

Shabbat Vayetsei 5783  
December 2, 2022/9 Kislev 5783  
Rabbi Peter W. Stein

December 3, tomorrow, is the anniversary date of my bar mitzvah. The Hebrew date and the reading of my Torah portion won't come for a couple of more weeks, as my bar mitzvah took place during Chanukah.

I've been thinking about this anniversary in different ways. The winter months have become a natural time of reflection for me, as the yahrzeits for both of my parents and the yahrzeit for Amy's mom all come over a few weeks in the winter. And, of course, the change in seasons and the cold and dark weather. And even though we have Rosh HaShana, New Year's Day is still a powerful moment for me and I think for many of us.

I loved the experience of becoming a bar mitzvah. I came away with a significant sense that I was part of a chain of tradition and I had a responsibility...and the ability...to strengthen that chain.

What I didn't know then was how dramatically the world would change. And how rapidly it would change just in the last few years. The world is obviously very different than it was at my bar mitzvah. It is very different than it was 24 years ago when I was ordained and there has been an acceleration of deferred innovation just in the last 2.5 years.

And at the same time, there is something fundamental that is the same. We are still facing the opportunity and the obligation to live with resilience and creativity, and to strengthen what we've inherited and pass it along to the next generation. We are still doing the sacred work of that chain of tradition.

I've been reading more and more about what is typically characterized as left-wing antisemitism. I am deeply concerned, as I've shared before. And I am deeply concerned about right-wing hatred and violence as well, of course.

What I am seeing is a shift in what is considered normal and moderate. I am seeing a deeply troubling shift in what is acceptable rhetoric. Just this week, a celebrity who I will not name but whose 2 letter name rhymes with Nay took to a national media platform and said “I like Hitler...I also love Nazis...” And while this received the expected condemnation, this was not a fringe event or an aberration of what is found regularly in the mainstream.

This is not a partisan lament. Rather, I share these thoughts with a sense of urgency, that all of us need to join together to reject all those who threaten the Jewish way of life.

Jewish history is filled with example after example of golden ages that came crashing down. Jewish life in America has developed in a truly extraordinary way. For virtually the first time, the separation of church and state and the freedom of religion mean that we are full and equal citizens. So many of the quotas and barriers that we faced have fallen away.

And yet, the chain that we hold is frayed and fragile. This may be an unprecedented home for us, but it is increasingly shaken by blatant antisemitism, anti Zionism, hateful rhetoric, and physical violence.

We need to speak up and stand up. We need to continue to build bridges so that there is a real understanding and genuine closeness between the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities, and across the spectrum of Jewish communities.

We need to cultivate robust engagement with Israel, making it clear that Israel is central to our Jewish identity and the special relationship between the United States and Israel must be preserved. This is even harder and even more important with some of the toxic changes happening in Israel’s political landscape.

I know you've heard me express these sentiments multiple times. I repeat them because they are important, and because each of us will take up this challenge in our own way. My hope is that these moments of Shabbat reflection will allow us to consider what we can do, individually and collectively, to maintain the strength and security of our identity and the heritage that we've inherited.

In one of the opening songs for Shabbat, a poem that was first written by Avraham ibn Ezra in eleventh century Spain, we proclaim: *Ki eshmerah Shabbat, El yishm'reini*...When I keep Shabbat, God watches over me.

It is a beautiful teaching that shows us something important. We are in a covenant, a reciprocal relationship. When we take action, like observing Shabbat, God responds.

That covenant was set in motion when God spoke to Abraham and Sarah. In each successive generation, we observed Shabbat and studied Torah and honored and strengthened our traditions. And this deepened the connection to God.

That's the chain of tradition. We don't wait for God to act on our behalf and we don't just accept the current realities as inevitable. In each generation, in each moment, we have the ability to live with resilience and creativity and passion and courage. And when we do, Judaism and the holy covenant will remain as a strong and vital presence in the world.

May we be blessed as we do this sacred and most important work. Amen.