

**ROSH HA-SHANAH MORNING 5780
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WESTCHESTER REFORM TEMPLE
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FROM THE RUIN TO THE ROAD

There we stood, forty-three of us, on the deserted rail platform, where no train had come or gone for decades. We came as mourners, bundled against the unseasonable chill on the afternoon of the 2nd of May, carrying a matchbook and small candles, six of them, one for every million Jews murdered by the Nazis, there to kindle flames of remembrance on *Yom Ha-Shoah*, Holocaust Remembrance Day, on *Gleis Siebzehn*, Track 17, the Berlin-Gruenwald Station where, from 1941 to 1945 more than 50,000 Jews were deported from Berlin, first to the Polish ghettos at Litzmannstadt and Warsaw, then, directly to Theresienstadt and Auschwitz.

When we first announced this trip, many asked, “Why Germany? Why would you want to go back there, after what they did to us?” What sense did it make for a rabbi, a rebbetzin, and forty-one congregants to go back to “the scene of the crime?”

To understand the meaning of our pilgrimage requires that we take a long, hard look at where we were coming from. Our country. Home.

The day we left for Berlin—the last day of Pesach, six months to the day after the Pittsburgh massacre which murdered eleven (and inspired in part by its perpetrator, Robert Bowers)—19-year-old John Timothy Earnest, another virulent Anti-Semite, White Supremacist, Neo-Nazi, domestic terrorist, stormed into the Chabad of Poway outside San Diego, and, firing from the foyer, wounded Rabbi Yisroel Goldstein and murdered 60-year-old Lori Gilbert-Kaye, who died shielding her rabbi from the gunman.

Bowers and Earnest are not lone wolves. They operate within a larger movement, emerging from the Internet's shadowiest realms where they have sheltered for years, taking to the streets in places like Poland, where, this summer, Israeli students were assaulted after leaving a Warsaw nightclub; France, where Yellow Vest demonstrators have embraced Anti-Semitic language and endorsed violence against Jews; and here in the United States.

This neo-Nazi flavor of Anti-Semitism, long festering beneath the surface of Western society, now thrives in the daylight of the same social forces that are forcing democracy into retreat while emboldening autocracy, that are promoting White supremacy and demonizing communities of color while trafficking in fear-mongering about immigrants and refugees.

This ancient Jew-hatred—that the Ku Klux Klan and Hitler's brownshirts enacted in violence—that neither warfare nor activism nor legislation can pull out, root and stem, once and for all—is very much alive today, and we must confront it head on.

And, like a weed, it keeps emerging, stubbornly, indiscriminately. Once a phenomenon relegated to the farthest margins of the right, Anti-Semitism has begun to creep closer to the center of American life—from both right *and* left.

The BDS movement, a global effort to harm Israel through Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions, has Anti-Semitism written all over it. Even though many of its supporters vigorously deny that Jew-hatred has anything to do with their anti-Israel activism, consider their record and form your own conclusions:

BDS singles out the world's only Jewish State for opprobrium.

They traffic in the language of "peace" and "justice," but when it comes to the only peaceful and just resolution to the long-simmering Israeli-Palestinian conflict, BDS proponents speak not a two-state solution, but rather of one state, Palestine. They coerce rather than compromise.

Unable to convince the Israeli electorate of the merits of their views, BDS activists demonize Israel and call for outsiders to punish her citizens until they capitulate.

BDS creates toxic college campus environments, polarizing students and faculty who might otherwise feel encouraged to enter into constructive dialogue about the best approaches to the seemingly intractable Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Jewish students--note well, *Jews*, not Israelis--are targeted with propaganda and abusive language. Jewish lecturers with even tenuous support for Israel are shouted down and prevented from speaking. Jewish voices are silenced when, for instance, BDS resolutions are presented for a student council vote on the first night of Passover.

