



Rabbi Stephanie Bernstein
Rosh Hashanah 2017/5778

I am sitting with Abby, age 12, who will become a bat mitzvah in just a few weeks. We are studying the Torah portion she will chant at her bat mitzvah, and my job is to help Abby brainstorm so she can come up with some ideas for her speech. Abby's Torah portion, from the opening verses of the Book of Genesis, describes God's creation of the world, moving from chaos to order. We read the verses together. I ask Abby what we might learn from this poetic description of creation. She hesitates for a moment and then says, "God half way created the world, and we have to finish it."¹ Abby goes on to say finishing God's world is not optional, it is something we are *obligated* to do. How can we do this, I asked her? We can make the world a better place for everyone, she says. We can focus less on what is on the outside of people and more on what's on the inside. We must understand, Abby says, everyone is created equal.

I've thought about Abby's words often since last month's terrible events in Charlottesville. I've done a good deal of reading about white supremacists, neo-Nazis, and the debate over what should be done with statues commemorating Confederate generals and soldiers. Through all of my reading, however, Abby's words remain: "God half way created the world, and we have to finish it."

Abby's Torah portion is the same one that is read on the second day of Rosh Hashanah. In many Reform congregations, we alternate reading this portion with reading the *Akedah* portion, which describes the almost-sacrifice of Isaac. These verses from the beginning of the Torah are appropriate for a holy day that is known—among other names—as the birthday of the world. Rabbi Nachman of Breslav, the renowned Chasidic teacher, said the creation of the world "is as much a handover as a coronation."² Just as God created the world by means of divine utterances, so God "would have us recreate ourselves and our worldview"³ during the Days of Awe that begin on Rosh Hashanah and end with Yom Kippur. This year, recreating

¹ Abigail Robbins, August 15, 2017. Personal communication. Used with permission.

² <https://www.thejc.com/judaism/features/why-rosh-hashanah-is-the-world-s-birthday-1.11342>

³ Ibid.

ourselves and our worldview includes facing the painful reality that some of our fellow Americans believe and are willing to act on beliefs that are antithetical to our values as Americans and as Jews.

We ask ourselves how what we saw in Charlottesville is possible in 21st century America. Senator Tim Kaine said: “This is not who we are.”⁴ According to scholars of racism, however, this **is** who we are, unless we are taught not to be.⁵ “In some ways, it’s super simple,” says Dr. Jennifer Richeson, a Yale University social psychologist. “We often assume that it takes parents actively teaching their kids, for them to be racist. The truth is that unless parents actively teach kids *not* to be racists, they will be.”⁶ An “us-versus-them” mentality is part of our biology as human beings. Eric Knowles, a psychologist who studies prejudice and politics, notes “There’s a lot of evidence that people have an ingrained even evolved tendency toward people who are in our so-called ‘in group.’”⁷ The good news, according to Dr. Knowles, is that our human tendency to draw boundaries around our own racial, ethnic, or religious groups, can be shaped by how our societal institutions inform us. We can and must constantly teach and reinforce where those boundaries *should* be drawn: to include all of humanity. The American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote:

The civility of no race can be perfect whilst another race is degraded. It is a doctrine alike of the oldest and of the newest philosophy, that man is one, and that you cannot injure any member, without a sympathetic injury to all the members.⁸

Charlottesville showed us that we have not done a good enough job of teaching this message.

⁴ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/speaking-of-science/wp/2017/08/14/why-are-people-still-racist-what-science-says-about-americas-race-problem/?utm_term=.105362f310ff

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., emphasis added.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/hatred-doesnt-have-to-be-taught/2017/08/15/c2a24ba6-81e3-11e7-902a-2a9f2d808496_story.html?utm_term=.c56163cccdc5

Scholars of racism tell us that it's a myth that America will become more tolerant over time. Data show that, although white millennials are "more progressive and egalitarian" regarding issues of climate change and gay marriage, they are no different from prior generations regarding "implicit [racial] bias".⁹ Dr. Jennifer Richeson studies how young Americans view the US becoming a country wherein minorities will soon make up more than 50% of the population. Her research shows that young whites are no different in their responses to this demographic change than are older whites. Both groups responded with "anxiety and uncertainty, expressing more negative explicit and implicit racial bias . . ."¹⁰ After reading information about the upcoming demographic changes, young white subjects, among them college students, were "more likely to agree with statements like 'I would rather work alongside people of my same ethnic origin.'"¹¹

