

Rosh Hashanah 5778
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Remembrance as a Survival Tactic in an Age of Hatred

Some call Rosh Hashanah *Yom Hazikaron*, "The Day of Remembrance."

In the Talmud, Rabbi Eliezer teaches: "On Rosh HaShana Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah were remembered by God and conceived; on Rosh HaShana Joseph came out from prison; on Rosh HaShana our forefathers' slavery in Egypt ceased."¹

Today is the day when God keeps God's promises. Today is a day to remember that redemption is possible, that we can be saved from slavery, the pit, our own barrenness.

In our tradition, remembrance is a holy act. To "remember" is to show extraordinary care - to "remember" is to strengthen relationship.

Our service is structured to remind us to remember. In the Torah portion², "*Adonai Pakad et Sarah*" - God remembers Sarah, accounts for her and redeems her. But it is not enough to just remember the heroine - God also remembers Hagar, the stranger, the outsider. And our tradition is not content to leave us with the expectation that God does all the remembering. When the shofar blows, it's haunting cry triggers our sense memory, calling upon us to re-member, and strengthen our fractured selves. Though we are vulnerable beings, we are remembered by a God greater than human fragility. Created, *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of the Creator, we are endowed with the ability to remember, with the ability to grow.

Zichronot, "remembrance" on Rosh Hashanah prepares us for *teshuvah*, "repentance", on Yom Kippur.

Remembrance is necessary -- When we remember and learn from our history, we can better understand ourselves in the present, and we can understand the forces and choices that have brought us to this day.

As Jews, we each live with history differently—

When journalist Jonathan Rosen was growing up his father would go to bed with a transistor radio set to an all-news station. Every night, his father's snores would mingle with the latest news from the White House or the neighborhood - even while asleep, he kept an ear out for bad news. A Jew born in 1924 Vienna who lost his parents in the Holocaust, his father was always attuned to the "menace of history."

¹ Talmud Bavli Rosh Hashanah 10b-11a

² Genesis 21

Jonathan was depressed by the grumbling static from the bedroom and vowed to replace it with music “more cheerfully in tune with America.”³

Many, perhaps, most of us feel a need to change the station, shifting our attention from paranoia to participation, our identities from anxious outsider to comfortable insider.

Growing up in the later decades of the 20th century in and around New York City, I always felt that Antisemitism was an unfortunate reality in some places and spaces, but never close to home. So many of us today grew up in these decades of acceptance, or have grown accustomed to the ease of city Judaism - towns with strong Jewish populations and schools with Yom Kippur sensitivity; Full acceptance in public and private institutions; Visible Jewish celebrities and public figures.

Many of us put down our vigilance, or never learned to keep an ear out for bad news. We never forget this “menace of history,” but we are often content to let it remain in our books and classrooms, rather than in our conversations and consciousness.

The “menace of history,” again walked the streets this summer in Charlottesville, Virginia when thousands of “Unite the Right” protesters gathered for a torch-lit rally, organized to protest the removal of the Robert E. Lee Sculpture in Emancipation Park.

In gathering to protect one racist monument, they succeeded in publicly resurrecting countless monuments to hatred - The heil Hitler salute; Slogans like - “blood and soil,” and “Jews will not replace us.”

And in the most violent and tragic moment of the weekend, self-identified white nationalist, James Fields Jr. drove a vehicle into a crowd killing Heather Heyer and injuring 19 others. According to the Washington Post, Fields “had a fascination with Nazism and a big idolatry of Adolf Hitler,” and he was previously photographed at a rally for Vanguard America, a neo-Nazi group dedicated to fighting “the international Jew.”⁴

We are not surprised by the existence of white supremacist organizations who broadcast racist, homophobic, xenophobic and anti-semitic messages.

But this summer we saw white supremacy emboldened - Neo-nazis marching in our streets, their message on the front page of every newspaper. We watched these hate

³ Rosen, Jonathan. “The Uncomfortable question of Anti-Semitism.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 3 Nov. 2001, www.nytimes.com/2001/11/04/magazine/the-uncomfortable-question-of-anti-semitism.html. Accessed 13 Sept. 2017.

⁴https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2017/08/14/jews-will-not-replace-us-why-white-supremacists-go-after-jews/?utm_term=.1954623edeb7

groups grow stronger and more confident because they felt supported by a President that fails to unequivocally condemn their hate speech.

The Charlottesville torch-lit rally is not a singular event - Since November we have watched anti-semitism make news throughout the commonwealth and the country. The New England Holocaust memorial was vandalized twice this summer. The Anti Defamation League reports that anti-semitic incidents in the US “surged more than one-third in 2016 and have jumped 86 percent in the first quarter of 2017.” The ADL has noticed a doubling in cases of anti-Semitic bullying and vandalism in public K-12 schools.⁵ Schools in our backyard - Brookline, Cambridge and Newton have all suffered anti-semitic events in the last year.

Remembrance is difficult when we are confronted with front-page news stories from another era. Remembrance is painful when it thrusts us into a reality we would rather ignore.

In one year, our communal attention has shifted towards vigilance, our insider identity in question. We are prompted to ask present tense questions from a bygone era - “How do I warn my children about anti-semitism?” “Are we safe?”