And BDS was very much the agenda of Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib's intended visit to Israel this summer, only the latest in a disturbing pattern of messages from the freshman Congresswomen. Putting aside for a moment--if we can--Israel's ill-begotten choice to bar their entry, let's not forget that the two Representatives chose *not* to join a bipartisan congressional delegation to Israel in favor of a trip arranged by *Miftah*, an organization that has accused Jews of using the blood of Christians in the Passover ritual, engaged in Holocaust denial, and praised terrorists who attack Israeli civilians.

Here's the bottom line. Anti-Semitism isn't a right-wing thing or a left-wing thing. It isn't a Republican Party thing or a Democratic Party thing, despite the efforts of many to paint it that way. In fact, Anti-Semitism doesn't even need Jews to breathe, as evidenced by the prevalence of Anti-Semitic attitudes in places with scarcely any Jews, like Japan and Indonesia.

When we politicize Anti-Semitism, using it to smear our political enemies—when we tar entire groups with the charge of Anti-Semitism—we distort the truth and dismiss the pain of the victims. If you cannot recognize that no one political movement, party, or “side” of the

fractured national conversation has a monopoly on Anti-Semitism, then you simply aren't looking hard enough.

Anti-Semitism is too serious to be exploited in the interest of scoring points with voters. We reject the politicization of Anti-Semitism, whether it involves the misappropriation the term "concentration camps" to describe the wretched condition of detention centers on our southern border, or the charge of "disloyalty" in reference to American Jews.

And the US-Israel relationship—premised, as it is, on vital economic, military, and technological support, shared democratic values, and common geopolitical goals—is too important to be sacrificed on the altars of ego and election prospects. When alliances forged to eradicate Anti-Semitism fall apart over this or that political squabble, everyone loses: Israelis, Americans, and Jewish people everywhere.

The story is told in the Babylonian Talmud of Rabbi Yosi, the great second-century Sage, who, while walking along the road, chanced upon one of the ruins of Jerusalem, which the Romans had sacked twice: once in the year 70, destroying the Temple, and again, in the year 135, after the failed Bar Kochba rebellion, at this time exiling the Jews into diaspora.

Drawn to the ancient ruin, Yosi entered to pray. Upon completing his prayers, he discovered the Prophet Elijah guarding the entrance to the ruin. "Greetings to you, my Rabbi," said Elijah.

"Greetings to you, my Rabbi, my teacher," replied Yosi.

"My son," said Elijah, "Why did you enter this ruin?" "In order to pray," answered Yosi.

"You should have prayed on the road," Elijah admonished.

“I was afraid that my prayers might get interrupted by travelers,” and I’d be unable to focus, said Yosi.

Elijah answered, “You should have abbreviated your prayers,” rather than pray inside of a ruin.¹

If you study the surrounding passages, you’ll learn about the dangers of such places.

Apparently, ruins were known to attract bandits, prostitutes, and even demons, who would lurk, waiting in the shadows for their prey. Elijah’s reprimand seems warranted on strictly pragmatic grounds.

But something deeper is at work here, something about the allure of ruins, the human desire to sanctify such places, to turn ruins into holy places.

This tendency is well demonstrated throughout human history and we Jews, no less than others, have enshrined our ruins. After all, what is the *Kotel*, the Western Wall, the retaining wall of a massive platform where the destroyed Temple once stood, but the greatest ruin in Jewish history?

Here, then, is one interpretation of the passage: Judaism discourages us from hunkering down in our tragedy, fetishizing our devastation, making a shrine of our suffering.

Prayer should be joyful, purposeful, transformative. Prayer can give comfort, lift the spirit, refine our moral commitments, realign our spiritual priorities. Praying in a ruin—metaphorically speaking—locates our Jewish identity in tragedy, hardship, and pain, building our Jewishness on a foundation of sorrow, the rubble of anxiety.

¹ *Berakhot* 3a.

What does it say about Jews today that the landmark Pew Research Center survey of Jewish identity reports that remembering the Holocaust is, by far, the number-one attribute that Jews consider essential to being Jewish? Not living an ethical life, which came in a distant second, or caring about Israel, or being part of a Jewish community (which actually ranked well below “having a good sense of humor,” so there you go).

