

I AM FRIGHTENED

I would like to thank my Rabbi, Andrea London, for her continued generosity and graciousness to me and my family. She continues to inspire me with her commitment to spirituality and to *tikkun olam*. I would like to extend my personal welcome to Rabbi Amy Memis-Foler who has joined our *klei kodesh*. I look forward to what I know will be her formidable contributions to the life of Beth Emet. You have already had a long and distinguished rabbinate and it is a pleasure to count you among our rabbis. To the other members of the Temple Judea Mitzpah family I say *Beruchim habaim* Welcome. We know that the decision to close a historic synagogue which was your spiritual home is difficult. We hope that Beth Emet will now become your new spiritual home. We know that your presence will strengthen our community. I want to also welcome the members to Temple Menorah who joined with us a while ago. I am sorry I have not extended a proper greeting until now. I do hope Beth Emet has won a special place in your hearts. Finally, I want to give a shout out to everyone who had a hand in renovating this sacred space. It is magnificent. You have maintained the essential beauty and holiness of the synagogue and added a new and deeply spiritual dimension to this hallowed place. Your vision, your generosity, and hard work deserve a special blessing. I checked the codes looking for a proper blessing for such an occasion and it seems that some authorities believe we should say *Shechehiyanu* however, I know that we have already recited this blessing my times. I found an ancient scroll written in a strange script which contained the following blessing. *Baruch ata Adonai eloheinu melech haolam WOW*.

I want to provide a context for my message on this Yom Kippur. This sermon is highly personal. I grew up in classical Reform Judaism. Ritual was only important if it inspired us to ethical action. The rabbinic sermons which I heard in my youth were peppered with quotations from the prophets who criticized the wealthy and powerful who allowed the vulnerable to suffer. They decried persecution, and protested the continuation of lawlessness, poverty, hunger, and homelessness. The words of the prophet Amos still reverberate in my ears.

Ah, you who are at ease in Zion And confident on the hill of Samaria, You notables of the leading nation On whom the House of Israel -pin their hopes:- Cross over to Calneh and see, Go from there to Great Hamath, And go down to Gath of the Philistines: Are [you] better than those kingdoms, -Or is their territory larger than yours?- Yet you ward off [the thought of] a day of woe And convene a session of lawlessness.- They lie on ivory beds, Lolling on their couches, Feasting on lambs from the flock And on calves from the stalls. They hum snatches of song to the tune of the lute— They account themselves musicians like David. They drink [straight] from the wine bowls And anoint themselves with the choicest oils— But they are not concerned about the ruin of Joseph (Amos 6:1-6)

Our commitment to social justice was enshrined in the Pittsburgh Platform of 1885, the founding document of American Reform Judaism which states, “We deem it our duty to participate in the great task of modern times to solve on the basis of justice and righteousness, the problems presented by the contrasts and evils of the present organization of society.” 144 years later in 1999 we gathered once again in Pittsburgh and adopted a new platform Reform Judaism: Modern Statement of Principles which forcefully reiterates our commitment taking what we study in Torah and apply it to the problems facing the world.

We bring Torah into the world when we strive to fulfill the highest ethical mandates in our relationships with others and with all of God's creation. Partners with God in (*tikkun olam*), repairing the world, we are called to help bring nearer the messianic age. We seek dialogue and joint action with people of other faiths in the hope that together we can bring peace, freedom, and justice to our world. We are obligated to pursue (*tzedeck*),

justice, and righteousness, and to narrow the gap between the affluent and the poor, to act against discrimination and oppression, to pursue peace, to welcome the stranger, to protect the earth's biodiversity and natural resources, and to redeem those in physical, economic, and spiritual bondage. In so doing, we reaffirm social action and social justice as a central prophetic focus of traditional Reform Jewish belief and practice. We affirm the (*mitzvah*) of (*tzedakah*), setting aside portions of our earnings and our time to provide for those in need. These acts bring us closer to fulfilling the prophetic call to translate the words of Torah into the works of our hands.

This morning's haftarah Isaiah 58 reinforces the basic principle of Judaism that ritual without justice is ineffective, meaningless and displeasing to God.

