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This past Spring I fell prey to some “fake news.” I had read on that great platform for truth called the Internet, that the renowned Jewish American author Herman Wouk had died. Wouk is the author of such classics as The Cain Mutiny and War and Remembrance. It wasn’t surprising to hear that he had died; Herman Wouk was 102 years old, had lived a long, very productive life. I imagine Wouk was surprised to hear about that he had died, because he is very much alive. I have our member and dear friend Arnie Goldstein to thank for setting me straight about that one.

But in that period when I thought Wouk had died, I began to read some of his works. And the book I want to recommend to you is The Winds of War, an extraordinary work of historical fiction. The first half of the book takes place in 1939 and 1940, mostly in Berlin. Victor Henry, otherwise known affectionately as Pugg, is the naval attaché assigned to the United States embassy in Berlin, and he is accompanied by his wife Rhoda. The Henry’s find Berlin beautiful, cultured and clean. But the signs forbidding Jews from restaurants, from opera houses and from public parks, are disconcerting, and Rhoda finds them infuriating.

Here is how Herman Wouk describes how the Henry’s accommodate to life in Berlin, poisoned as it was by this anti-Semitism.

Rhoda was not blind to the Nazi abuses. After her first walk in the Tiergarten, she refused to go back. It was far more clean, pretty, and charming than any American public park, she admitted, but the signs on the benches, JUDEN VERBOTEN, were nauseating. Seeing similar signs in restaurant windows, she would recoil and demand to go elsewhere.....Day by day, she reacted less to such things, seeing how commonplace they were in Berlin, and how much taken for granted. When Sally Forest, who loathed the Nazis, took her to lunch at a restaurant where a window placard announced that Jews were not served, it seemed silly to protest. Soon she ate in such places without a second thought. In time, Tiergarten became her favorite place for a Sunday stroll.

I reread those words over and over, because they demonstrate how easily we can acclimate to bigotry.

When Pugg would meet with his Nazi navel counterparts, they would speculate that while most Americans had no interest in joining the war in Europe, the Jews, who controlled all the banks, the entertainment outlets and the US treasury, might force Roosevelt's hand.

We Jews have long asked how such lies about our outsized influence have become the rhetorical yeast for the politics of hate, exclusion and worse. What have we done, we continually ask, to warrant the title of the world's scapegoat? Reported incidents of anti-Semitism have tripled just in the past year alone. And now we know that Tiki torches, Nazi flags and signs with the words, "Jews are Satan's children" reflect a dangerous current in this country, as old as the Passover story.

The trauma for Shabbat morning worshippers in Charlottesville hearing Nazis marching outside their temple doors shouting "Blood and Soil" and "Jews will not replace us." In one account of the Charlottesville rally, a young woman shared that those pounding voices continue to haunt her. The terrifying voices, the yelling, remain long after the images fade. Those voices, shouting such venom, such disturbing accusations, such deeply disturbing lies: they embed in the public consciousness, and they become, for far too many, the truth.

Hate filled propaganda is as old as humanity itself. But of late, it does seem as if it has gone completely off the rails. Let's reminisce on some of the more recent examples of poisonous "Fake News."

#1: The Sandy Hook Massacre was a hoax to pave the way for the government to take away your guns.

#2: 9/11 was an Israeli plot to keep weapons flowing from the US to the Middle East to kill Muslim babies.

#3: Muslims were dancing on rooftops in Jersey City as the Twin Towers fell.

#4: Refugees and immigrants are mostly criminals, rapists and murderers.

And my personal favorite, #5: Hilary Clinton was running a child prostitution business in the back room of a Washington pizzeria.

Such deliberate lies are created to terrify us and turn us against each other. And their purveyors know exactly what they are doing, and their goal is power.

And what Charlottesville taught us yet again, is that they may come for people of color first, for immigrants first, or Muslims, or the LGBT community first, but if we stand silent, the haters will interpret our silence as acquiescence and they will eventually get around to shouting "Zeig Heil".

