

**We Define Ourselves**  
By Rabbi Stacy Friedman  
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A few years ago, my son Eli was studying for a vocabulary test at our dining room table when he looked up from his homework and asked, “Mom, what is a pogrom?” I answered, “It is the reason you are here. It’s why your grandma Esther, Frank’s mother, fled Russia in the 1920’s, escaping persecution and violence that plagued the Jews. It’s why at age four, she and her family arrived in Mexico because quotas barred their entry into the United States. It’s why they lived for many years in a small Mexican border town awaiting the day they would be able to build a new life here in California. It’s why she taught her children, including your father, to treasure Judaism and to always live as a proud Jew and a kind person.” I continued, “It’s largely why I fell in love with Frank,” and with a tear in my eye I added, “and it’s why, when I finally met Esther in the hospital on the night before she died, I whispered in her ear that I would always love her son and thanked her for creating such a spectacular person. So you see, Eli, a pogrom is the reason you are here.” After I finished my response, Eli looked at me quizzically and asked, “but what do I write on the test?”

It’s a great question, one that has troubled me so much over this past year, a year violently pierced by Pittsburgh and Poway, a year of escalating anti-Semitism both in our country and across the globe. What is the answer when our children and grandchildren ask, “Why do people hate Jews?” What is the answer to parents who rightfully ask, “Will my child be safe at school? At synagogue?” How do we respond to our young adults, anxious about encountering anti-Semitism and Israel bashing on their college campuses? What do we say to our survivors and so many others who hear echoes of the past and fear a return to a darker time? And how do we respond to that still small voice within us that asks, “Are we safe praying here today?”

On this holiest of days, I respond to these poignant questions not as an historian or a journalist, not with statistics and definitive answers, but as your rabbi. Today, I speak to you as your rabbi, inspired by our sacred texts and meaning of their teachings. I speak to you as a Jew who is lifted by the vibrancy of our tradition and the righteousness of our values. I speak to you today as a mother who adores my children and yours’, and who prays constantly for their safety and sanity

in today's world. I speak today as a woman, created in God's image, who affirms the sanctity and dignity and equality of every person on this planet. And I speak as a human being who abhors violence and hatred of any kind and who knows that bigotry and cruelty against one person or one group, is bigotry and cruelty against us all.

Last fall, I was in Washington D.C. visiting Adam for parents weekend when my phone began to reverberate wildly with the horrendous news that 11 people were killed as they prayed in their synagogue on Shabbat. My immediate concern of course was for the victims of this despicable tragedy, for their families and community. But my second concern was for you, for this holy community, whom I treasure beyond words and whose welfare is my life's work. We, the leadership of this community, spent that dreadful day, and many days since instituting and analyzing increased security precautions at the synagogue and here at the Civic Center as well. And while it is our highest concern, it isn't only our physical safety that concerns me today, but it is our spiritual security as well. We can't allow fear and hatred to overshadow the beauty and the power of our sacred tradition. We can't allow a depraved white nationalist wielding weapons of war to define our Jewish identity. We can't allow anti-Semitic bigots to diminish in any way the depth and the meaning and the radiance of our holy days and of the New Year upon us.

Yes, we must and do speak out and stand up against hatred and prejudice and violence in all their forms, and we will continue to do so until there is one day no longer a need. But anti-Semites don't get to define us. We do. And the greatest threat for American Jews would be to lose sight of the breathtaking power, the wisdom, and the redemptive hope inherent in Judaism. We define ourselves by the depth of our prayers and the righteousness of our deeds. We define ourselves by the strength and compassion of our community. We define ourselves by loving our neighbors and the stranger in our midst, because ultimately, as Elie Weisel reminds us, "The role of Judaism is not to make the world more Jewish, the role of Jews is to make the world more human." That's why we're here.

We make the world more human when we stand alongside anyone victimized by hatred and prejudice. We make the world more human because we know that another person's anguish and pain is truly our own. We've all seen the pernicious uptick not only of anti-Semitism but of all

forms of racism and bigotry as well. Fueled by hateful and divisive rhetoric, by xenophobia and racist ideology, white nationalist target multiple minority groups today. Just two days before the Tree of Life massacre, an armed man tried to enter a predominantly black church in Louisville, Kentucky. When he couldn't get in, he went to a nearby grocery store and murdered two African-Americans. In March, a white supremacist opened fire on worshipers during their Friday prayers in two separate mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand killing 51 people and injuring 49 others. In April, the same month as the deadly attack on a synagogue in Poway, three African-American churches were burned in Louisiana. And as we know, xenophobes and bigots don't only target minorities in houses of worship; they also target people of color, immigrants, LGBTQ, and other ethnic and religious minorities in the streets, in their homes, and throughout the virtual world of the Internet.