Is such the fast I desire, A day for men to starve their bodies? Is it bowing the head like a bulrush And lying in sackcloth and ashes? Do you call that a fast, A day when the LORD is favorable? No, this is the fast I desire: To unlock fetters of wickedness and untie the cords of the yoke to let the oppressed go free; To break off every yoke. It is to share your bread with the hungry, And to take the wretched poor into your home; When you see the naked, to clothe him, And not to ignore your own kin. Then shall your light burst through like the dawn and your healing spring up quickly; (Isaiah 58:5-8)

Now I want to share with you a little more of my personal history. As most of you know I am 75 years old. I was born in 1943 and this June I will celebrate the 50th anniversary of my ordination. I grew up in a family of refugees from Nazi Germany and was surrounded by survivors. My father left Germany in 1932 because of rising anti-Semitism. He was only able to emigrate to the United States because his Uncle Adolph sponsored him. His parents thought he was crazy to leave Germany. In fact, they came for a visit in 1938 and my parents begged them to stay. My Grandfather refused saying that "Hitler does not mean me. Hitler means the *Ost Juden* the Eastern European Jews." They returned to Germany and through a series of bribes my parents were able to bring them to the States in 1939.. They only were able to bring with them a set of Rosenthal china which I still own. They were broken people and died soon after coming to the United States. My great Uncle Leo was married to a non-Jewish woman who denounced him to the Gestapo and he was briefly interned in a concentration camp. Again, through a series of bribes my parents were able to bring him to Cuba then to Canada and then to the United States. His brother, my great Uncle Willy, was a hero of World War I and had his leg shot off. He too, was married to a non-Jewish woman who hid him Berlin throughout the War. Many of you have heard me speak of my cousin Ilse and her husband Hans. They both survived Auschwitz. She was sterilized by Dr. Mengele and suffered until the day she died. The Shoah is the story of my family and it is embedded in my DNA. During my childhood and early adulthood, the fear of anti-Semitism and combating it were the bread and butter of my Jewish existence. Our antennas were tuned to find anti-Semitism under every rock. I was acutely aware of our otherness.

This year with twenty-six members of Beth Emet, Elaine and I stood in the Stadium in Nuremberg where Hitler held massive rallies. He enflamed the crowds playing on their fears blaming the Jews and others for destroying Germany. He promised to make Germany great again. I recently watched again Leni Reifenstahl's brilliant propaganda film *Triumph of the Will* which details the Sixth Nazi Party Congress which took place in Nuremberg. In the opening scene, Hitler's plane descends through the clouds as the savior of the nation. The crowd greeted him with hysterical enthusiasm. He relished their pledges of loyalty and their one-armed salutes. Hitler's ability to mesmerize his audiences, whip them up into a frenzy and convince them that whatever he said was true was extremely frightening.

One lesson from those times is that to put one's faith in a leader who claims that he alone can alone save the nation is flirting with disaster. Historical analogies are dangerous. The United States in 2018 is not Germany in 1930s. I am not suggesting that any of our leaders should be compared to Hitler, but I see elements of demagoguery which make me worry. The rising number of antisemitic incidents, the mainstreaming of white supremacy, wide spread systemic racism, Islamophobia, growing nativism, the denigration of the news media, the growth of conspiracy theories, and increased xenophobia are deeply disturbing trends.

Having stood in the Stadium in Nuremberg and having recently watched the rally unfold in *Triumph of the Will* the words of Joseph Goebbels' Hitler's Minister of Propaganda came to mind.

1. A lie told once remains a lie, but a lie told a thousand times becomes the truth
2. Arguments must therefore be crude, clear and forcible, and appeal to emotions and instincts, not the intellect.
3. The rank and file are usually much more primitive than we imagine. Propaganda must therefore always be essentially simple and repetitious.

Pirkei Avot says, "*Al shlosha devarim haolam kayam al haemet val hadin val hashalom* The world is sustained by three things; by truth, justice, and peace." Without truth there is no justice and there is no peace.

In Judaism there are extensive discussions of truth. Louis Jacobs in his article on Judaism and Truth points to who a category of falsehood that is worth noting. The category is people who praises themselves for having virtues they do not possess.

As part of the Germany trip we visited the Holocaust Memorial known as *Gleich 17* Track 17. It was the railroad line where the Jews of Berlin were transported to the concentration camps and it is a simple memorial - just a railroad track and along the track are a series of dates and list of the number of Jews who were transported that day. As I walked along the track I noticed a date in 1943, a few days before I was born, and then I noticed a date a few days after I was born. When we reached end of the Memorial we paused for a brief service. We lit six candles recited a few selections and concluded with kaddish and with the singing of Hatikvah. We were all deeply moved. All though I have visited many holocaust memorials and several concentration camps including Auschwitz Birkenau, my experience at Gleich 17 was one of the most profound experiences of my life as I realized that my standing there was a miracle. If not for my father's perspicacity rather my grandfather's myopia, I would never have been born. Why do I tell you all of this? Because recent events, especially Charlottesville, and certain political rallies, have brought back some terrible and frightening memories. As a teenager I read about Father Coughlin and the American firsters. In rabbinic school I read Julius Streicher's virulent anti-Semitic newspaper *Der Sturmer*. My library is filled with books on the Shoah. For many years I taught courses about the Shoah. Now the stories of my family's suffering in the concentration camps have become a renewed nightmare.