Tomorrow we will hear the beginning of the Torah, and God will create the universe, not with hands or construction tools, but with words. The Torah teaches, “God said, let there be light, and there was light”. Our Judaism’s greatest insight into human nature is the blazing power of speech. How what we say, and what we listen to, catalyzes what we will do next. What speech we challenge. What speech we tolerate. And what speech we amplify.

So there was the vile hate-speech of Charlottesville, but then there was Boston the following week, which got very little press. The same band of white supremacists and Neo-Nazi/KKK folks planned a rally in Boston, only to be overwhelmed by 30,000 peaceful counterprotesters. In one account I read, some lovely elderly counterprotesters approached a journalist, asking, “Excuse me sir. Do you know where the Nazis are? We can find any to show our signs to.” The newspapers reported that these white supremacists had planned 61 other marches around the country, but after Boston, they were all cancelled. That’s the power of a gentle, generous chorus of decency, to wash a community clean of its hatred. We can let the hate-speech of Charlottesville be the memory that guides us, or the bright light of human dignity in Boston. That is our choice.

So we can debate the worth of immigrants and dreamers to this country and whether they should be deported, or we can cherish the memory of Alonso Guillen, a dreamer who lost his life saving victims of Hurricane Harvey. We can shake our heads at the decision to prohibit transgender soldiers from serving in the armed forces, or we can take a look at the courage and sacrifice of the 15,000 currently serving, including Navy Seal Christopher Beck, who took part in 14 missions, and earned both the Purple Heart and the Bronze Star.

We can internalize the heated rhetoric directed at Muslims here in America. Or consider this story, one of the most meaningful moments in my rabbinate with you. This past February, Temple Sinai took a large group of teenagers to Orlando to a miraculous village at Disney World called Give Kids the World. This is a place where kids with life threatening diseases and terminal illnesses are welcomed with their families, free-of-charge, so they can enjoy the parks. There are doctors and nurses and social workers of course, but village also runs on volunteers, and our kids came to help, and they were amazing. Each week, the village hosts a birthday party, a Christmas party and a Halloween party, because so many of these kids missed these celebrations because of hospital stays and other health crises. At the front entrance of the Christmas party, I noticed a young woman. She was dressed in full Muslim regalia, including a hijab. And atop her hijab, were reindeer antlers, and a Christmas tree hat. She greeted every child with a huge smile and an enthusiastic “Merry Christmas!” Her name is Isma, and she

told me that she's been volunteering at Give Kids the World ever since her brother came, suffering from cancer. She told me he had the best time. It was his last, best time.

The rabbis gave Rosh Hashanah two names: Yom Hazikaron, Day of Remembrance, and HaYom Harat Olam, Day of the World's Birth. Collectively these two names ask us to draw energy and conviction from our past, so we can craft a better future. We can succumb to the voices of fear and prejudice, but that comes with a heavy price. I believe Rosh Hashanah's two names teach us that we need to let the spiritual wisdom of Isma, and those nice elderly counterprotestors in Boston, and Christopher Beck, and Alonso Guillen of blessed memory, be the truths that light our way.

Our tradition is clear: Every single human being descends from the same Adam and Eve so no one group could say to another, 'We are more legitimate than you'. Every single human being was created in God's image so that no person could say to another: I am more a child of God than you are."

When our actions and our words, when our protests and our votes, restore decency and kindness, and when we resist the urge to just let it pass when another group of people is attacked, their character and patriotism soiled, and instead stand up for them, stand alongside them, and teach our children that hate-speech must be confronted and silenced, and when we stand proudly as Jews, refusing to cower to the bigots, and celebrate our Judaism and our synagogue and the State of Israel as sources of strength and solidarity and goodness and justice, then, and only then, we affirm that uncompromising Jewish conviction of *tikkun olam*, a conviction as old as Abraham and Moses, that we can heal this world of its fear and its hate. Maybe not the whole world all at once, but certainly a little at a time. That is our task at the edge of this new year.