Without a doubt, Judaism cherishes memory--and the memory of the *Shoah* can and does impel us toward the Jewish values of justice and compassion. But remembrance of our past devastation cannot substitute for our investment in a joyful, transformative Jewish present and future.

What does it say about us that the average age of a Pittsburgh victim--that is to say, the average age of a synagogue-goer on what started out as a typical Shabbat morning--was 74? How can we expect the generations of our children and grandchildren to stand up against anti-Semitism if they don't feel a connection to the Jewish tradition or the Jewish People today?

Have we done enough to share our own joy in Judaism with our generations? Have we taught them that those Shabbat candles aren't going to light themselves? Have we ever shared with them our own reasons for caring enough to be part of a synagogue, a community of faith and action? Have we inculcated a sense of joyful responsibility for the welfare of our people, for *tzedakah* and *mitzvot*? Have we given them reasons to feel that their Judaism is a treasured inheritance and not an anxious burden—or, worse, a hollow and meaningless practice, a tired obligation, a going-through of the motions?

We give a lot of time and attention to the anti-Semites who want to harm us. Have we given the same time and attention to the tradition that binds us together?

I know it all feels so discouraging--heartrending, really. But I come here today to tell you that there is a sunlit pathway from the ruin back to the road. Like all chapters of adversity in our

long and storied history, we will meet this one with a mixture of anguish, courage, determination, and yes, that most quintessentially Jewish of all human qualities, hope, *tikvah*.

Today, I want to share with you why I feel hopeful.

The reason is you. This congregation, this WRT family, you, and I, all of us, together. We are the reason I feel joy in our present and hopeful about our Jewish future. We, who showed up in this sanctuary, 600 strong, the Friday after Pittsburgh, to say that hate has no place in our synagogue, and that we are not afraid.

You know who makes me feel hopeful? The almost fifty twelfth graders who came with us to Israel over the last two years, where we ate too much falafel and danced with Israeli Reform Jewish teens at Shabbat dinner and crocheted baskets with Eritrean asylum-seekers and where our biggest dilemma concerned how to recover a student's credit card that an Israeli ATM decided to swallow on day one.

Here's a ray of hope. Last Wednesday, in our 10th grade Confirmation class, we had a frank conversation about dating and relationships and the challenges of living in an interfaith world. Every student in the class declared it important to create a Jewish family and a Jewish home. (One student added, helpfully, "My dad said that my mom will kill me if I don't.") Hope, to me, is officiating at a wedding of a bride or groom whose Bar or Bat Mitzvah I conducted, whose Confirmation we celebrated. I have thirteen of those this coming year.

I feel hope because WRT is going to Poland early next summer. It will break our hearts to stand at Auschwitz. But hearts will mend when we dance at the 30th annual Krakow Jewish Culture Festival. Last year, they had a band called "The Honorable *Mentshn*," get it? And how great is that?

I spent Friday morning in this sanctuary with our preschoolers, singing *Bim-Bam* and playing the shofar, and hanging out with our official ECC mascot, a giant stuffed dinosaur who, any of our children will tell you, loves challah. That dinosaur gives me a lot of hope for the Jewish future.

So does the four-year-old who, in the video montage of last year's graduating preschoolers, declared that when he grows up, he wants to be a "white collar crime lawyer." Okay, maybe that's not the best example. There were a lot of students who said they want to become teachers just like the ones they adore here at WRT.

And all of you adult learners inspire me. Nothing gives me greater joy and satisfaction than discussing the Jewish view of the purpose of humankind, as we did last week in our new Melton curriculum, or when a veteran Torah study participant asks me if I happen to know any ancient Egyptian grammar, because it might really improve her understanding of the text. We have some really smart congregants here, you know. Come to one of our classes sometime. You'll leave feeling better about the Jewish future, too.

And then there are all of you who show up on a Monday morning to chop vegetables into soup for our hungry neighbors. And the Bar and Bat Mitzvah kids who follow up a long day of school by going down to Mount Vernon where they help first graders with spelling and math. And all of you who've taken the time to figure out why we have four separate receptacles for tossing your food waste and why the one marked "Trash" is almost always empty... because here at WRT, we model a world in which *nothing* goes to waste, and almost everything we consume can be reused, recycled, or composted. And that gives me a *lot* of hope.