When our society's institutions—our schools, our families, our government leaders, our faith communities—do not act to counter our natural human tendency to favor our own social group, these tendencies can lead to violence. Those who commit such violence harbor implicit biases and prejudices, as all human beings do. What moves them to violence, research tells us, is being exposed to "an organized ideology that valorizes or glorifies an intergroup struggle like a race struggle," promoting a "siege mentality" among followers.¹² This ideology is the driving force behind a number of groups, which law enforcement agencies call the 'White Supremacist Extremist Movement'. Eric Ward, who has studied these groups for 30 years, writes "American White nationalism, which emerged in the wake of the 1960s civil rights struggle and descends from White supremacy, is a revolutionary social movement committed to building a Whites-only nation, and antisemitism forms its theoretical core."¹³

In May of this year, the FBI and Department of Homeland Security issued a joint intelligence bulletin on White Supremacist Extremism. The bulletin warns:

⁹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/speaking-of-science/wp/2017/08/14/why-are-people-still-racist-what-science-says-about-americas-race-problem/?utm_term=.17681b8d7c06

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid

¹² https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/speaking-of-science/wp/2017/08/14/why-are-people-still-racist-what-science-says-about-americas-race-problem/?utm_term=.d6abf705eb22

¹³ <http://www.politicalresearch.org/2017/06/29/skin-in-the-game-how-antisemitism-animates-white-nationalism/#sthash.VASwXL5P.T9bh0VN8.dpbs>

. . . lone actors and small cells within the white supremacist extremist (WSE) movement likely will continue to pose a threat of lethal violence over the next year. This assessment is based on a review of lethal and potentially lethal incidents of WSE violence from 2000 to 2016 and the often spontaneous and opportunistic nature of these acts that limits prevention by law enforcement.¹⁴

The bulletin goes on to say between 2000 and 20016, white supremacist extremists “were responsible for 49 homicides in 26 attacks . . . more than any other domestic extremist movement.”¹⁵

Christian Picciolini is a former skin-head who founded Life After Hate¹⁶, an organization that works to combat white supremacism. He spoke at TRS a few weeks ago.¹⁷ Picciolini estimates that there are approximately three hundred thousand people in the US with white supremacist ideology who are currently in militia training. During their day to day lives, they do not stand out. He reports that, in recent years, members of these groups have made a conscious decision to blend in. They wear khakis and polo shirts . . . as did the marchers in Charlottesville. Though, thankfully, only a small percentage of those who hold white supremacist views act on them, more of our fellow citizens hold such views than we would like to admit. A Washington Post-ABC News poll in late August found “that roughly 1 in 6 Americans either support the alt-right or say it is acceptable to hold white supremacist or neo-Nazi views.”¹⁸

We know our United States’ infrastructure needs tending. Our moral infrastructure needs tending as well. What can we do? “To greet the world with love,” writes David von

¹⁴ <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/3924852-White-Supremacist-Extremism-JIB.html>

¹⁵ https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/federal-government-has-long-ignored-white-supremacist-threats-critics-say/2017/09/02/bf2ed00c-8698-11e7-961d-2f373b3977ee_story.html?utm_term=.94820cd1633f

¹⁶ <https://www.lifeafterhate.org/>

¹⁷ <https://www.templeroddefshalom.org/live/>

¹⁸ https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/poll-shows-strong-disapproval-of-how-trump-responded-to-charlottesville-violence/2017/08/21/4e5c585c-868b-11e7-a94f-3139abce39f5_story.html?utm_term=.2dc07a5ce5c7

Drehle, “is an attitude that must be cultivated through storms of adversity and droughts of trust.”¹⁹ Like other important messages, he says, this one must be repeated frequently. He continues,

But it’s also obvious that people should wash their hands to avoid spreading germs, pay attention when they’re driving and look both ways before crossing the street, yet these truths must be repeated because people are prone to forget and lives are at stake. Mass hatred is humanity’s deadliest tendency, the epidemic to end all epidemics. We can’t say it enough.²⁰

