

The Stranger's Voice

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Rabbi Jeff Marx. The Santa Monica Synagogue

There is an old Yiddish saying that when one person tells you it's going to rain, you can safely ignore them but when two people tell you, then it's time to bring your umbrella. For the past thirty-two years in this congregation, I have spoken perhaps only two times on anti-Semitism. First, because the threat of anti-Semitism has always seemed to me to be a terrible foundation on which to build Jewish identity and that the narrative of victimhood is a sad way to build Jewish pride. And, second, when, occasionally, over the years, there have been anti-Semitic outbreaks in America, I have attempted to put into perspective that these were isolated incidents, that America in the 21st Century is not Germany in the 1930s and 40s, that there was simply no reason to be alarmed.

But I will confess to you that the events in Charlottesville, Virginia, just 6 weeks ago, have left me worried, and that the shofar blast we sounded on Rosh Hashanah and that we will sound again at the end of the day, need to be sounds of alarm. On August 5th, hundreds of neo-Nazis and white supremacists, carrying flags with swastikas, marched by the Reform synagogue, in a city where Jews have lived since 1870. They shouted out their hateful slogans: "Seig Heil!" "Blood and soil!" "Jews will not replace us!" The night before, they had gathered with torches, invoking the memory of Kristallnacht when Jewish synagogues across Germany had been burned. While there have always been small pockets of neo-Nazis in America, what was disturbing was that instead of hiding out in the woods or in someone's rec room, now they were now emboldened to show their faces, and shout out their unbridled hatred.

What was disturbing was that, while, in the past, we could count on the good-will of our fellow Americans to denounce fringe hate groups, now we have been witnessing the dangerous flirtation of beleaguered white nationalists with these haters. As Arlie Hochschild has brilliantly written about in her recent work, *Strangers in Their Own Land*, when white Protestants are feeling that *their* America is being taken away from them – indeed, only 43% of America is now White Christian – when their livelihoods feel threatened, when the American dream feels like it is slipping away, when more attention seems to be placed on "identity issues" than on "true Americans," then the politics of isolationism, and nativism arise. But the line between, "send home the illegal immigrants who are taking our jobs," and between "immigrants who are settled here are inferior and should be eliminated," is a thin one. The failure of some on the right to clearly distance themselves from those who are racist and anti-Semitic is troublesome indeed.

Whereas, in the past, we could count on local governments and elected officials to respond to such vitriolic hatred, now, the Charlottesville police department – even when Nazi websites posted a call to burn the synagogue – was not willing to assign an officer to help keep its members safe, and the synagogue was forced to move their Torah scrolls out of the building for fear of harm.

Then, there was the initial tepid and equivocal response from the White House following the violence that left one counter-protester dead. Compare this with our first president, George Washington, who wrote to the Jewish congregation in Newport, Rhode Island that “the Government of the United States, gives no sanction to bigotry” and ended with a quote from the prophet, Isaiah: “Every one shall sit in safety under their own vine and fig tree and there shall be none to make them afraid.” Add to this that there has been a rise in America of anti-Semitic incidents, and that last year on social media, there were 382,000 anti-Semitic posts, with roughly 10% of those calling for violence against Jews. So, yes, following the events in Charlottesville, I have been worried in a way I have not been before.

So what are we to do, and how are we to respond? First, we need, again, to put our current situation in historical perspective: I will again insist that, no, this is not Nazi Germany. The anti-Semitic marches and rallies, the social media postings, are not coming from members of our government, from the top down, as it was in Germany, but from the bottom up. The neo-Nazis and white supremacists, though they have loud voices, are still a very, very small percentage of our population. Yes, their increased visibility is worrisome, and seeing flags with swastikas summons up our justified Jewish fears but we need to try and keep their small numbers in perspective.

We also need to remember that the current president is not the first president to be indifferent to Jewish suffering. In 1939, Roosevelt refused to consider admitting the St. Louis – a ship filled with 900 Jewish refugees from Hitler’s Europe – into Miami harbor. We know that Harry Truman called New York City, “kike town,” and refused to invite Jews into his home; and many of us here can remember Nixon’s anti-Semitic rants about the Jews, including his conviction that, “...most Jews are disloyal.”