I have often been Pollyannaish in my assessment of the future. I believed we had made much greater progress in combatting the evils of society than we have. After the Oslo Accords, I truly believed that peace was inevitable. I accepted almost unchallenged Israeli and American exceptionalism. Both were the shining light on the hill. They were a breath of fresh air. They were the bulwark of freedom, justice, and hope. They represented the messianic dream of world redeemed. With rose colored glasses I had difficulty seeing the remnants of darkness that were hiding beneath the surface waiting to emerge. This morning I do not want to portray myself as a prophet of doom and disaster, but vigilance is necessary. Freedom is hard won and needs to be nurtured. Democracy must be reaffirmed at every moment. A free and fair press is necessary to protect democracy and freedom. The new media are a boon and a challenge. I am frightened in ways I have not been in previous difficult and divisive moments in the United States and in Israel.

Our Mahzor for Yom Kippur *Mishkan Hanefesh* contains public and private confessions of sin. We say together *Al cheit Shechatanu* for the sin we sinned. We speak in the first person plural because we take collective responsibility for our own actions and those of the members of our community. In the private confessions we use the first person singular because we cannot change society unless we can change ourselves. These words from the private confession are a powerful challenge.

I reflect on the harm I have done to the world around me:
Through my failures to take time to educate myself about complex social problems;
Through my failure to do my part as an active citizen and make my voice heard;
Through resigning myself to the way things are, rather than working for a change;
Through succumbing to racism distaining those different from myself;
Through my failure to respond with generosity to those in need;
Through cynicism and abandoning hope

The public and private confessions ask us to be self-reflective. Individual action is important but only through collective action can we move toward a more just and equitable society. The cacophony of hatred and divisiveness in our society has made collective action more necessary. The voice of love and compassion is being drowned out by the voice of suspicion and hatred. Among our collective national sins is a disdain for difference and a denigration of the weak and poor. Hate mongering has become acceptable among those from whom we would never expected it. The powerful seek to trample on the powerless. Civil discussion on the right to bear arms and the safety our children and our cities is almost impossible. We have built walls around ourselves rather than building bridges. Anti-Semitism and racism are accepted with a wink and nod at the highest levels of our society. The litany of our national sins is too long to list.

For me watching the march in Charlottesville and seeing men carrying torches and chanting “Jews shall not replace us was truly” was deeply disturbing, especially when the President would not condemn the blatant racism and anti-Semitism in a clear and forthright manner. What protects us in this country is not only the rule of law but the willingness of our leaders to condemn hatred. What is happening here is part of a global phenomenon. Nativism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism are rearing their ugly heads in so many places. Refugees are being demonized. Europe is in crises. Sadly, in some of our conversations with German Jews they were more worried about anti-Semitism from the Muslim refugees than from rise of the ultra-national right parties. Sometimes acts of generosity and compassion sadly become catalysts for fear and hatred.

We speak of the United States as a country of immigrants which is true. However, how many times in the past have politicians sought to dim Lady Liberty’s beacon of hope? Let’s remember the prejudice against the Irish, the Italians, the Chinese and of course the Jews. Now it is Latinos and people of color.

On Rosh Hashanah Rabbi Memis-Foler reminded us of two of the commandments from this afternoon’s Torah portion “You shall love your neighbor as yourself and when a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. 34The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: As she further reminded us love in these commandments is not about emotion but about how we treated each other.”

This afternoon we read these additional words which call upon to take care of the poor, to be honest in business and in judgement to be concerned for people with disabilities and show respect for aged. We read in the Torah:

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not pick your vineyard bare or gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger: I the LORD am your God. You shall not steal; you shall not deal deceitfully or falsely with one another. You shall not swear falsely by My name, profaning the name of your God: I am the LORD. You shall not defraud your fellow. You shall not commit robbery. The wages of a laborer shall not remain with you until morning. You shall not insult the deaf or place a stumbling block before the blind. ... You shall not render an unfair decision: do not favor the poor or show deference to the rich; judge your kinsman fairly. Do not deal basely with your countrymen... You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your countrymen. Love your fellow as yourself: I am the LORD. You shall rise before the aged and show deference to the old;. (Lev. 19:9-16,18,32)

Who is the stranger? The stranger is anyone other than us. Language is important. Language creates reality. Our tradition teaches us that God created the world through speech. Speech has the power to create or to destroy. By what name do we call the stranger. Do we call the stranger by the name he or she wishes to be known? My mother taught me “Sticks and stones may break my bones and name will never harm me.” Sorry Mom you were wrong. My friends Who are you? a deplorable, a low IQ dog, or white trash or a money grubbing Jew? Words have consequences. In Germany we were *untermenschen*. Then we were vermin. Then we were cockroaches. Then we were an infestation. And then we were exterminated. To dismiss language as mere rhetoric is a grave error. We need unifiers and not dividers.

