

Where Are You? Finding Promise in the Desert

Rabbi Zachary R. Shapiro

Rosh HaShanah Evening, 2017/ 5778

Temple Akiba of Culver City, CA

One of the really nice things in my profession is officiating at weddings. While most are local, every once in a while, I am invited to weddings in special places. Yosemite. Napa. Cabo. Cancun. And Cleveland.

No, Cleveland was not as exotic as these other destination weddings. But I had grown close to the young couple, and I could not pass up on the opportunity to celebrate with them.

I landed at the Cleveland Hopkins airport and got into my rental car. The wedding was taking place at the Ritz Carlton, which was downtown. So I plugged the Ritz into my nav system, and followed the guidance, which eventually found me on the Ohio Turnpike heading west.

I thought it odd, as I knew I should be heading north to get from the airport to the city.

“Where in God’s name am I?” I cried out!

I looked at my nav system again. Lo and behold, while I DID ask for the Ritz, I asked for the Ritz in Marina Del Rey. Just then, I saw a street sign that said, “Next Exit 30 miles”!!!

Where are we? That’s one of the penetrating questions that accompanies us on our Holy Day Journey. Where am I in my life right now? What are my accomplishments? What have I accumulated? What have I squandered?

This question is first asked in the Torah after Adam and Eve ate from the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. They knew they messed up, so they hid when they heard God walking through the Garden. God calls out, “Ayeka? Where Are You?”

Where are you? It’s a burning question. Not where are you physically. Where are you in life What has brought you to this place. And what can you do to move forward?

Dear friends, I can't get this question out of my mind. And though I wrestle with my response to it every day on a personal level, the question has taken on an added emphasis on a national level as the soul of our country is starving. I need to be very honest. I struggled. I really struggled with how to approach my messaging for the Holy Days. I consulted colleagues, re-examining what this pivotal moment in life demands of us. On the one hand, we come together for messages of hope, unity, and healing. On the other, we cannot ignore the divisive voice that has abducted the historically dignified tone of our nation. Yes, we ask ourselves, "Where are we?" "What brought our nation to this place?" "And how do we move forward?"

We ask these questions as Americans. We ask these as Jews. We ask these as concerned human beings who stand for principals over politics.

In August in Charlottesville, Neo-nazis and fascists grabbed the attention of our nation. Yes, there have always been hate groups. But by and large their influence was mitigated by a higher national expectation.

That tone has changed.

And the suggestion of a **moral equivalency between neo-Nazis and those who oppose them reveals a complete moral bankruptcy.** Yes, I understand

that there are people of questionable motives among both the far left and the far right. But the moment a group finds itself marching on the same side as those carrying torches and Nazi flags Thugs who are crying out, “Jews will not replace us,” we need to step up. When those who march with racists are called “fine people,” we need to step in. And when those around us fail to speak up for social justice, we need to step out.

In truth, these voices of hate are minute. A week after Charlottesville, additional neo-nazi rallies took place in other cities. In Boston, a so called “free speech” demonstration was planned. A couple dozen white supremacists showed up to spew their hate. But what they faced was epic. Some 40,000 anti-protestors peacefully took the the streets, drowning out the hate with messages of diversity.

Yes, the voices of hate are small. But their impact is deep. Sonya, a survivor of Auschwitz, reflects on this crisis: “This is not the America I came to. It's easy to say, "Never forget," to assume that the world has learned its lesson. But unless we move beyond simply remembering, and take an active part in standing against anti-Semitism and racism, we could find ourselves repeating a regrettable history. We all need to be on guard, resist and fight.”¹

¹<http://edition.cnn.com/2017/08/19/opinions/holocaust-survivor-trump-charlottesville-sonia-k-opinion/index.html>

For the past 70 years, the world Jewish community has enjoyed an unprecedented era of acceptance. And in the United States, our sanction among the people goes back even farther. By and large, our experience here has been utopian. We are part of the fabric of this country. While some of us may have endured anti-Jewish episodes - Yes, there were quotas in American universities, policies in country clubs, and restrictions in other institutions. I don't deny any of that. But most of us have not come face to face with the vitriolic anti-Semitism that has been part of Jewish identity for our entire existence.

And now... the climate we are in has given both voice and permission for hate to surface. Racists feel protected. Fascists feel supported. Bigots feels sanctioned. Newsweek just reported that at one Jewish community in Texas is feeling so unsafe that they are holding their Holy Day services in secret.²

I care so much about the fabric of our country. As many of you know, my Grandpa Phil would gather all his descendants on the 4th of July to read us the Declaration of Independence. "Don't ever take for granted," he would tell us, "that you have the right to vote." Grandpa implanted into our consciousness a deep sense of patriotic pride. I trust in the extraordinary foundation that makes our nation so strong.