Oh, and so much hope comes from the nearly 100 volunteers who have helped to rebuild the lives of two women who have come to the US from the Central African Republic, a major humanitarian resettlement effort about which I will say more on Yom Kippur.

And let me tell you about the hope I feel when we pray together. You really do get it, WRT. You get that prayer is an act of love, a shared practice that brings us joy and stirs our souls and makes us want to sing. Prayer is kids running up to the front of the room at Sharing Shabbat, to join in the choreography of “*V’shinantam*”; and prayer is the couple that chose to celebrate their fiftieth anniversary with a Friday night *aliyah* to the Torah; and prayer is all the soul-stirring voices and instruments that Cantor Kleinman leads and brings together on these glorious High Holidays, and prayer is our awesome outdoor harvest festival, Sukkah Slam, in just under two weeks, and if you’re not there, under the moonlight, with the live Middle Eastern band and the food trucks and the spirits-tasting, then, well, I give up, because you’ve missed my whole point!

Listen closely. *We* are the antidote to the anti-Semitism infecting our world. We won’t win this fight just by reinforcing our facility and training our staff and volunteers in cutting-edge security. Yes, we’ve done that, with diligence and seriousness.

But, if you really want to stand up to anti-Semitism—if you really want to make a difference—then you have to live so as to proclaim that being Jewish matters; that Judaism is a noble and beautiful heritage worthy not just of *safeguarding* but of *living*, really living, with joy and vigor; that the Jewish People are our *family*, deserving of our love and support; and that Judaism gives us powerful tools for addressing the ills plaguing our aching world.

So here’s my advice. Hold your heads high. Lift your voices with joy. Stop obsessing over Anti-Semitism, and start getting down with some fellow Semites!

CODA

Now, come back to Berlin with me for one last moment, because I never told you what we were doing there in the first place.

Most of us understood that it was important to return to “the scene of the crime” in order to understand our history and the threats that have imperiled us. What most of us did *not* expect was to meet Dalia Grinfeld, age 24, whose family had fled Ukraine and who has just been named Assistant Director of European Affairs at the Anti-Defamation League. Her Jewish activism began in university, when she established a German Jewish Students’ Union that quickly grew into a nationwide network of over 25,000 students and young professionals.

Or Anja Olejnik, a former child refugee of the Bosnian War, who is now raising a Jewish family in Berlin while directing all of Germany’s programs for the Joint Distribution Committee, the global Jewish rescue service;

Or Nina Peretz, a young woman who met and fell in love with an Israeli living in Berlin, converted to Judaism, and who now serves as the first female temple president in Germany.

We went to remember. We returned with stories of Jewish life reborn. The German Jewish community, now 250,000 strong, will not content itself to pray inside a ruin. They have decided that the best way to live out the meaning of “never again” is to live openly and Jewishly, to build new synagogues, new Jewish community centers, new Jewish performance venues, out of the ruins.

Late one afternoon, our group arrived at the Villa at Wannsee, a serene lakeside country-home about a half-hour outside Berlin. On January 20, 1942, fifteen senior Nazi officials convened at Wannsee to devise what came to be known as “The Final Solution.”

There, on the manicured front lawn, a certain tree stump caught Kelly’s eye. It had been a magnificent specimen, the many rings proclaiming generations and generations of stored up history. How many leaves had once crowned its great trunk, no one will ever know. How many people had once sought shelter in its shade, we cannot say. The tree had been sawed off clean just above the roots, which, you could tell, still went deep and spread wide.

But—and this is what moved Kelly to examine it—new shoots were growing out of the stump, bright green tendrils of life, thriving: stubbornly, joyfully, reaching for the light.

It's the first beautiful new morning of a beautiful new year. Let's do what our people always do—insist on thriving: stubbornly, joyfully, reaching for the light.

Shanah Tovah