

**Where We Choose to Stand**  
**Rosh HaShanah Day II, 5782**  
**by Rabbi Scott Shafrin**

I remember the last time I was told I wasn't going to heaven. I say the last time because it certainly wasn't the first. Mere weeks away from finishing high school, some friends and I were wrapping up one class or another, waiting for the bell to ring, talking about what we would be doing that summer and in the fall. I'd been talking to my friend Eric, an incredible guy who I'd been in just about every class with for the last four years, and both of us were lamenting that we'd soon be living in different states, leading completely different lives, and reminiscing.

As the bell rang and we packed up, he turned to me and, without much warning, said, "Scott, you are a wonderful person. I don't really think it makes sense that you won't get to go to heaven." My 18 year old brain was not able to process this, and I am sure I said something, but all I could think was, "Did my friend just really tell me I'd be going to hell?"

I was angry and hurt. Even then, I knew that what my friend was saying, in his mind, was a compliment, that the strictures of his faith seemed to categorize people in a way that, having known me, didn't quite make sense. And yet, I know that what he was saying was that some part of him still believed that as a Jewish person, I was less than, other, in some way sub-human even.

It stung. In some ways, it still does, though honestly, I hadn't thought about that exchange in years. Like many who grew into adulthood around the turn of this century, I had thought that anti-Semitism was mainly a thing of the past. Sure, there will always be hateful, misguided people who peddle stereotypes and seek to demonize one group or another. But publicly acceptable, mainstream, vocal demonization of Jewish individuals or Jews as a people didn't seem like real and present danger.

And then came new versions of the old tropes. Israel caricatured as an apartheid state. Coded references to "George Soros," as a stand-in for wealthy and influential Jews controlling things behind the scenes. Chants and online postings of vile hate that end #TheJewsWillNotReplaceUs. The defacing of our own Chesed Shel Emeth cemetery just up the road. The shootings at the synagogues in Pittsburgh and Poway. According to the Anti-Defamation League, anti-Semitic activity online, hate speech, and acts of violence have steadily increased, year after year, since 2011. The sad thing is that there are so many other incidents of the anti-Semitic hate and violence that I don't actually have the time or strength to list them all.

In the past year, things have become starker still. The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights wrote in a report this past July (July 23, 2021) that just "between May 11-31, 251 incidents, including assault, vandalism, and harassment occurred, a 115% increase from that same time last year. Social media posts asserting 'Hitler was right' and using hashtags like #Covid1948, linking the founding of Israel to the coronavirus and #Zionazi

were trending worldwide.” These attacks were coming from all corners, and political ideologies alike, using fighting between Israelis and Palestinians as fodder, or perhaps proof, for spreading anti-Semitic ideas, theories, and rhetoric that had nothing to do with that conflict. In addition, recent studies have reported that although Jews comprise 2.4 percent of the American population, they are the victims of 60.2% of anti-religious hate crimes. The conclusive findings of this paper were that, most critically, these incidents “harm specific victims but also create long-lasting and deeply harmful fear, anxiety, and insecurity for witnesses and the broader community.”

My main message is not that anti-Semitism, just like hate of any kind, is vile and does immeasurable damage to our entire society. That is undoubtedly true, and I could wax philosophical about the dangers of hate in our society, but it’s not the point I want to focus on this Rosh Hashanah. Neither am I standing here today to compel you to take action in order to pressure leaders to use their power in order to tamp down such pervasive hate directed against Jewish people. Those are crucial efforts, and each of us should absolutely and unequivocally stand up against hate, but there is an even more insidious evil we face. As an individual, as one person, I cannot end hate and violence alone. What I can do is decide for myself where I choose to stand in this world.

The fear created by anti-Semitic hate, which drives us to hide ourselves away, to cover our Jewishness, to feel pushed further and further to the margins is what I most want to speak about today. One of the most visible effects of hate speech and violence

is that it causes us to recoil, to pull back from those parts of life that seem the most public, the most exposed. Back in mid-March, in an episode of her self-titled podcast, comedian Sarah Silverman succinctly addressed this feeling, saying,

*“You wonder why Jews stick together? What choice do we have? It makes me sad to know that so many Jews that I know commit their lives to being allies to so many, to stick their necks out for others. And I'm proud of that. That will always be our way. But who is here for us?”*

I have spoken with friends, colleagues, members of our own community who feel that same way, who are appalled when they see organizations or individuals working on causes they adamantly support, who turn around and spread anti-Jewish stereotypes, hate, or rhetoric. “I can’t work with them!” I have heard far too many say. “If they are going to say or do things that are openly anti-Semitic, I don’t feel safe fighting for causes that I truly believe in.”