But today I am not here to make us depressed or despondent, but rather to remind us all that despite the repugnancy and wickedness of all of this, hatred and cruelty do not get to define us. It is our compassion and our common humanity that define us. It is the way people have united as allies and partners in standing up against such hatred that defines us. It is the support so many have shown one another after each attack that ultimately defines us. It is the love and the tears we have shed for one another at our vigils. That is what defines us. It is the way people of all faiths and ethnicities and races have come together for vigils, for rallies, for meals following these dreadful events. I'll never forget that first Shabbat after Pittsburgh when I walked up the front steps toward the synagogue and standing at the top were our Christian minister colleagues and friends wearing badges that said, "Welcome to Rodef Shalom." They just showed up in solidarity to support us and pray with us and make us feel safe at a tenuous time. And Rodef Shalom showed up for our Muslim neighbors as well offering them solidarity and friendship following the New Zealand mosque attack last spring. This is how we make the world more human, by connecting with others, by standing up for them and by being supported ourselves. And unlike so many other times in our history when Jews were isolated and marginalized, victims of state-sponsored and institutionalized bigotry, we don't stand-alone today. We are protected and defended by our nation's laws and institutions and surrounded and supported by countless allies.

And still, we need to be vigilant today. We need to stand up and call out hatred and prejudice so that it does not become normalized or woven irreversibly into our societal fabric. How? Vivian Braly is a great example. When her son Jonah was a high school freshman and played on the football team, his teammates, who knew he was Jewish, would frequently drop change in front of him and ask, “Aren’t you going to pick that up?” This continued until the day they did it in front of Vivian. She stopped them and told them why it was wrong, why it was a dangerous stereotype of Jewish people and how offensive it was. “How did they respond,” I asked. “They felt awful and had no idea what it meant,” she said. “They apologized sincerely, and they never did it again.” We can’t ignore words or actions that offend us or anyone else, and must take all hatred and prejudice seriously. We, like Vivian and many others, need to name it when we see it or hear it and educate and communicate so that we can chip away at this pernicious force.

I’d like to particularly address our young people for a moment, both those who are today and those who will read this later. I know that while many of you feel safe as Jews at school or on your college campuses, openly celebrating holidays, wearing a Jewish star or that “I love Israel” T-shirt, others feel uncomfortable or self-conscious and have been criticized because they are Jews. For students involved in progressive activism on college campuses, it can be particularly challenging. One of our college students reported being frequently confronted with hostility because he is a Jew and was recently told by a fellow activist that the Holocaust never happened. It is clear that anti-Semitism exists on both the right and the left, and we all must be vigilant in the face of both. I ask of you today that if anyone’s words or action make you or someone else uncomfortable, listen to that voice, trust that feeling, and do something about it. That’s what Zachary Baumgarten, a Middle Schooler did when swastikas were carved into the desks along with the words, “Jew die” at his Middle School. He alerted his teachers but wanted to do more. So as part of his mitzvah project, he worked with the support of the ADL, he has educated his peers, both at his school and at synagogue, about the dangers of hatred and bias and bullying. He compiled a video in which his peers shared their stories about discrimination and bullying. This year, Zachary will serve as an ADL ambassador and guest speaker at schools across the Bay Area. And, I must add, Zachary was just elected student-body president of his middle school, a testament to the fact that today, it is safe to stand up and call out bigotry and empower others to do the same.

Eli, I told you that day that a pogrom is the reason you are here, but it's not the only reason. The reason you are here, the reasons we are all here, are reflected in these three beloved artifacts, two that are old and imbued with abiding meaning, and one which is new, whose meaning we've had to create for ourselves- a humble aluminum cooking pot, a precious crystal ashtray, and two silver candle sticks.

When my great-grandparents came to this country from Lithuania well over one hundred years ago, like most people escaping persecution and poverty, they brought very few possessions with them. One of them was this aluminum cooking pot. Why did they choose to lug this simple, unassuming bowl with them across the world? You see, every week, this is the pot in which they cooked their Shabbat chicken (although until last week I erroneously believed it was their Passover potato kugel pot). This is the reason they came to this new land was so they could live fully and pray freely as Jews, so they could light their Shabbat candles and bless their children and bake a kosher chicken every Friday night. This humble cooking pot was the very foundation and center of their new lives. In fact, they even became chicken farmers, having received a Rothschild land grant, and spent the rest of their lives raising chickens on their farm in rural Connecticut.

