

I Protest. I Have Faith – Rosh Hashanah Morning 5778
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Congregation Emanu-El of Westchester
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I fell in love with our country the summer I rode a bicycle from San Francisco to Washington, DC. With members of my fraternity from chapters across the nation, we rode to raise money and awareness for people with disabilities. The ride also raised my awareness of our great nation. I met pastors who housed us in their church social halls overnight. I slept in un-airconditioned high school gyms after pickup basketball games with local teens. I met the folks from the Lions Club who fed us dinner. The Rotary Club hosted dances for us together with local people with disabilities.

At each stop, Americans came out to greet our red, white, and blue clad team. They waved American flags, offered prayers for our safe journey, and thanked God for living in a country sensitive to the needs of all people. Whether we stopped in the tiny mining community of Ely, Nevada, population 192, or in downtown Chicago, Americans of every political party, color, religion, and heritage came out to greet us, to cheer us on, to share in the American dream of possibilities for all people.

I fell in love, too, with the land itself. The verdant valleys of California, the deserts of the West, the mountains of the Rockies, the endless plains in the mid-west, the steep, old hills of Pennsylvania and Maryland. We began each morning with a stretch, a prayer, and some Advil as we got ready to ride in heat and cold, in rain and wind, every weather condition you can imagine. We got honks of support from passing cars and we almost got run off the road by triple tractor trailers. Most of this nation is empty of people and filled with wilderness, with corn and with soybeans. And, everywhere people live, we found a country filled with kindness and unity, filled with a commitment to helping those who need a lift, filled with a desire to cheer for what is good and unifying and principled and right. We rode as red, white, and blue clad symbols of possibility, of equality, of compassion, of America. And people liked nothing better than to come out, applaud for our arrival, spend time affirming shared values, and then send us off with good wishes and sincere prayers, feeling better about the future and about themselves.

I still have faith in the America I knew on that ride. But that faith is challenged daily. I still have faith in the goodness of the American people but divisiveness and anger has overshadowed so much of that goodness. I still have faith that most pastors would open their doors to a group of college kids on bikes, but religion now divides as often as it unites. I still have faith that a conservative, miner from rural Nevada would break bread with a liberal, Ivy League kid from Westchester but now red and blue seem to define us more than red, white, and blue. I am sad. I am scared. And, you know what? I am really angry.

Today I speak words of protest, joining hundreds of my Reform rabbinic colleagues across the nation in fulfillment of our sacred obligation [of moral leadership].¹ Rabbis must speak truth even, unpopular truth. Moral leaders must preach justice even when all may not wish to hear that

¹ Abrahamson, Rabbi Elka and Rabbi Judy Shanks. One Voice for the New Year, 2017. CCAR High Holy Day Resource Packet

message. My protest follows the traditions of the Torah's prophets. My protest comes from a deep, abiding patriotism. Today I protest the rise of anti-Semitism. I protest the waves of xenophobia sweeping our nation and engulfing our government. I protest the rejection of science and the degradation of our environment. I protest leaders who "dehumanize, degrade, and stigmatize whole categories of people in this nation."² The America I got to know as I rode across this country does not stand for any of this. The America I know does not stand idly by, the America I know stands up for what is good and right, compassionate and just – a nation of upstanders.

I protest the monster of anti-Semitism that is alive and well in America. As it has done throughout history, it lay dormant for years, growing seemingly smaller and appeared, especially in areas like ours, to have disappeared. The monster has come roaring back. Nazis marched in Charlottesville. Nazis. They chanted "blood and soil" harkening back to the Nazi delusion that the so-called Aryan race has a primordial connection with the land in Germany. As one of them explained to Vice News, and please forgive me using the language in this direct quote, "This city is run by Jewish communists and criminal niggers."³ Other protesters chanted, "Jews will not replace us."⁴ In their eyes, Jews are foreign interlopers who threaten the white purity of Americans.

Lest we think that they only spew words and words cannot hurt. At Charlottesville's synagogue on that fateful day, three Nazis stood outside during services. They brandished Nazi symbols and held tight to their weapons. The police did not respond to a request for direct protection. Our Jewish brothers and sisters had to sneak out the back of a synagogue to avoid a confrontation in America in 2017.⁵ We do not have Nazis standing in our lot. But Nazi symbols appear spray painted at our schools. Our JCCs receive bomb threats. A swastika and the words "White Power" appeared on the Bronx River Parkway bike path in White Plains.⁶

This past week we hosted the Westchester Jewish Council's annual High Holy Day security briefing. Law enforcement representatives stood by local politicians and Jewish community leaders to clearly and explicitly denounce anti-Semitism. County Executive Rob Astorino spoke of his commitment to fighting anti-Semitism and assuring our safety. I sincerely appreciated the clear denouncement from Westchester's chief executive. And yet, at the same time, it highlighted the ambiguity and false moral equivalence drawn by President Trump following Charlottesville and again just last week. The evil and hatred of Nazis and white supremacists cannot find one iota of support from our national leadership. If statements of condemnation require any explanation at all, they are utterly insufficient. We need leadership like that of George Washington who famously wrote to the Jews of Newport, Rhode Island, "I Happily the Government of the United States gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance..."⁷

² Ibid.