Silence also has consequences. The silence of good people is the greatest sin. Good people can do terrible things. The Nazis were good to their wives and children and their dogs. They loved Beethoven and Goethe and they murdered millions. Rabbi Joachim Prinz who had been a leading rabbi in Berlin during the Nazi era said in his brilliant speech at the March on Washington.

“When I was the rabbi of the Jewish community in Berlin under the Hitler regime, I learned many things. The most important thing that I learned under those tragic circumstances was that bigotry and hatred are not the most urgent problem. The most urgent, the most disgraceful, the most shameful and the most tragic problem is silence.

On March 16, 1958 after Rabbi William Silverman’s synagogue was bombed during the civil rights movement, and his life and the life of his family were threatened, many wanted him to be silent about integration. His response was a powerful sermon entitled “We Will Not Yield.” In it he said, “Judaism and Christianity must take a stand for moral principle, for human rights and dignity, or be labeled a pious fraud. What is at stake is not whether our public school will be integrated. The question is: To what extent are we going to activate the principles of democracy and the American way of life? To what extent are we going to live by our faith?” The key line repeated often in his message is that “We will not yield to evil. We will not yield to violence.” It was a message for then and it is a message for now.

In our changing world and our changing economy many have been left behind. There are real grievances. Too many people are without adequate health care. Too many have lost jobs and lost hope. There are still pockets of hunger and poverty in this, the wealthiest nation on earth. What is happening now is the result of a long process. It is the consequence of differing views of the United States and of long running disputes that remain unresolved.

The central question for us as Jews and Americans is, how do we create a just, equitable and compassionate society? We believe that a hand out is really a hand up. We know that we cannot depend only on the largess of the wealthy and powerful. Judaism teaches it is the responsibility of government to

provide a social safety net. In Judaism we do not value suffering. The relieve of suffering is an important mitzvah.

Many of our cities have become killing fields. Our forests are burning. Our land is parched. Our climate is changing. How dare we reject science? The ice is melting. The storms are harsher. Drought and floods plague new regions and devastate the landscape. In the creation story we are told that we are permitted to use the resources of this world but that we must also protect them. In Midrash God takes Adam and Eve on a tour of the world and tells them, "It is now yours. Do not muck it up."

Who is a Patriot? Patriotism comes in many forms. I applaud those women and men who serve in our armed forces and who place themselves in harm's way, so my family and I can be safe. They are patriots. I admire the first responders who risk life and limb daily. They are patriots. Anyone who fights for an America that is just - where Black Lives matter. Where all lives matter is a patriot. An NFL player who takes a knee at the National Anthem to protest racism is a patriot. A person who runs for political office to work for a just and compassionate society is a patriot. A person who joins with others to speak truth to power is a patriot. A person who registers to vote and votes is a patriot.

Recently Michael Sirotta, a member of our congregation and a participant in the Germany trip and a docent at the Holocaust Memorial in Skokie, took us on a tour of museum. He told us that the message they try to convey to the many school groups who visit is the difference between bystanders and upstanders. A patriot is a person who is an upstander rather than a bystander.

In 1935 the African American poet Langston Hughes wrote a poem Let America Be America Again.

O, let America be America again--
The land that never has been yet--
And yet must be--the land where *every* man is free.
The land that's mine--the poor man's, Indian's, Negro's,
O, yes,
I say it plain,
America never was America to me,
And yet I swear this oath--
America will be!
Out of the rack and ruin of our gangster death
The rape and rot of graft, and stealth, and lies,
We, the people, must redeem
The land, the mines, the plants, the rivers.
The mountains and the endless plain--
All, all the stretch of these great green states--
And make America again,

I still believe in the United States. I still have faith in our constitution and the instruments of democracy. I still have faith in the American people. I still believe love can triumph over hate. I still believe good can conquer evil. I still believe light can dispel darkness. But for America to be America again we must pray like Abraham Joshua Heschel who when he marched with Dr. King he said his feet were praying.

We must dream like Martin Luther King

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

As our siddur reminds us the only way to get to that promised land is by joining hands and marching together.

God Bless America, land that I love.
Stand beside her and guide her. Through the night with a light from above.

We shall overcome someday yes this I still do believe.

Amen