



Rabbi Amy Schwartzman
Rosh Hashanah 2017/5778
Responding to Charlottesville

In 27 years, I have never given a sermon on anti-Semitism. I have never wanted my Judaism to be defined or driven by the hatred of others. *That* is the mindset of a different age, *those* are the sermons of a different time. Of course, I know; I remember; I have studied these painful yet sacred chapters of our history. And, I can recall Skokie, Crown Heights, and Kansas City. But, this sermon, a response to anti-Semitism, I never imagined I would have to deliver. Never.¹

August 12th changed all of that when I watched in stunned disbelief as white supremacists brought their menacing brand of racist, anti-Semitic hatred into the streets of Charlottesville. Armed men carrying Nazi flags stood outside of the Temple there, while worshippers left through the back door carrying the Torah scrolls. This was not 1937 Germany, but 100 miles from here in 2017. I know I must speak to this event which was witnessed in some way by each of us here, but I will not give-in entirely. At its core, this will not be a sermon on anti-Semitism, this will be a sermon on Jewish and American values, this will be a counter-protest.

There is no question that I was deeply shaken on that day. Part of what unnerved me was that the racism and bigotry on display were so brazen. Today's Neo-Nazi's and KKK marchers walk openly through the streets, with their guns no less—no more hoods, no more concealment, no more midnight meetings in the woods—with open pride in garish tiki torch-light they proclaimed 'Sieg Heil' and 'Jews will not replace us.' And, did you notice how young they were? How devastating to see our next generation, our future, spewing hate.

But, then, what really pushed me to this new place was the response of the President. In three speeches, just days after Charlottesville the leader of our great nation moved from moral equivocation to moral abdication. To suggest that there were "many sides" to the events in Charlottesville is to balance hate-mongers with those who

stand to defend American values and rights for all citizens. There certainly is condemnable violence on the left, but to equate actions of hate protestation with actions of white supremacy is to distort the import of intimidation and domestic terrorism, which was on display before our entire nation. Ignoring this is nothing less than a failure of moral leadership.²

When I recall the many horrors that I have witnessed here in our America, Oklahoma City, September 11th, Charleston, Orlando, I can picture each President stepping into the appropriate role of leader and moral guide. It may be entirely obvious, but what happened in Charlottesville was un-American, unpatriotic, and demeaning to human life and dignity; every leader in America, especially our President, should have said nothing less.

This is not about politics. What happened in Charlottesville and the reactions to it have nothing to do with party or policy or platform. This has to do with our values as Americans, our empathy with minorities and our safety as Jews. My words today come from the compelling wisdom of our prophets who called leaders to deliver a stern warning against complacency and an impassioned call for action. My words today come from our sacred texts. The Talmud teaches, *“If you see wrongdoing by a member of your household and you do not protest—you are held accountable. And so it is in relation to the members of your city. And so it is in relation to the world.”*³ As Jews, we are held accountable in ever-encompassing circles of responsibility to rebuke transgressors within our homes, in our country, in our world. One courageous medieval commentator to this text teaches that we must voice hard truths even to those with great power. Seven-hundred years ago, the Meiri stated *“the whole people are punished for the sins of the king if they do not protest the king’s unjust actions.”*⁴

Last month’s events are a wake-up call to our Jewish community. Our Torah, our Prophets, all of Judaism calls us to speak and act against the evil of racism whether it is explicit anti-Semitism or not. From the creation story, our tradition teaches that God fashioned us all from one single person, Adam, so that no human being could ever say, *“my lineage is greater than yours.”* But just in case we thought the white supremacists

were after someone else, or that the Confederate flag has nothing to do with modern day Nazi sympathizers, or that we were somehow safe in the fact that most—but certainly not all—Jews in America are white, those tiki torches illuminated another truth, one we learn and forget only to have learned again that day: if one minority group’s rights are threatened, we are all threatened. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. taught us, “We are all tied together in a single garment of destiny,” whether we are the least powerful or the most powerful person in our world.⁵

After Charlottesville, this truth rings in our ears. There were rallies, there were gatherings at the White House, all of our clergy joined the Ministers March for Justice, the papers were full of editorials processing this event and its meaning for Jews, Black people, LGBTQ people, for all minorities, really for our entire country. We were engaged in the perennial debates over the balance between liberty and security, individual rights and free speech.

Now, over a month later, those voices are beginning to fade. But we must continue to shine the spotlight on this suppurate wound of racism and anti-Semitism that has gone untreated and unnoticed by populists for generations. This hatred that has festered beneath the surface of our dynamic American culture suppressed by a permafrost, that has in this past year begun to thaw. We must shine a light brighter than those tiki torches; we must live our lives as a daily counter-protest to Charlottesville.

Every time we act to restore the moral balance of this world that seems to be spinning through some divergent trajectory, we engage in a counter-protest. Every time we choose acts of tolerance, decency, kindness that acknowledge the worth of a person different from us, we engage in a counter-protest. Every time we speak out at our offices, at the Giant, in the halls of our schools, to change the tone and reject bigoted remarks, we engage in counter-protest. Every time we show our children a different way, we engage in a counter-protest.

