Accepted -- For Who We Are
Parashat Vayeshev; Thanksgiving 2021
Rabbi Carl M. Perkins
Temple Aliyah, Needham, MA
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About a month and a half ago, a friend and colleague of mine, Rabbi Amy Wallk, of Springfield, Massachusetts, visited Washington. While there, she saw the sights. One of them was the National Cathedral in Washington, where only days before, a bust of Elie Wiesel was dedicated.

It appears in an alcove called the Human Rights Porch with three other heroes of the struggle for human rights: Rosa Parks, Mother Theresa, and Jonathan Daniels, a civil rights martyr, an Episcopal seminarian who, though unarmed, was shot dead in Alabama in 1965 while defending a Black teenager.

The National Cathedral has hundreds of images, sculptures and carvings of people all around it. When Rabbi Wallk saw the statue of Elie Wiesel, she felt pride: pride that Wiesel had become the first modern Jew to be recognized there. Proud

that the leadership of the Washington National Cathedral had come to recognize Elie Wiesel for the remarkable man that he was.[1]

But then she had a different feeling when she saw how Elie Wiesel was described on the banner that highlighted the four individuals honored in that alcove.

Here's how he was described: **"After barely surviving the Holocaust, the winner of the 1986 Nobel Peace Prize became a global ambassador against hatred and genocide."**

Well, that's accurate. But to Rabbi Wallk -- and perhaps to us as well -- there was something missing. Nowhere in that description does it mention the fact that Elie Wiesel was a Jew. That he suffered because he was a Jew. That his family was murdered because they were Jews. Moreover, there was no mention of the fact that his entire life he was proud of being a Jew and that he saw that as an essential part of his being.

Now, would it have been inappropriate to mention that Elie Wiesel was a Jew? After all, Mother Theresa was described as a Roman Catholic nun; and Jonathan Daniels was described as an Episcopalian seminarian.

As a Holocaust survivor, who bore witness to the Holocaust, one could say that **Wiesel represented 6,000,000 dead Jews**. Not only that, but -- as we were reminded by Dr. Alan Rosen, who spoke so beautifully about Elie Wiesel last April via Zoom here in our shul, Wiesel also spoke about -- and wrote book after book about -- Jewish celebration. As Rabbi Wallk has pointed out, Wiesel embodies the story of the Holocaust, yes, but also "the story of survival, Jewish resilience, creativity, adaptability, tradition, study, intellectual struggle, and faith."

So, … what do you do when you feel pride on the one hand and disappointment on the other?

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[1] Note that although "The Washington National Cathedral is the cathedral of the Episcopal Diocese of Washington," it "was conceived by President George Washington and architect Pierre L'Enfant as a "great church for national purposes." (David Williams, CNN)

Well, Rabbi Wallk did what many congregational rabbis would have done in response to her visit: she wrote an article in her shul bulletin describing both her pride and her disappointment.

And that was that.

At least, she thought that that was that. But then, she got a letter forwarded to her from someone at the National Cathedral. It turns out that someone in her congregation works at the National Gallery of Art in Washington. And he knows someone who works at the National Cathedral. Rabbi Wallk's congregant passed on her message to his friend, and before you knew it, someone with authority at the National Cathedral became aware of this, and immediately wrote back to the congregant and to Rabbi Wallk. He said the following:

"The points you ... raise are fair and accurate, and we will be working to address them so that our signage in the Cathedral's Human Rights Porch more accurately captures the breadth of Elie Wiesel's legacy. Please be assured ... that we will be updating the signage ... as soon as possible. Our aim in every aspect of the Elie Wiesel project has been to convey the full measure of his life and legacy, and I apologize that we fell a bit short on this piece. ...

We will make sure that all of our materials reflect Elie Wiesel's Jewish faith and heritage so that we are able to more accurately tell the richness of his story."

The letter was openly apologetic. It acknowledged the error and promised to do something about it. So, as it turns out, that glaring omission at the National Cathedral is going to be fixed. And it all came from Rabbi Wallk **seeing** something and **saying** something; seeing that a piece of who Elie Wiesel was was invisible -- and making it visible.

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This past Thursday, most of us celebrated the holiday of Thanksgiving,

Let's leave aside for now the fact that indigenous people in the United States have come to see this day as a day of mourning. That's a serious challenge to the message, the spirit and the enjoyment of the day that has yet to be resolved. I am hopeful that one day all of us in our land can come together with healing and reconciliation. That will take some time.

Be that as it may, today Thanksgiving is a holiday which is beloved by many Americans, and by many Jews.

As Rabbi Yael Buechler recently wrote, "Thanksgiving seems to have all the right ingredients for a holiday that most American Jews can embrace: It doesn't fall on Shabbat, its roots and message are nonsectarian, and its only real ritual is a multi-course meal."[2]

"That's why prominent Orthodox rabbis of the mid-20th century, including Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik and Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, gave Thanksgiving their *hechsher* (seal of approval)."

As Shari Rabin, associate professor of Jewish studies and religion at Oberlin has pointed out: American Jews are comfortable with Thanksgiving because it's not as directly connected to paganism as Halloween may seem to be, or as connected to Christianity as Christmas undoubtedly is.

One thing is clear: Thanksgiving today is a secular holiday open to Americans regardless of their religious faith.

And yet, … that didn't happen by itself. It didn't happen without a struggle. It didn't have to end up the way it did, and could easily not have.