² <http://www.newsweek.com/neo-nazis-texas-jews-hiding-high-holiday-secret-location-666607>

And yet our county is fighting for our soul. **Ayeka?** Where are you? Where are we?

We are in search for a guiding light of righteousness. And we expect more from the voices of our elected leaders. At best, however, we receive a measured neutrality.

I want you to consider the following three excerpts. Perhaps one will resonate more than others. But they all offer a similar message:

1) Dante wrote in the Inferno, ""The hottest places in hell are reserved for those who, in times of great moral crisis, maintain their neutrality."

2) Dr. Martin Luther King: The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.

3) Ellie Wiesel: "The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference. The opposite of art is not ugliness, it's indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference. And the opposite of life is not death, it's indifference."

I wouldn't hold my breath waiting for change to come from on high. I am reminded of a midrash in which our rabbis ask: "where is the messiah?" He

answered, " at the city gate with the lepers, the forsaken and the poor." When will he come? "A voice from heaven said, 'Today' if only you head the call.

So it is up to us to head the call.

I want to share a piece of a message entitled: "One Voice for the New Year." It was co-authored by my colleagues Rabbis Elka Abrahamson and Judy Shanks - as a national response to what we are experiencing. Reform Congregations throughout the nation will hear this same statement:

As rabbis we are, from sea to shining sea, speaking to our congregations in every accent of America to declare in unison: acts of hatred, intimidation and divisiveness will not be tolerated in these United States. We stand upon the shoulders of the sages, poets and rabbis in every generation who fought for freedom. We speak in memory of every Jew and in memory of all people who tragically and senselessly lost their lives at the hands of evil oppressors. We call on our political leaders; progressives and conservatives alike, to rigorously uphold the values brilliantly articulated in the founding documents of our country, the "immortal declaration" that all [men] people are created equal. We call on every elected leader to responsibly represent our country's history and advance

*its noble visions of tolerance. On this first day of the New Year WE are
"Proclaiming liberty throughout all the land" [Lev 25:10].*

A powerful and direct statement. I am very proud to stand with my colleagues, hundreds throughout the country - with this message.

Folks, we have all eaten the fruit in the garden of Eden. That means our eyes are now open and we are given the authority and the responsibility to shape the world through our sacred calling. Adam and Eve had to work in the Garden. They had to till the soil. They had to plant for a new generation. As we plant for tomorrow, we want to be the best role models possible.

Here are four actions plans that can get us started:

- 1) Urge your Member of Congress to Condemn Hatred and Bigotry. Every human is created in the divine image. White supremacy, Anti-Semitism, and racism have no place in our country. Our leadership needs to hear that. The call needs to come from us. Ayeka - where are you?
- 2) Donate to organizations and causes that champion the rights and inclusion of all people, regardless of status, orientation, or religion. Examples include: **Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism**, the **NAACP Legal**

Defense Fund (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) or **HIAS**. AYEKA - where are you?

3) Make a direct donation to Congregation Beth Israel in Charlottesville - as they need immediate help because of security concerns. AYEKA - where are you?

4) Share a photo of yourself at a march on social media with the hashtag:

#BeTheLightForJustice. Each photo has the potential to ease someone else's pain. But hear me on this....

I don't want to see your Facebook photos at a march unless you also intend to post a Facebook photo wearing a sticker that indicates you went out to vote. If you really want to make a difference, both are necessary.

AYEKA! Where are you?

In preparation for my words tonight, I consulted with the deep wisdom of Rabbi Facebook. I wanted to gage how others would respond to, "Where are you?" So I put it out there. Here was the first response:

"New Jersey."

Should I clarify my question? I thought. No.... Let's play this out. Here's the next one:

"Reseda."

A few more place names trickled in. But then things got more interesting:

"I am here and present."

"I am in a good place spiritually and emotionally."

"OMG, Rabbi, why are you asking these questions!"

"Hineini."

One friend, who I asked in person, just went through a life-altering injury. He looked at me in the eye. He said, "I am grateful and happy to be alive. That's where I am."

Ayeka? Where are you? And whether the answer is the Ritz in Marina del Rey or Hinei (I am present) I remind you of the following poem by Reverend Niemoller during the Nazi era:

*First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Socialist.
Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.*

And so we ask: AYEKA?

Where are you when hateful voices compromise the fabric of our nation?

Where are you when Muslims, Mexicans, transgender, and so many others are targeted?

Akeyka. Where are you when bullying invades our society, when intimidation becomes acceptable, and when mockery becomes the new norm?

Where are you?

Friends, Temple Akiba is with you on the journey. We pursue justice. We reject xenophobia. We embrace your souls. Together we stand for righteousness. Together we create the promise of tomorrow. Let us move forward with the language of goodness, the spirit of dignity, and the presence of divinity. And as the year progresses, stop for a regular check-in by asking, "Where am I?" Then discover your cause, live your dream, and find the promise that will guide you through the desert.