We need to remember, in historical perspective, that racism, anti-Semitism, and reactive nativism in America is not new. There were Henry Ford’s anti-Semitic publications in 1920, the closing of America’s immigration gates in 1924, Jewish quotas established for colleges in the 1930s, and restrictions on Jewish entry into neighborhoods, resorts and country clubs well through the 1950s.

We also, in the midst of our worries and concerns, must be careful not to become like those we oppose. This being the High Holy Days, I publically confess, al chet, that when I heard that the Antifa group had arrived in Charlottesville with baseball bats, my initial

atavistic reaction was pleasure that some Nazi skulls would be smashed. And I suspect more than a few of you, here, initially had the same visceral feelings, as well. But no, violence should not be used against those who call for violence. We cannot condemn the violence of the fringe right while condoning the violence of the fringe left. Violence cannot be the answer to neo-Nazis and white supremacists, and, frankly, violence directed at them only adds to their narrative of victimhood. We may meet hate with anger; we may meet hate with resistance, but we must not turn to violence to combat the hatred and violence of others, as long as there are alternatives.

Even more difficult, in the midst of our anxiety, is our initial inclination to curtail hateful speech that we find to be morally offensive. As the chancellor of U.C. Berkeley wrote recently, once we embark on the path to censorship, we make our own speech vulnerable to it. We have seen too many examples on college campuses this year of opposing views shouted down, presenters threatened, speaking engagements cancelled. We need to be careful, however, for today the students feel that white supremacists should not be heard; tomorrow it will be the Zionist supporters. We should also not give the neo-Nazis the excuse that what they are doing is calling for the right of free speech. As difficult and morally reprehensible their words are, they should not be denied a space to talk. And we, of course, need to keep demanding the freedom to respond to their hate with our words, with rational discourse, as well as the freedom to walk away, and refrain from watching or listening.

But it is not enough to simply remain calm as we put the current situation into historical perspective, nor enough to refrain from condoning violent counter-protests and avoiding the impulse to curtail free speech. We Jews need to do better than that. Our Jewish response, I believe, needs to be informed by our Torah portion for these High Holy Days, a deeply troubling story that none-the-less gives us guidance for today.

Last week, on Rosh Hashanah, as Jews around the world gathered together to usher in the New Year and begin our Days of Awe, we began by reading the story of one of the most marginalized figures in the Book of Genesis. It is, you will recall, the story of a woman. But not just a woman, an *Egyptian* woman, and not just an Egyptian woman but also a *slave*. A slave named Hagar, whose name literally means, “The Stranger.” We usher in the holiest of times, by reading the story of a disenfranchised stranger, one who is, clearly, not one of us.

In the Torah portion, you will remember, Abraham casts out Hagar and her son, Ishmael, into the wilderness with barely enough water to sustain them. The water is soon gone, and staggering through the bare terrain, she finally casts off her son and then sinks to the ground a short distance away, prepared to die of thirst. At that moment, an angel of God calls to her, as the angel will call later to Abraham. Though neither Abraham nor Sarah is ever able to call her by name – she is always referred to as, “your slave” or “that Egyptian” –

the angel calls her by her name. And just as, later, the angel's call results in Abraham looking up to see the ram that will be substituted in place of his son, Isaac, now the angel calls to Hagar and she looks up to see the well of water that will save her and Abraham's other son, Ishmael. "Do not worry," says the angel, "God has heard the cry of the boy." God has clearly looked on her distress, as well, and responded.

God hears the voice of Hagar, the stranger. On the very day in which we Jews gather to affirm our ties to our religion, our fidelity to our God and to our People, our commitment to continuing our on-going story in the world, the principle lesson we are asked to carry away is that God also hears the cry of the stranger. It is an extraordinary religion we have: On the one hand, we proclaim that we are the Chosen People; we are unique, we are special, we are God's favorite. And, on the other hand, we are reminded that everyone is a creation of God, human beings have the divine spark within them. Over, and over, and over again, we are commanded not to mistreat the stranger, for we were strangers in the land of Egypt.