We may be aware that Thanksgiving was declared a national holiday by President Abraham Lincoln in 1863. But long before that, there were national and local proclamations that officially established a day of gratitude each year. For example,

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[2] This and all subsequent unattributed quotations are from Yael Buechler, "How Thanksgiving helped Jews carve out a piece of the American story," JTA, November 22, 2021.

in the first year of his presidency, on October 3, 1789, "George Washington issued a Thanksgiving proclamation by the new government, designating 'Thursday the 26th day of November' … as Thanksgiving."
That proclamation called for "a day of public thanksgiving and prayer to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many signal favors of Almighty God." As Rabbi Buechler puts it, this was certainly "religious, but not specifically Christian."

On the contrary, in his proclamation, President Washington urged gratitude "for the civil and religious liberty with which we are blessed."

"Gershom Mendes Seixas, the cantor of New York's Congregation Shearith Israel, welcomed the president's declaration in what is regarded as the first Jewish sermon about Thanksgiving." (Unfortunately, there's no videotape of that sermon available, but the text is accessible on-line.[3])

All that is wonderful.

What isn't so wonderful is the way that other Thanksgiving proclamations issued by other American leaders communicated their messages. "Many were, in fact, filled with Christian language."

For example, "in 1848, Governor William Johnston of Pennsylvania issued a Thanksgiving proclamation calling for the day to 'be set apart, **by all denominations of Christians within this Commonwealth.'"**

"That didn't sit well with some Jews, and they made their displeasure known."

The November issue of a Jewish newspaper quoted A.T. Jones, a Jewish Philadelphian, who [pointed out] to the governor that 'Israelites [-- which is how Jews would refer to themselves in those days --] *never* forget to pray for their rulers -- yet your excellency seems to have no recollection of their existence … treat[ing] them as though they were not worthy of it.' Jones lamented that Jews

[3] The First Thanksgiving Sermon Given By A Rabbi In 1789

‘fought and bled’ with their fellow American citizens and expressed great disappointment in a proclamation that clearly omitted Jews in the celebration of Thanksgiving.”

In a secular Philadelphian newspaper, there was a further back and forth between “a prominent Jewish lawyer in Philadelphia, Joseph Moss, and the governor himself, a few weeks prior to the holiday. … Moss … wrote … that in a commonwealth with over 15,000 Jews, the proclamation **‘seems entirely to have lost sight of these undeviating followers of the Holy Bible.**’”

That brought an immediate response by the Governor the following day:

“I cannot permit you to suppose[, the Governor wrote,] that the spirit of intolerance has a place within my bosom.”

The Governor then goes on to blame someone else in his administration: “[Neither] the terms of [the proclamation’s] composition or its phraseology were ... designated by me. It was issued by the Secretary of State during my absence, and I presumed [it] would be in the usual form.”

“The governor concluded his response by officially inviting the Jewish community to observe Thanksgiving and signed it, ‘Truly your friend, Wm. F. Johnston.’”

Similar “Thanksgiving proclamation mishaps … occurred throughout the 1800s in various states -- including Ohio, Pennsylvania and South Carolina. [These] turned into opportunities for Jews to assert and insert themselves into the national narrative.”

Laura Yares, professor of Religious Studies at Michigan State University, points out that, going back to Moses Seixas’ letter to George Washington in 1790 -- the letter that led to Washington’s famous and stirring letter to the Jewish community in Newport, Rhode Island -- **“Jews have openly and publicly taken on the task of holding political leaders to the task of preserving America’s commitment to the separation of church and state.”**

I believe that those efforts have been instrumental in maintaining this principle.

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These two stories: the story of how Elie Wiesel will eventually come to be described at the National Cathedral, and the story of how Thanksgiving has evolved to be a secular holiday in which people of all faiths -- and none -- can express thanks on equal terms: they have a lot in common. Like the two dreams of the cupbearer and the baker at the end of today's parashah[4], or the two dreams of Pharaoh at the beginning of next week's parashah[5]: they are one and the same.[6]

The message is clear: In a land with 200 million Christians, a land in which we comprise but 2% of the population,[7] it's up to us to speak up when we see evidence that we are not being acknowledged or recognized.

As a minority, there are times when we will need to point out that we are being overlooked. Many Jews are at the forefront of efforts to help minorities in this country and marginalized people throughout the world. That's wonderful. But Jews can sometimes be reluctant to advocate for Jews or for Judaism. We shouldn't be.

On this Thanksgiving weekend, we can be grateful to live in a country where our freedom to live as Jews, to be faithful to our way of life, is protected by the founding documents of our country. How many others can say that?

But we have a right to more than that. We want to be visible and to feel comfortable being visible. We want our uniqueness recognized and respected.

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[4] Genesis 40.

[5] Genesis 41:1-8. The content of the dreams is repeated in vv. 17-25.

[6] Genesis 41:25: חֲלוֹם פַּרְעֹה אֶחָד הוּא. The same could have been said of the baker and the cupbearer's dreams in chapter 40. See Genesis 40:13 and 40:19. Note that the same words are used to describe what will happen to the cupbearer and the baker, respectively -- שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים יִשָּׂא פַרְעֹה אֶת־רֹאשְׁךָ מֵעָלֶיךָ and שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים יִשָּׂא פַרְעֹה אֶת־ רֹאשְׁךָ -- though in the latter case, the word מֵעָלֶיךָ is added, giving it a dramatically different interpretation.

[7] See: If the U.S. had 100 people: Charting Americans' religious affiliations

As we prepare to celebrate Hanukkah, let's remember that such recognition doesn't come on its own. It sometimes requires us to make the effort, to speak up, to get involved.

It's up to us to light the candle and to bring illumination.

Shabbat Shalom, and Happy Hanukkah!