The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) has an excellent guide to help us teach and live this vital lesson, which you can view online, “Ten Ways to Fight Hate: A Community Resource Guide.”²¹ The SPLC, which has been teaching tolerance, fighting hate, and tracking hate groups since 1971, gives us hope that we can make a difference in combating the 260,000 hate crime incidents that occur in the US each year. The SPLC urges us to educate ourselves, speak up, act, support the victims of hate crimes, join forces with allies, pressure our leaders to speak up, and stay engaged. The SPLC writes: “[Hate] is an attack on a community’s health [we must] do something. In the face of hatred, apathy will be interpreted as acceptance by the perpetrators, the public and—worse—the victims.”²²

The Department of Justice notes,

[H]ate crimes, more than any other crime, can trigger community conflict, civil disturbances, and even riots....for all of their rhetoric, hate groups and their imitators are really trying to divide us; their views are fundamentally anti-democratic. True patriots fight hate.²³

¹⁹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/hatred-doesnt-have-to-be-taught/2017/08/15/c2a24ba6-81e3-11e7-902a-2a9f2d808496_story.html?utm_term=.c56163cccdc5

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ <https://www.splcenter.org/20170814/ten-ways-fight-hate-community-response-guide>

²² Ibid

²³ Ibid

We must urge our leaders not only to speak out against hate crime incidents, but to support organizations that work to combat domestic extremism. Federal government funding in both the Obama and Trump administrations has focused on combating extremism within US Muslim communities, with little emphasis on the dangers posed by white supremacists and neo-Nazis.²⁴

Life After Hate was approved for a grant in 2016 that was denied by the current administration. We must urge our Congressional representatives to support draft legislation that will restore funding to groups such as Life After Hate that are fighting white supremacists.²⁵

As Jews, we know that the hateful language of white supremacists and neo-Nazis can fuel actions that lead to violence against minorities. We have experienced this throughout our history as a people. In Charlottesville, we witnessed something most of us have never seen in our lifetimes: neo-Nazis marching with torches past a synagogue chanting “Sieg Heil” while congregants inside welcomed Shabbat. After receiving numerous online threats to burn down the synagogue, synagogue leaders removed the Torah scrolls from the building.

We also saw courage, grace, and love. John Aguilar, a thirty year Navy veteran, decided to stand watch over the synagogue during Friday night and Saturday services, standing next to the synagogue’s armed guard. When asked why he did so, Mr. Aguilar said he just felt he should.

Heather Heyer, who was killed when a white nationalist drove into a crowd of peaceful counter-demonstrators in Charlottesville, also felt compelled to stand up against hate. Speaking at her memorial service, Heather’s father said his daughter “loved people; she wanted equality. On the day of her passing, she wanted to put down hate.”²⁶ Heather’s grandfather recalled that little Heather was a “pint-size fighter for fairness.”²⁷ Heather’s boss remembered a time when Heather broke up with a boyfriend who made a disparaging comment about her

²⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/15/us/politics/right-wing-extremism-charlottesville.html>

²⁵ <http://thehill.com/policy/national-security/346852-dems-may-force-fight-to-fund-groups-fighting-neo-nazis>

²⁶ https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/heather-heyers-grieving-mother-readies-herself-for-huge-public-farewell-to-my-child/2017/08/15/c5270e5e-81fa-11e7-ab27-1a21a8e006ab_story.html?utm_term=.3e21ec564d9f

²⁷ Ibid

African American supervisor's race.²⁸ Heather's co-worker Feda Khateeb-Wilson said: "Maybe if you didn't speak so loudly, they wouldn't have heard you, and you would still be here. But thank you for making the word 'hate' real . . . Thank you for making the word 'love' even stronger."²⁹

On this day when we celebrate God's creation of the world, we reaffirm that the sacred work of completing the world is in *our* hands. We reaffirm that, although hate is real, love is more powerful. As we enter this New Year, let us resolve to stand up to hate and bigotry. May we be inspired by the life of Heather Heyer and by the actions of all those who stand up against hate. At Heather's memorial service, her heartbroken mother urged those present to honor her daughter by fighting "as Heather would do . . . I'd rather have my child," she said, "but by-golly if I got to give her up, we're going to make it count."³⁰

As Abby taught us: "God half way created the world, and we have to finish it." Let's make this year count.

Amein

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Ibid