That's what it means to be a Jew. To be fiercely protective of one another, *and* to have a heart that's also filled with compassion for those who are not members of the tribe. We are to hold in tension the particular (that's us) with the universal (that's them.) In the spring, during our Passover Seders, at exactly the moment that we celebrate how the waters of the Red Sea parted for us and we went forth into freedom while the wicked Egyptians who enslaved us were drowned in the sea, we take our pinkies and diminish the cup of joy, because the Egyptians who were drowned in the waters, were God's children, too. Though the Torah commands us that when we find a lost item we are to return it to our Jewish neighbor, our rabbis proclaimed that this commandment also pertained to others, that the lost property of non-Jews was also to be returned to them. This dialectic between the particular and the universal, was best expressed by Hillel, two thousand years ago: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" he asked, 'But if I am only for myself, who am I?"

I want to suggest to you this evening, then, that in the aftermath of Charlottesville, it is not enough for us to be focused *only* on *our* Jewish wounds and worries, the perceived threats to *our* safety. It is not good enough just to circle the Jewish wagons. The white supremacists in Charlottesville were not just there for us. They came to voice their hatred for Blacks, Latinos, Asians, gays and lesbians. Many of you are familiar with the words of the German Lutheran pastor, Martin Neimoller:

First they came for the Socialists, and I didn't speak out—
Because I wasn't a Socialist.

Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I didn't speak out—
Because I wasn't a Trade Unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak out—
Because I wasn't a Jew.

Then they came for me—
But there was no one left to speak for me.

They are coming for *all* the strangers, and we Jews must not be totally preoccupied with our fears of anti-Semitism. We must stand at the side of others, as well. We must be allied with them in the days to come. Just a few weeks ago was an extraordinary article by the Reverend Al Sharpton that appeared in the Israeli paper, Ha'aretz. While I, frankly, have found him to be a self-serving demagogue and publicity hound, his article brought me up short. 'Despite all the arguments and breeches of the last 40 years between our two communities,' he wrote, 'there is today, a need for Jews and blacks to come back together, to fight the anti-Semitism, racism and bigotry that confronts us.' And it's not just Blacks, whose cry, like Hagar's goes up to the heavens: Gays, transgenders, Latinos, American Moslems, refugees fleeing terrorism; all who are the stranger. Their call, too, is heard by God, their cry needs to be heard by us, as well, and we need to add our voices to theirs.

Together, all of us need to say loudly and clearly through social media and public gatherings: "This hatred isn't us." We need to counter this hate by confronting it, exposing it, and labeling it. We must reject the notion that among the neo-Nazis and white supremacists were "very fine people." No, they were not, and their sympathizers are not and we need to raise our voices together to make that clear and call on our government officials to do so, as well.

We need to meet hate with continued, rational explanation, with displays of diversity, with goodness and with light. We will not eradicate hatred and racism in our lifetime, but we can help reduce it. We can reduce it, not by attempting to muzzle it nor beat it submission with baseball bats but by increasing our voices, to proclaim that most of us in America are not haters. We can reduce it by putting forth a continued vision of our fellow human beings as neighbors. We do not have to love them but we may not mistreat them. They do not have to be our friends, but they must be seen as having dignity in their own right. Those who seek to enter our country must be seen as human beings seeking a decent life rather than potential criminals in our midst. Those who are sick or ill must be seen as more than a drain upon our economy but instead as fellow human beings who are not as fortunate as we have been. We must hear their voices, the voice of Hagar, the stranger, and respond to them.

Tonight, on this eve of Yom Kippur, may we listen to the plight of our neighbors, hearken to the cry of the stranger, and hear those without a voice. May we open our ears to the oppressed, reach out with our hands and hearts across the borders of sexual orientation, race, class, political party, nationality and religion, to speak up, to speak out, to declare

ourselves, to raise our voices so that goodness may flourish, so that all may sit under their vine and fig tree, and none, none, shall make them afraid.