

Block Out the Darkness; Make Room for Light

Parashat Shoftim 5778

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Our Rabbis taught: When the sun is in eclipse, it is an evil sign for the entire world (Sukkah 29a).

That teaching from tractate Sukkah has been in the back of my head since I first learned it in my second-year Talmud class in rabbinical school. I wasn't sure what to do with it then; and I didn't understand how relevant it was until this past week.

It's ironic that I was on my way down to Georgia. I was packing for a family vacation when I turned on the television after Shabbat and saw the horrific images from Charlottesville. My mind went back 30 years, to Forsyth County, less than an hour from Atlanta.

Forsyth County was entirely white for decades, and in January 1987, a group of civil rights activists organized a "brotherhood anti-intimidation march" there to honor the first celebration of Martin Luther King's birthday as a national holiday. About 75 marchers were met by 300 counter-protesters, some of them dressed in white robes and hoods and others dressed in fatigues. Rocks and bottles were thrown, although there were no serious injuries. But there was an almost immediate uproar. A week later, civil rights leaders organized another march, which attracted more than 15,000 people. This time the marchers were protected by more than 2300 police and national guardsmen; some say it was the largest demonstration of police force in Georgia history. And they stood between the marchers and a mob of "hundreds if not thousands of white, mainly young, rural men and women, repeatedly shouting, "N --- go home! (New York Times)"

Neither the marchers nor the counter-protestors actually came from Forsyth County. The county seat of Cumming had only about 2,000 residents. And one resident spoke for his neighbors when he told the New York Times, "I was ashamed." I remember that sense of "Enough!" Atlanta had this unflattering past, but it wanted to become an international city. Leaders knew that they had to disavow racism and let white supremacists know that they were not welcome.

The racist past affected our Jewish community as well. There was a Shabbat service at Congregation Beth Shalom – many years later that would become my parents' synagogue, but this was 1981. The congregation was in its infancy and they were holding services in an elementary school across the street from the construction site where they were erecting a building. The rabbi was in the middle of his sermon when people started talking and shifting in their seats. He turned around to try to understand the fuss, and he saw a cross burning on the lawn of what was to be his synagogue's new home.

There is a Jewish angle to these cross-burnings. As an 8th grader, I had to study the case of Leo Frank – you may know the story from Alfred Uhry’s musical *Parade*. Frank, a Jew from New York, was the proprietor of the National Pencil Company in Atlanta. When one of his young female employees was found dead in the factory, Frank was arrested, jailed, and convicted in a trial that was repeatedly interrupted by intimidating mobs congregated outside the courtroom and shouting to hang the Jew. After Governor John Slater commuted Frank’s death sentence to life in prison – a courageous act that ended his political career – an angry mob stormed the prison camp, abducted Frank, lynched him ... took pictures to document the event. A group calling themselves the Knights of Mary Phagan went to the top of Stone Mountain to burn a cross. And the “lighting” became an annual tradition that lasted for decades.

These are horrible stories – and there are more – but I am more interested in the response. In 1986, Frank was granted a posthumous pardon. Citizens and leaders were committed – if not to erasing a dark past than to creating a brighter future. People stopped tolerating acts of hatred and bigotry. Maybe I was naïve, but I came to think that this sort of thing just didn’t happen anymore. There are still monuments; the carving on Stone Mountain of Jefferson Davis, Robert E. Lee, and Stonewall Jackson is larger than Mount Rushmore. And there is legitimate debate over which monuments should stay and which should go. But there is no debate about which ideas are on the right and wrong side of history. Last week, the Stone Mountain Memorial Association rejected the application from the Sacred Knights of the Ku Klux Klan to hold a “lighting” ceremony in the fall to celebrate and renew the annual tradition that began in 1915. The Association noted that it had the right and responsibility to deny permits for events that might disrupt park activities or “appear to represent a clear and present danger to public health or safety.” The right to free speech does not extend to provocative or incendiary behavior.

And I contrast that approach with the equivocation we have seen from some in response to Charlottesville.

Whether he condemned neo-Nazis or not, the president’s remarks that “not all of those protestors were white supremacists,” and that there were “very fine people on both sides that were there to innocently protest and very legally protest” – those words gave comfort to supremacists and very bad people. David Duke tweeted kudos: “Thank you President Trump for your honesty and courage to tell the truth.” Richard Spencer, a white nationalist leader, vowed to bring more protestors in the coming weeks. White nationalists were encouraged by the president’s comments.

Which brings me back to that Talmudic statement about the curse of an eclipse. Because what is an eclipse? It occurs when the lesser light, the moon, moves in such a way that its shadow temporarily blocks out the greater light, blocks out the sun. And it happens slowly – at first just a speck, then a crescent, and it moves to cover more and more of the sun until all its light is covered. And that’s what happened in Charlottesville. A lesser light, a fringe group, emerged from the shadows – feeling that the time was right to intimidate, to shine torches bright enough to overshadow goodness, to exhibit a display of force and presence, to the point that for a split second, you might have thought that these purveyors of hatred had a legitimate message to share. And that is a curse.

This was the message of Rabbi Marvin Hier, founder and dean of the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles. "Silence is the worst thing we can possibly do," he said. We have to confront white supremacy in the beginning, lest the bigots and haters sense approval and return again and again. We need a coalition of the good to challenge hatred without violence, but with constant protest.

Our Torah portion included three of the most famous words in the entire Torah: "*Tzedek, tzedek tirdof*: Justice/Rightness, Justice/rightness, you shall pursue." Justice and rightness do not happen by themselves and they are under constant threat. Those words are followed by a warning to the deviant who deigns to worship another god or the sun or the moon, a commandment to the people who encounter a person who strays far from the path of legitimacy. The Torah says to show them no mercy. We are not to try to understand, not to search for the wrongs that others might have also committed. We are to wipe them out. Repeatedly, our portion commands: You shall sweep out evil from your midst!

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Haters and bigots will never disappear. They are always there. We might have hoped they could be permanently brushed to the side; but their voices seep out, out of the shadows and into the public square, in search of legitimacy. It becomes our duty to speak up. It becomes our leaders' responsibility – if they cannot silence them completely – to say unequivocally that their message is not okay; hatred is never patriotic. It becomes our duty to defend pluralism and openness and inclusion, to pursue justice and light in an America that – in the words of George Washington – "gives to bigotry *no* sanction, to persecution *no* assistance"; and calls upon "the father of mercies [to] scatter *light* and not darkness in our paths, [to] make us all in our several vocations useful here, and in His own due time and way everlastingly happy." Shabbat shalom.