants understand their responsibilities as Jews to resist the temptation of being silent bystanders. His congregation remembers him as feeling “passionately that the moral compass of Judaism demanded an active response to the injustice of the times. His activism was slow, in the beginning, but over time congregants of The Temple came to expect his sermons on racial justice.”¹

As you can imagine, not everyone was happy with Rabbi Rothschild’s activism. The Temple lost some members because of it. One woman was outraged and quit when the Rabbi’s teenage daughter participated in a sit-in to integrate a lunch counter in downtown Atlanta. And some members simply tolerated his sermons and his activism, and liked the rabbi in spite of his activities, not because of them.

But for others still, outside the Jewish community, it was simply intolerable that a Jew would be speaking up on behalf of the African American community. And I’m sure they had a decidedly different way to describe Rabbi Rothschild than I have.

In the early morning of October 12, 1958, fifty sticks of dynamite were placed at the entrance to The Temple, blowing an enormous hole in the building’s outer wall. While thankfully, no one was hurt that morning, lives were changed.

The bombing galvanized the Temple members to embrace their Judaism and it’s teachings of justice, and to understand the urgency of the moment, in a way that the Rabbi’s sermons could not have.

And it brought out leaders in the Christian community to advocate for a climate of moderation and cooperation in Atlanta. The Christian clergy had largely turned blind eyes to the many attacks on black churches, but the bombing of the Temple finally woke them up to the radicalism in their midst, and the necessity to condemn it. And to this day, Atlanta really does stand apart from much of the South as a different model for cooperation and for civil rights.

This past March, I sat in the sanctuary of the The Temple, not far from where that blast had occurred, and I heard Rabbi Rothschild’s widow speak to a room full of rabbis about the courageous work that she and her husband had engaged in by working for Civil Rights. She spoke not only about the opposition they encountered from the white, non-Jewish community, but also from some of their own congregants, and from other Southern rabbis as well.

Why am I telling you this story of what happened so long ago? Because it is happening again, today.

In 1915, anti-Semitism reared its ugly and dangerous face in this country. Some Jews responded by creating an organization to fight it. Others believed that if they just pretended nothing was happening, and they blended in enough, they would be safe. A generation later, when that hatred raised its violent head at them again, that same community responded differently, this time, with courage and with bravery. And because they did, they were able to help change their city to be a beacon of hope.

August 11 and 12, 2017 – 102 years, almost to the day, after Leo Frank was lynched, we saw people with Nazi flags, and with torches, marching through the streets of Charlottesville, chanting anti-Semitic slogans, carrying weapons and threatening clergy. With hoods off, and by the light of day they were proud to declare their beliefs that this is a white Christian nation.

The Jews of Charlottesville were terrified, for the first time in their history they had to hire guards, take the Torahs out of their synagogue for safe keeping, and leave through the back door after services because of threats of violence. In the meantime out in the streets there were clergy of every faith risking their own lives and physical safety to protest the vile hatred of the Klansmen and the Nazis.

But that is not what scared me. What scared me was watching our President in his unscripted remarks not only refuse to forcefully and unequivocally denounce those who glorified anti-Semitism, racism and hatred, but by his silence and his hesitancy he gave credibility to their voice by saying some of the people who marched with the Nazi flag were “good people.”

And I was further disturbed when less than a week later a Washington Post-ABC News poll found that 9% of Americans believe holding white supremacist or neo-Nazi views is acceptable.ⁱⁱ That means 9% of the people polled felt comfortable speaking to a person on the phone and admitting that they thought that it was ok for someone to be a white supremacist. I wonder how much higher the actual percentage really is.

In the last year we have seen a terrifying rise not only in anti-Semitic hate crimes, but also a rise in attacks against people of color, Muslims, and immigrants. There is a widening polarization so that people from different political parties can barely even have a civil conversation or agree on what they both consider to be facts!

And the question is being put before us once again. How will we respond to the social issues of our day? We will turn a blind eye and say “not our problem”? Or will we have the courage to act like Rabbi Rothschild and say that our faith demands of us to respond when we see injustice?

In the past few years there has been much debate on social media, in the Jewish press and in our own synagogue about what role current social issues should have in synagogues, about whether or not synagogues are becoming “too political.” And some have asked wouldn’t it be better if we just left the outside world out of our sanctuaries all together?

I find the question baffling. How can we separate what is happening in the world around us from what Jews talk about inside of our synagogues?

The synagogue is not, and has never been, a place where we check the worries of the world at the door. That is not a luxury we have as Jews.

Rather, the synagogue is where we go to make sense of those worries, and to understand how to respond to those concerns as Jews.

In the Talmud we learn that Rabbi Yochanan said about the Jews of Babylonia: They would go to synagogues and houses of learning, on Shabbat, to discuss matters affecting the multitudes (Ketubot 5a).