The fear, anxiety, discomfort, and pain are all too real, and it cuts so much deeper when that fear comes from the words and acts of those we considered allies and friends. Just like I began to question my very relationship with a classmate and dear friend after one unintentionally cruel comment, so too do many of us shrink back and pull away from the public forum when we hear anti-Semitism uttered or stereotypes repeated by those we call friends. If we boil it down to its simplest ideas, it may feel like many of us face a choice between two bad options: 1) Distance ourselves from people, groups, and causes that we feel are tainted by anti-Semitism or 2) ignore hateful rhetoric or anti-Jewish lies in order to work on causes about which we care.

Neither of these are really acceptable. In the haftarah we read just this morning, the prophet Jeremiah glorifies the raising up of the most vulnerable, predicting a more just future in which “The blind and the lame among them, those with child and those in labor—in a vast throng they shall return here. They shall come with weeping, and with compassion will I guide them” (Jeremiah 31:8-9). Today we say, “*Hayom Harat Olam*; Today is the day of the world’s rebirth!” and by envisioning a world full of compassion, a world in which those most vulnerable are never ignored, Jeremiah calls on each of us to dive in feet first and never stop seeking out ways to be allies to others, to stifle oppression and hate, and to show up, in every way we can, when there is a need. And there is always a need.

We cannot abandon our responsibilities toward justice; it is anathema to the very essence of our Jewish tradition so beautifully summarized by the great Talmudic Sage Hillel in the Masechet Shabbat (31a): “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole Torah; all the rest is the commentary—go and study it.”

But neither can we stay silent in the face of injustice aimed at us. In fact, many modern commentators use the story of Akeidat Yitzhak, the Binding of Isaac, which we also read on this day each year, as a prescription to always speak out about the abuses that harm us right in our own homes. The voice of the angel, preventing Abraham from carrying out the heinous murder of his own son is set as an example to each of us to speak up and prevent ANY injustice anywhere, but especially in our own back yard. In

fact, the brilliant Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel drove this point home when he asked, in a commentary on the Akeidah, “What if the angel had come too late?” the implication being that if we do not act in accordance with the voice of our own better angels, we will be too late to stop those tragedies in our midst.

So much of what we learn from Torah resembles the stark contrast between these two polar opposite ends of the spectrum: do good, avoid evil. Do not murder. Honor Shabbat and make it holy. Justice, justice you must pursue. Sounds pretty simple.

But is anything ever so clear cut? Honor Shabbat, but violate it if you need to save a life. Don’t murder, but do kill in self-defense, do kill in a justifiable war, do annihilate all traces of Amalek. Pursue justice, but how do we always determine what specific course of action is the most just?

So where does this leave us? There must be a way forward that sustains our rights to be heard as equal human beings while still giving us a pathway to work with others to fight for justice. My brilliant and soulful friend, Rabbi Sandra Lawson, tackled this very question. Not only is she one of the most incredible speakers, teachers, and justice leaders of our time, but, as a queer, Black rabbi, her voice and her life are a testament to the struggle against hate that too many have fought against for far too long.

"People's allyship should not be conditional," she said. "It should not be 'I showed up for you, or these groups — therefore you show up for me.' You should do it because it's the right thing to do. And it requires building real relationships."

It's the hard work of building and sustaining relationships that makes it possible to stem the tide of anti-Semitism. I've followed my friend Eric over the years and we've stayed loosely in touch. After high school, he graduated the US Naval Academy, and then served as an officer for 8 years commanding a submarine. He serves as a financial advisor by day, and has donated much of his time, money, and expertise to charities that help the most vulnerable. He is active in his community with his wife and, as of this past year, new baby boy. He is a good person, who wants to do good things in the world and believes that serving others is the core of what he is called to do in the world.

But I only know any of these things because I know him. Because I didn't write him off as ignorant or a monster or a hate-monger because of one comment, even one that hurt me deeply and has been burned into my memory forever. I could have easily said, "What a horrible person, who is not worth my time! I can never speak to someone who would say such ignorant things!" Instead, I spent years trying to figure out his opinion. Eric only said what he said because he was trying to make sense of a conflict between the philosophical and spiritual messages he had been taught and his own lived experience, namely, "My friend Scott is a good person, a kind person, a person who

strives to do right, and is also a Jewish person, and these two things are not mutually exclusive”.