³ VICE News, HBO, August, 14, 2017

⁴ Ibid. and others

⁵ <https://reformjudaism.org/blog/2017/08/14/charlottesville-local-jewish-community-presses>

⁶ <http://www.lohud.com/story/news/politics/2016/11/14/astorino-hate-graffiti-bronx-river-park/93809728/>

⁷ <http://www.tourosynagogue.org/history-learning/gw-letter>

And so I protest. I protest the rise of anti-Semitism. I protest those who poo-poo the rise, who say it's not that bad. I protest leaders who fail to clearly and immediately and completely denounce not only the anti-Semitism, but the anti-Semites who carry it out. I protest.

I protest, too, the waves of xenophobia sweeping our nation and engulfing our government. For 2,000 years the people of the world reviled the Jews. For 2,000 years we had no home. For 2,000 years we stood as "the other" par excellence, the epitome of all that seemed foreign and impure and strange and shifty and usurious and suspicious. If anyone should understand the horror and immorality of xenophobia and rejection facing today's refugees and immigrants it is us.

Our tradition could not be clearer on this. The commandment to welcome the stranger appears thirty-six times in our Torah, more than any other commandment. The Talmud teaches that God created us all from the first person so that no human being could ever say, "my lineage is greater than yours."⁸ Our congregation has taken this commandment to heart as we welcomed the Taha family from Kurdish Iraq to Westchester this past spring. We did this with the volunteer effort of nearly 50 congregants, the generous financial support of several more, and the incredible leadership of Steven and Joan Kass. The Tahas have started to establish themselves in America. They do it with the same fits and starts as every new immigrant family, but the doors of opportunity and freedom have opened for this family and we should take great pride in helping in our small but significant way.

Our actions stand in contrast to those of our government. The administration plans to let in fewer than 50,000 refugees.⁹ The administration canceled Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals. Who are we to visit the sins of the parents on their children?! Who are we to tear apart families and communities? The fig leaf law-and-order argument covers up a nefarious xenophobia and racism befitting Charles Lindbergh or Bull Connor. Once law stops serving the residents of our land, once law becomes a hammer with which to smash compassion, that law loses its moral force and our nation loses a bit of its soul.

Some worry if we have the resources to welcome refugees. They seek to prioritize people who already live here. Well, the America that I know, the America whose roads I pedaled end-to-end, has resources of compassion and treasure, caring and kindness that can handle any challenge. The America that I know can juggle multiple moral imperatives at once. To suggest that America cannot absorb and integrate a meaningful number of refugees is to cast dispersion on all that makes us great.

And so I protest. I protest for the Tahas. I protest for the undocumented children in school with my children. I protest for immigrants holed up in churches seeking sanctuary from our government. I protest in memory of the generations of Jews who found doors slammed in their face, who suffered through two millennia of xenophobia. I protest.

I protest, too, the rejection of science and the degradation of our environment. On the opening day of religious school a parent asked me how we can understand the divine punishments laid out in the Torah. In the face of Hurricanes Harvey and Irma and Maria, in the face of wildfires

⁸ Mishnah, Sanhedrin, Chapter 4, Mishnah 5

⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/12/us/politics/trump-refugee-quota.html>

and earth quakes, how can we accept the teachings of a book which claims that God punishes our moral failings with natural calamity? I explained. We need not look at the supernatural to understand the broad, important message of our Torah, the message that our actions have consequences. When we build with no end and disregard geologists' flood maps, people suffer. When we fail to invest in infrastructure deemed necessary by engineers, flood waters have no place to go but into our homes. When we spray pesticides that biologists tell us will harm the whole food chain, people get sick and animals disappear. When we ignore well founded studies by forestry experts, our great woodlands burn.

And, when we disregard the existential threat of climate change, we imperil our very survival. Scientists will not tie any one storm to climate change, but they share a consensus that global warming will lead to more storms like Harvey and Irma and Maria, more wild fires like those we see out west. The refugee problem that we see today will increase exponentially when arable lands around the world dry up and sea coasts disappear.

As if climate change were not enough, we have seen countless environmental regulations rolled back, regulations that protect the air we breathe and the water we drink and the land which we share with the animals and birds who fill creation. In the book of Genesis, God commands Adam to work and to protect the land. This command does not tell us to trade one off for the other, it says to do both. This affirms our moral obligation to live on this earth sustainably and those who ignore this obligation for short term profit imperil our future and all of God's creation.

And so, I protest. I protest those who today work actively for environmental degradation. I protest those who ignore sound climate science and thereby threaten our very existence. I protest those who take advantage of economically depressed people to cynically push for profitable deregulation. I protest for the mountains and fields and forests of this great country. I protest for this one and only planet that we have. And for the Divine presence that animates our universe, I protest.