And, of course, there is more, and some of it is tough to do. Whatever our criticisms are of others, our counter-protest is not complete unless we find a way to look into our own hearts and souls to see the biases we are carrying as well. It’s a too easy to

say that what happened in Charlottesville was horrible and stop there. For our societal critique to have value we must be willing to look at our prejudices, our own racism and our own privilege. The opportunity for this type of personal assessment, our *heshbon ha-nefesh*, accounting of our soul as we say in Hebrew, is here, now, on these High Holy Days. Is this not what we are called to do from today through Yom Kippur? To look hard at who we are and be honest with ourselves about our deeply human flaws, and commit to turn and change? Our *teshuvah* is so critical right now because social transformation cannot be successful without personal transformation.

Let me suggest another counter-protest that also begins with the individual but ends with the community. This counter-protest involves our ever-popular smart phones. We all know what a 'selfie' is, right? Maybe you have one of yourself in front of the Lincoln Memorial or a Nats game. As a fun way to document a moment—selfies are great. But I have begun to realize that 'selfies' reveal our society's obsession with the self, the me, the I. Over and over again we affirm—I am the center of my world. But biologically aren't we social creatures? We need face-to-face interactions to build the friendship, trust, loyalty and love that redeem our solitude. It is in the dynamic of 'we' that one learns the lesson of altruism. When we have too much "I" and too little "we," we can find ourselves vulnerable, fearful and alone.⁶

It's not only the 'selfie' that is isolating us. When we filter incoming information, and surround ourselves with people whose views, opinions and prejudices are just like ours, we isolate ourselves in a different way. Researchers have shown that such isolation makes us more extreme in our outlook. We must resist this tendency. We must counter-protest.

Set your phone to look outward. It's time to take pictures of others. Maybe not literally, but to take the time to see them, to listen, understand someone with whom we rarely interact. In one brief encounter, we may discover that the people not like us are just people, like us. And every time we hold out the hand of friendship to somebody not like us, whose class, creed or color are different from ours, we counter-protest. We chip away at the wall of hatred that develops from excluding the other.

I recently learned that *The New York Times* is running a daily column presenting the best writing on both sides of political issues. We should read that! We must understand what is driving the thinking of others rather than staying in our echo-chambers. The best engagement comes when both sides are informed of the other's thinking. Rather than condemn those who disagree with us, we need to understand their world view. It is only then that we can find some common ground where we might stand together and maybe, discover a more tolerant shared view. You could say it's time to put the "we" back into America's most famous phrase: 'We The People.' We must move from the politics of me to the politics of all of us, together. Rediscovering America's "we" is a great response to Charlottesville.

Being here, now, in our dynamic and very full Jewish home is a profound response to Charlottesville. We are here, affirming a tradition that the Neo-Nazis and white supremacists want to wipe out—again. We show our defiance; our refusal to cower; our pride in who we are and the values we represent. We are here and we will not disappear. At this moment, we are living our counter-protest.

But the existence of this congregation cannot be taken for granted. And maintaining a Jewish community that will combat racists and extremists is our responsibility. Ours alone. After that horrible day in Charlottesville a few neighboring ministers called to offer support. "We will protest alongside of you," they said. Yes, for sure. I know they will and I treasure my interfaith relationships. But keeping this community here, here to respond to swastikas in our High Schools, here to sing *Oseh Shalom* at a community event, here to provide our children with the moral compass that is Judaism, here to celebrate and comfort, affirm and challenge, here to keep the lights on—that is on us and only us.

Forgive me for stating this so bluntly, but part of our counter-protest against Charlottesville, against bigotry directed at us or at anyone, is investment in this Temple—our time, our energy and our resources—to ensure the vitality and lasting strength of this congregation; finding meaning, joy and friendship within these walls. In 27 years, I have never been so anxious about anti-Semitism; nor have I been so sure of

the importance of the perpetuation of this Temple. Tragically, Charlottesville will happen again and when it does, we must be here responding with the values of our tradition, pushing back by our very presence as a dynamic, caring, engaged congregation.

Allow me to circle back to our tradition and Torah, the subjects about which I feel most comfortable offering my sermons on the High Holy Days. While not in the readings of Rosh Hashanah, I am thinking today about Moses and a time when he felt, as I know many of us do these days, that he had to step up and, in a way, go to bat to save his people, to preserve the future.

Moses had been up on the mountain for 40 days receiving the 10 commandments while the Israelites, impatient for his return, created the golden calf. Learning about this idol, God became irate, incensed with the Israelites. God turned to Moses and said: “Leave me that I might destroy these people.” Can you imagine Moses in this scene? He has given his entire adult life to his fellow Jews. He must be asking, “is this the moment of life and death for my people? Can I stand aside and watch this destruction?” At once Moses realizes that his relationship with God is all that can prevent the end of Israelites. The Talmud reports that Moses embraces both his responsibility and his power. He says to himself ‘no!’, “*d’var zeh talu’i bi – this matter is dependent on me.*”⁷ I will not step aside; I will not abdicate my responsibility; I will fight for what is right; I will fight for my people and our future.

These must be our words after Charlottesville too. *Dvar Zeh Talu’i bi* – this matter is dependent on me. To stand up, to counter-protest, to respond for our Judaism and with our Judaism. *Dvar Zeh Talu’i bi* – this depends on me, this depends on us.

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Temple Rodef Shalom

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¹ Rabbi Elka Abrahamson

² Rabbi David Stern, Shabbat Sermon – After Charlottesville

³ Shabbat 54b

⁴ Menachem ben Shlomo - The Meiri

⁵ 'OneVoice' – CCAR Statement for Rabbis after Charlottesville by Rabbis Abrahamson and Shanks

⁶ Rabbi Jonathan Sachs, Ted Talk

⁷ Brachot 32A