And the historian Josephus wrote that in Israel Jews would gather in the Great Synagogue of Tiberius to discuss issues regarding the rebellion against Rome.

In other words, for more than 2000 years, synagogues have been our town hall, the place we go to talk about, to wrestle with, and even argue about the pressing matters of the day.

And one of the ways we try to make sense of what is happening around us is by learning from our past and from our sacred texts. We haven't been coming to synagogue to read the Torah and the Haftarah out loud every week for thousands of years out of nostalgia, we read the Torah and the Prophets every week so that we know what our faith demands of us, to know what our responsibilities are and how to engage with the world, when we leave the synagogue.

We come to temple, so that as a community we understand the laws and expectations that are incumbent upon all of us in our personal lives, in our professional lives, and in the public square.

We read the Torah over and over again so that we will internalize a value system that believes that there is inherent worth and holiness in every human being, even the ones we don't like and the ones who don't like us.

A value system that commands us to be caretakers and stewards of the earth.

A value system that demands we pay our workers a living wage, in safe work conditions, and on time.

A value system that says that WE are responsible for the widow, the orphan and the poor who dwell in our midst.

A value system that insists that we set up courts of law that do not discriminate between the rich and the poor, the stranger and the home born.

A value system that declares without hesitation to each and every one of us "Tzedek, tzedek tirdof! – Justice, justice you shall pursue! (Deut. 16:20)."

So whether we are discussing a rebellion or matters that affect the masses, or plain old anti-Semitism, we are to wrestle with these issues as informed and educated Jews and engaged citizens of this country.

When we study Torah and the teachings of our faith, we are supposed to be reminded that these are not political ideals, but rather they are our religious imperatives.

When we come to temple to learn, we are supposed to remember that the whole point of studying Torah is to take those values, ideas, and imperatives, into our daily lives. The Torah isn't meant to simply be studied, but internalized so that it becomes the light that guides our steps.

And just in case we doze off during the year, and don't pay attention to the teachings of our faith the way that we should, we come to synagogue on Rosh HaShanah to hear the blast of the shofar to stir our souls, to reawaken us to our moral obligations, obligations to ourselves, to each other, and to our God.

One of the names for Rosh Hashanah is "Yom Teruah – the Day of the Sounding of the Shofar." The Shofar with its deliberately discordant blasts calls to us to PAY ATTENTION! WAKE UP!

The first blast – Tekiah – is a single pure sound, the sound of clarity, a call to action. In Leviticus we are told that on the first day of the New Year the shofar blast is "proclaiming liberty throughout the land!" (Lev. 25:10).

Shevarim – 3 short, broken blasts of the shofar that sound like an animal crying out in anguish. It reminds us of the pain in the world, the sound of suffering, the sound of fear, the sound of anguish.

Teruah – 9 quick blasts of the shofar, the sound of urgency, an alarm telling us to move, to respond, to the many crises that are all around us.

And finally, the Tekiah G'dolah – the great sounding of the Shofar. This blast calls out to us with authority: Do not remain indifferent! It is telling us that the time for reflection has ended, and the time for us to go back into the world, and roll up our sleeves, and get to work, has begun.

It was not by accident that Rabbi Rothschild began his work as a voice for civil rights on Rosh HaShanah. He knew that on this day we are called upon to remember our universal values and responsibilities. On this day, the birthday of the world, we are called upon to remember our obligations not just as Jews, but as human beings, as brothers and sisters, each of us responsible one for the other.

On this day we stand before our Creator asking for the opportunity to begin again, an opportunity to go forward with a life filled with righteousness and goodness, to be able to renew our social contract for another year. Another year where we can try harder to repair what is broken in this wonderful world that we have been entrusted.

In Mishkan T'filla, the prayerbook we use on Shabbat and weekdays, there is a meditation in the morning service that captures for me what it means to pray in this space, it explains what the real purpose of a synagogue is, it is my prayer for us on this Rosh HaShanah:

Within these walls we sit surrounded by numberless generations.
Our ancestors built the synagogue as a visible sign of God's presence in their midst.
Throughout our long history, our endless wanderings it has endured,
a beacon of truth, love, and justice for all humanity.

Its presence guided our ancestors to lives of righteousness,
holding up to them a vision of their truest selves.
Now we, in our turn, come into this sanctuary to affirm the sacredness of our lives.
May holiness wrap around us as we cross its threshold.
May we enter this place in peace.ⁱⁱⁱ

And may we always leave this sacred space elevated and inspired by the words that we have shared,
taking those words into our lives, making them manifest in our actions so that our legacy will be of
having lived lives of holiness filled with acts of love, compassion, and justice.

And let us say: Amen.

ⁱ <http://the-temple.org/AboutUs/History/RabbiJacobRothschild.aspx>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.axios.com/9-of-americans-think-its-acceptable-to-hold-white-supremacist-or-neo-nazi-views-poll-2475534976.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ P. 23, Mishkan T'filah