I protest, too, the leaders who dehumanize, degrade, and stigmatize whole categories of people in this nation.¹⁰ We read in Genesis that God created us all *in the image of God*¹¹. The text of the creation story does not distinguish between one kind of person and another. No difference between CEOs and laborers, no caveat for skin colors of white, brown, or yellow. In the American canon we find an echo of this ideal: *We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.*¹² Over the centuries, America has evolved to recognize the fullness of this statement: not only men, women; not only white, all colors; not only land holders, everyone. *We the people* has come to mean all of us blessed to call this country home. And yet, powerful forces have come to the fore which threaten this ideal. These forces discriminate against transgender people, gays and lesbians and bisexuals. These forces discriminate at our borders based on religion. These forces dehumanize women, treating them as objects to be groped, workers to be underpaid.

¹⁰ Abrahamson, Rabbi Elka and Rabbi Judy Shanks. One Voice for the New Year, 2017. CCAR High Holy Day Resource Packet

¹¹ Genesis 1:27

¹² US Declaration of Independence <http://www.ushistory.org/declaration/document/>

And so, I protest. I protest for my college classmate Alison, a transgender woman who bravely served as a pilot in Iraq before coming out and now faces discrimination from the nation she served, from the military for whom she sacrificed so much. I protest for scientists and academics, business people and artists who cannot travel from our country for fear of Border Control forbidding their reentry. I protest because I have faith with all my heart that every Jew, every Muslim, every gay, transgender, disabled, black, brown, white, woman, man and child is beloved of God and precious in the Holy One's sight.¹³ I protest.

Judaism demands moral leadership not only from our rabbis, but from each member of the covenant, each one of us. Our Torah calls us to be a kingdom of priests, a holy nation.¹⁴ Therefore, we cannot become inured to the daily scandal, the daily outrage, the daily acts of anti-Semitism. Just as Abraham argued when God described the planned destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, we will respond to the injustices in our nation today by being upstanders. We will respond with peaceful protests, and with public calls for healing, by building alliances and by speaking in unison with other minorities and faith communities.¹⁵ We will be upstanders for, as the late Eli Wiesel put it, We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere.¹⁶

Taking sides does not always mean taking to the streets. This past Sunday, our 7th grade class visited the Pleasantville Cottage School, a home to emotionally troubled boys and girls, ages 7-16. Its philosophy is that the child is part of a family that must be engaged and helped so that the child can safely return home permanently.¹⁷ Our students visited with these children, black and latino, from troubled homes or troubled themselves. They played games and did art projects. They laughed together and affirmed one another's humanity, or put more in their terms, they just hung out and had fun. After the program, their director of volunteers wrote to our Youth and Program Director, Jane Dubro. She said, Having your students here shows our kids that there are children that care about others and that makes them feel special. And, most important, that they are not alone or forgotten. Perhaps this, more than anything else, stands as the greatest type of protest. This living example of Jewish values embraces diversity and compassion, dignity and respect, potential and kindness. We can speak and write and march and post as much as we want, but nothing replaces going out into the world and living our values as so ably demonstrated by our wonderful 7th grade class this past weekend. I challenge each of us to follow their example.

My cross country bicycle journey ended on the steps of The Capital building in Washington, DC. With a police escort we rode two by two down Pennsylvania Avenue, snapping pictures through tears of joy and pride. We arrived to the cheers of friends and family who had gathered in DC and, after a moving ceremony, we took pictures holding up our bikes with The Capital Dome in the background. I still get choked up when I see The Capital. I think about the amazing people that I met on that journey across America: good, kind, decent people, caring people committed to

¹³ Abrahamson, Rabbi Elka and Rabbi Judy Shanks. One Voice for the New Year, 2017. CCAR High Holy Day Resource Packet

¹⁴ Exodus 19:6

¹⁵ Abrahamson, Rabbi Elka and Rabbi Judy Shanks. One Voice for the New Year, 2017. CCAR High Holy Day Resource Packet

¹⁶ <http://www.eliewieselfoundation.org/nobelprizespeech.aspx>

¹⁷ <https://www.jccany.org/our-programs/residential-care/pcs/>

helping and to service. I think about each mountain and the endless fields of corn and soybeans, of cattle grazing and of the millions who drove by us out to make a life for themselves and their families.

I still have faith in that America. I have faith that we will all heed the call of the prophet Isaiah to be an *ō* , a light unto the nations.¹⁸ I have faith that we will be upstanders, that we will not be put off by the cost of speaking truth. I have faith that we will not allow our individual comforts and desires to outweigh our obligation to every other resident of this land. I have faith that we will be upstanders who delve into complex issues with open minds. I have faith that we will work together to bend the arch of history toward justice, to make our nation an exemplar of our highest ideals and potential. And, I have faith that we will be upstanders who answer the call of the Torah: *ō!* Justice, justice shall you pursue!¹⁹

¹⁸ Isaiah 49:6

¹⁹ Deuteronomy 16:20