This aluminum pot is my inheritance from my great-grandparents. And while it is no longer suitable for cooking chickens, it now serves to remind me how lucky I am, we are, to have inherited or adopted such a rich heritage and how grateful I am to be a Jew today. Never could my ancestors and yours have imagined Judaism as vibrant and diverse and self-renewing as it is today. Never could they have imagined that so many precious souls, who are not Jewish themselves, would choose to entwine their lives with the lives of the Jewish people; eating gefilte fish on Passover, saying the kaddish for loved ones, and crying joyful tears when their child is called to the Torah. Never could they have imagined the access Jews have today to universities, professions, and leadership that eluded our people for much of our history. And never could they have imagined the outpouring of love and concern from every corner of society, when Jews are harmed or threatened today. Never could they have dreamed that this was all possible. This cooking pot and all it represents, abiding love and richness of Judaism, the holy

rhythm and meaning it infuses in our lives, and its embrace of all people, this is why we are here today.

Many of us are familiar with this crystal ashtray that belonged to Alice Calder, of blessed memory. She and her beloved, Roy, brought this crystal dish to synagogue each year on Kristallnacht, and after they died, her children have continued the tradition. As a young woman in Hamburg, Germany, Alice worked at a furrier shop. On her way to work on the morning of November 10, 1938, Alice witnessed burning synagogues and broken windows in all of the Jewish owned businesses. Piles of Torah scrolls and prayer books burned as she passed by on the streetcar. When she arrived at work, nobody was there. Its Jewish owners were taken away during the night. There was nothing left for her to do except leave the shop and return home. But as she left, Alice took with her this crystal ashtray used by its customers. She said it was to remind her of that day, though she knew she would never forget it. It was also the only thing Alice ever stole in her life. But it is also so much more than that. This crystal ashtray was salvaged from the very ashes of that day and is a symbol of resilience, both Alice's and that of the Jewish people. It traveled with Alice throughout her life- she brought it to England where she, unlike the rest of her family, survived the war, and it traveled with her when she came to America to build a new life.

Rabbi Ed Feinstein reminds us that in 1964, Look magazine featured a cover story called, "The Vanishing American Jew." In 1964, as the third generation of American Jews was being born and raised, the author, a sociologist, predicted that within twenty years, there would be no American Jewish community left. Look Magazine folded five years later and we are still here, vibrant and thriving 55 years later. In fact, Jews have flourished since Abraham first heeded God's call to go forth and become a great nation. And nearly 4,000 years later we are still here- not the Jebusites, not the Hittites, and certainly not the Amalukites, the nemesis of the ancient Israelites. Why? Perhaps it is because of what the Ahad Ha'am called, *chefetz hakiyyum*, the survival wish or life force of the Jewish people. The reality is that there has never been a time in our history devoid of anti-Semitism. Over millennia, Jews have had to adapt, redefine and reinvent themselves, and that survival wish propelled them each time. It was palpable in the DP camps after World War II where countless Jewish weddings took place and where birthrates

between 1946 and 1948 were the highest in the world. And while no longer breaking any birthrates records, we must remain resilient today, not shying away from the truth of our times, but rather, using it to make us stronger, more adaptive and more responsive in our turbulent world. Our resilience, our *chefetz hakiyyum*, this is the reason we are still here today and Judaism will thrive for many millennia to come.

When we were married, Frank and I received these silver candlesticks from a dear friend. When she asked what we wanted as a gift, I told her the truth; “I’d love some classic Shabbat candlesticks that look like they came from the Old Country, but didn’t.” She is a very good friend because she immediately understood what I meant. I wanted these candlesticks so that we could create our own rituals and traditions, so that our Jewish life wasn’t solely dependent on what had been handed down to us from previous generations. I wanted for us to create for ourselves a renewed Judaism that is vibrant and meaningful and filled with wonder and joy. We know that we light two candles on Shabbat and holidays, upholding the commandment to remember, one for *zachor*, and keep, *shamor*. But Rashi adds an additional explanation, and it is for this reason as well that we cherish these candlesticks; Rashi contends that the candles are for *kavod* and *oneg*, for honor and delight and that without light, there can be no peace because people will constantly stumble and be compelled to live in the dark. Frank and I wanted for our children to fall in love with Judaism and Jewish life- and I believe they have. This is the reason you are here, the reason we are all here in this glorious community- to, despite everything, begin a New Year together, and to bring light into our souls and into our world.