After the Akeidah, Isaac says nothing. Silence. For a long time. The next words that the Torah narrative records him uttering come at the end of his life, after he has spent decades practically removed from the world, cut off from the comings and goings of his community. He speaks as he knows his life is coming to an end, in an effort to pass some piece of goodness on to his children, but even in this he is ultimately thwarted; his blessing never reaches its intended audience. His voice, so absent from our tradition begs the question, “What might we have learned had Isaac spoken up? What wisdom could we have gleaned from him had he reached out to rebuild relationships with others throughout his life? What might he have taught and shared and uncovered if he hadn’t held himself back out of the fear of engaging, out of his deeply ingrained terror that the world was too dangerous a place for him to raise his voice?”

In a moving teaching he delivered in 2018, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks z”l, the former Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, closed with this call to action:

*I began to formulate [this way of being] as an ethic. Don’t wait to be praised: praise others. Don’t wait to be respected: respect others. Don’t stand on the sidelines, criticizing others. Do something yourself to make things better. Don’t wait for the world to change: begin the process yourself, and then win others to the cause. There is a statement attributed to Gandhi (actually he never said it...): ‘Be the change you seek in the world.’*



The only way forward for us as individuals, as a community, as a Jewish people is to build real relationships that can stand up to the tide of hate that is directed not only at us, but at so many people who are labelled outsiders, different, other. Even when those groups adopt the familiar, inherited language of the oppressors of generations past, who will be there to show them the fallacy of these hateful tropes if not us?! We cannot fight hate with anger and outcry alone. We must also fight it with our care, our presence, and our willingness to engage in the much more difficult work of repairing long broken relationship.

And we are incredibly fortunate that in our community, we have people who have the training and experience to help us do exactly that. Some of you have already been contacted by our amazing Tzedek Team, led by Benj Singer, who have begun the critical work of seeking to build and strengthen our relationships with one another right here in our own community. These amazing volunteer leaders have been working tirelessly to help us ready ourselves with skills and experience to not only make this community stronger, but to help us build real relationships with people and groups who we have not yet made our allies in the fight for justice, but with whom we can and should be in partnership.

In looking ahead into this new year, I think back on something one of my mentors as a young community organizer, the ever-inspiring Emily Weitzman Rosenbaum, once told me - that coming to the table where decisions are made, where

seats of power rest, can be frustrating, hurtful, exhausting, and sometimes terrifying. Sometimes, you might think it's not worth the effort. Often, you might feel unheard, or worse, that your voice is heard and despised. But the thing is, you'll never get anything done if you give up your seat at the table.

I can't tell you, right now, in the abstract, how to react to a specific instance when anti-Semitism touches your life or our community. And frankly, I don't know that there is any one right path to take in those situations where we are attacked, hurt, or shunned. I am not trying to tell you how to feel about any of this going on in the world.

I can, however, tell you how I feel. I feel hurt and frustrated when I give my time over to the causes of justice, of giving voice to the voiceless, lending what strength I have to the oppressed, only to have those same allies become actively hostile to who I am as a person at the drop of a hat. I feel alone and eaten up inside. I feel sad, and so very tired.

But when I think about throwing up my hands, walking away from the pressing issues of our day, of saying, "Forget about all of this! If I can't fight injustice with others who will battle just as hard on my behalf, then I'm done!" it tears me apart. And in my mind, I can hear again ancient wisdom found in this morning's haftarah, the words of Jeremiah that echo throughout the ages:

*I will turn their mourning to joy, I will comfort them and cheer them in their grief... For there is a reward for your labor—declares Adonai: They shall return from the enemy's land. And there is hope for your future—declares Adonai. (Jeremiah 31:13, 15-16)*

Hope is what I am left with, the hope that when my life is done, I will be able to stand before the Holy Blessed One and say that I did not hold back from the work of justice, even when it was hard or frightening or hate-filled or too much for me to bear. Hope that other people's ignorant acts won't force me to give up my faith that every person is created in the sacred beauty of the Divine image and can be shown a different side of life with time and honest relationships and all the work those take to create and sustain. Hope that my life and my actions, my presence in the work of justice, are a better antidote to ignorance, stereotypes, and hate than any argument, statistic, or line of logic could ever be.

May this hope never be extinguished. May it's light continue to guide my way in the year ahead. *Ken yehi ratzon*, may it be God's will that this year, we may write ourselves and our world in the book of goodness and mercy, love and life.

Shanah tovah.