

D'var Torah—Rabbi Ita Paskind  
Re'eh, August 19, 2017  
***“Charlottesville, a Jewish perspective”***

I offer an account of the Charlottesville incident from the shul president, Alan Hoffman. ‘The fear of seeing Nazi flags parade past the shul and hearing shouts of Seig Heil and “Jews will not replace us” yet we had pride in a packed sanctuary, including some non-Jews who came in support. Pride in a shul member who felt compelled to stand with their guard throughout the day. Pride in the rabbis of the shul marching arm in arm with other faith leaders in a show of solidarity and peace. Sadness at feeling the need to remove the Sifrei Torah from the premises, at encouraging members to leave through the back and walk in groups, and at cancelling the Havdalah program they’d planned for that evening. It’s 2017. It’s the United States of America. Nobody should be living in fear.’

And yet, we’ve seen in the last 7 days that those who stand for hate are feeling emboldened. They are telling reporters and anyone else who will listen that they hope their protests will lead to violence—and of course, they did. They are planning and conducting more demonstrations around the country, with the permission that comes from silence, from a lack of condemnation from enough of our leaders. This one’s not politics as usual, friends. This is a flash point in our history. It’s a time for what Rabbi Heschel called “moral grandeur and spiritual audacity”.

I know I’m preaching to the choir here, but it needs to be said. There’s no room in our country for hatred, for anti-Semitism, for racism, for Nazism, for the KKK. The corrupt value systems of those espousing these ideas are simply the exact opposite of what our Torah demands of us, and what people of faith the world over believe. We need to be the people who stand up and remind the world what our people endured 70+ years ago, when we vowed Never Again. We need to demand that our leaders speak out for peace and tolerance and love.

You know, the Torah, in our parasha, gives us a choice between blessing and curse. Which direction we choose is based on whether we follow the mitzvot that God has given to us. Our ancestors first had to listen to both the blessings and the curses at the intersection of two mountains—Har Gerizim and Har Eival. The blessings would be recited from Har Gerizim, and the curses from Har Eival. Now, just the words would probably be enough for anyone listening to say we choose to follow the mitzvot. Nobody wants to live a life where curses are chasing us day in and day out.

But the Rabbis take it step further, adding physical descriptions to the mountains—Har Gerizim is lush and green, Har Eival is desolate. They want to make sure it’s extremely clear which path to take. It’s easy to tell the difference, and it’s obvious which one would lead us to a brighter future. We choose the path of blessing.

Now, that path may not always be the easiest. Lord knows that doing the right thing sometimes takes longer, costs more money, has painful side effects. But we do it anyway.

An analogy, from Midrash Tanchuma Re'eh: There was an elder who sat at a crossroads. Before him were two paths: one path began with thorns but concluded in a clearing, and one path began in a clearing and concluded with thorns. He would sit at the start of each path and warn passers-by, saying to them: "Even though you see that this path begins with thorns, you should take this path, because it concludes in a clearing."

Everyone who was wise would listen to him and walk along the [recommended] path. [The wise people] would get a little bit tired [at first], but they would go in peace and arrive in peace.

But those who would not listen to him, would go [on the other path] and would fail at the end.

Similarly, Moses explained to the people of Israel, saying to them: Here is the path of life and the path of death, blessing and curse. "And you shall choose life, so that you and your descendants may live."

That's our deepest desire, after all, isn't it? To live, and to have our lives mean something?

Rabbi Rick Jacobs, the President of the Union for Reform Judaism, gave an interview earlier in the week on CBS. He described his support for the congregation in Charlottesville, Congregation B'nei Israel, and talked about how he went there to preach after Saturday's events. A message of peace and love and light and brotherhood. It's not just pie-in-the-sky. It's what we stand for as Jews and as human beings created in God's image. Clearly, there is more work ahead of us than we may have anticipated. We must watch out for our fellow Jews. We must watch out for people of color. We must watch out for LGBTQ individuals. There must be no room for discrimination. We choose blessing. We choose life.