As we remember these questions, we also remember that a rise in anti-semitism never occurs in a vacuum. Charlottesville reminds us that hate is intersectional — “Unite the Right” protesters gathered en masse to resurrect civil war era white supremacy, racism and violence against Black Americans — but they brought with them their hatred for Jews, Latinos, Immigrants and LGBTQ people.

Jewish memory teaches us that this is an age old phenomenon — During the Civil War era, as White Americans debated the humanity of Black Americans and began a violent, national conversation regarding race and racism, the first major crisis of anti-semitism also came to national prominence. In this time of great national stress, Jews were excoriated by both the North and South, and accused of disloyalty and profiteering.⁶

During the Great Depression, segregation and racism caused extreme crisis in black communities with unemployment rates 2-3 times higher for black workers than for white workers, and starvation and disease rampant in black neighborhoods.⁷ Beginning during the early Depression years and continuing for more than a decade, violent acts against Jews reached a new zenith with Jewish immigrants blamed for any number of woes in the overcrowded cities. Here in Boston, roving gangs of “Christian Front Hoodlums,”

⁵ <https://www.adl.org/news/press-releases/us-anti-semitic-incidents-spike-86-percent-so-far-in-2017>

⁶ For more on this, see: Leonard Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pages 31 and 246.

⁷ For more on this see: Greenberg, Cheryl Lynn. *To ask for an equal chance: African Americans in the Great Depression*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2011.

terrorized Jews so fiercely, the Governor ordered an investigation, and found they were aided by local police.⁸

And when cultural antisemitism turned to political anti-semitism in post Depression Europe, we know that Hitler and his fascist allies not only targeted Jews, but expanded their hatred and violence towards immigrants, LGBTQ people and all those who did not fit within their white supremacist world view.

Today, during this new moment of civic and cultural discord, again the most vulnerable are most at risk - immigrants and asylum seekers live in fear of deportation; the disabled and sick fear losing health insurance; millions of black and latino youth fear becoming another statistic of mass incarceration. It is with this backdrop of intersectional hatred, bigotry and social crisis that Jews find themselves facing the most visible and violent anti-semitism in decades.

History teaches us that in these moments of crisis, the best weapon against intersectional hatred is interconnected love, and the balm for a troubled body politic is the incredible power of coalition building.

We do not need to deny, or put away our anxieties as Jews - Anxiety and vigilance help us access the history and memory of past experience. Memory makes us wise and mature wisdom inspires us towards the most noble virtues of humanity.

We can look to our shared memory for inspiration.

We can look to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which was drafted in the conference room of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism. This landmark piece of legislation, is a cornerstone in the ongoing dismantling of legal racism in America. The Civil Rights Act also ended legal discrimination against Jews and other religious minorities. Jewish liberation is bound up with Black liberation. Jewish liberation is bound up with human liberation.

We can look to our recent memory. We can recall the image of 1700 Bostonians from all religions, ethnicities and walks of life crowding our sanctuary immediately following the events in Charlottesville, affirming a message of unity, love and strength. We can recall the image of dozens of Jewish, Christian and Muslim clergy on our bima singing together songs of hope and protest.

We can recall the sea of 30,000 peaceful protestors who flocked to the streets of Boston the weekend after Charlottesville to repudiate white supremacy and affirm their commitment to peace, and justice.

And we can remember that we are not alone. Through the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization we are in deep relationship with our neighbors. We are in productive

⁸ Dinnerstein 144

conversation with our elected officials. We are a part of a local and national network of people of faith who refuse to stand idly by.

When we are anxious, when history teaches us to be vigilant against this age old “menace of history,” - we can remember that God liberated us from the bonds of slavery and oppression, so that we may fight for a world where all are free.

Three weeks before his death, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel gave an interview to Carl Stern of NBC. He shared this message:

“Let them remember that there is a meaning beyond absurdity. Let them remember that every deed counts, that every word has power, and that we all can do our share to redeem the world in spite of all absurdities and all frustrations and all disappointments... And above all, let them remember... to build a life as if it were a work of art.”

This message of hope was not delivered during an era of comfort and confidence. America was still embroiled in the Vietnam war; Barely three months prior, 11 Israelis were murdered at the Munich Olympics; And it was six weeks since the Washington Post broke news of the Watergate scandal.

This message of hope does not come from a man unfamiliar with hatred and violence. A Polish Jew, Heschel escaped Nazi controlled Europe, but his entire family died in bombings, ghettos and concentration camps.

“Remember that there is a meaning beyond absurdity.”

“Remember that every deed counts, that every word has power.”

“Remember to build a life as if it were a work of art.”

Heschel teaches us that remembrance is holy when it leads us to action - The lessons of history alone cannot lead us to liberation. Our anxieties and collective memory can serve us well, but looking backwards for wisdom is only one piece of our holy work. We need love, community and the power that comes through working in deep relationship with people who are different than us.

Today is Yom HaZikaron, “The Day of Remembrance”

Today is the day when God keeps promises.

God remembered the heroine Sarah, God remembered the stranger Hagar.

As the shofar’s fractured, wailing cries echo through this room, we pray, that we too will be remembered for blessing in this new year.

May this year be a year of goodness, health and peace.

And when it isn’t, when the year brings inevitable challenges and anxieties, may we remember to find strength in coalition, may we remind each other to remember the infinite possibilities of love.