

Kol Nidre Yom Kippur Sermon Rabbi Bloom – September 29, 2017

Last month I visited the Sachsenhausen concentration camp north of Berlin and interviewed Horst Seferens, the public information officer. I asked him, (days before the incident at Charlottesville, Virginia), “Aren’t you worried about the increase and prominence of Neo-Nazis and other extremist groups in Germany today?” “Yes,” he answered. Then he looked at me and quipped, “Aren’t you too worried about the Nazis in your country?”

And the truth is, I *am* concerned about what I see in the news of accounts of Neo-Nazi threatening to march at a synagogue in Sweden; of the march and protests at Charlottesville; and of ongoing activities on the internet that are blatantly anti-Semitic.

Let me add one more recollection from Berlin. On more than one occasion I saw folks standing on a small platform on the city streets giving speeches to passersby with anti-Zionist and anti-Israel slogans and maligned Israeli flags, painted on their posters. So, I know that we are not only speaking about the alt-right, Neo-Nazis, and white supremacists. We are also talking about extremists on the left wing of world politics. These people also foment anti-Semitic or anti-Israel demagoguery in the world today.

Sadly, anti-Judaism is an equal opportunity employer of hatred available to everyone. Today the protests against us are not only marches in the public square. On-line communities have arisen and written books and created videos which inculcate neo-Nazi notions or extremist left notions against Jews, Judaism, Zionism and Israel, [and] by simply clicking on a link or downloading an app onto your cell phone, you can easily upload this kind of sinister propaganda.

Online Anti-Semitism has become an entirely new virtual reality, paralleling the one we live in in the offline world.

The case can be made that Jews are at risk in both worlds, and when the online and offline chatter overlaps, we have Charlottesville.

Tonight, on Kol Nidre I am not going to expound on the existence of Anti-Semitism, for I presume you know what it is and also know how extensive it is. Instead let me try to go deeper with you into that cavern called hatred. What makes anti-Semitism more complex today than it has been before? Does the Torah explore these feelings of hatred that we feel towards our adversaries? Finally, what is the ultimate long-term impact of this brave new world of hate, online and offline, upon our Jewish identity? My main point tonight is that despite vigilance against anti-Semitism, we have a constant and urgent duty to expose the prejudice and bigotry that exists against Jews. We cannot, on the other hand, let our own emotions become solely focused upon anti-Semitism to the point where we distort our sense of Jewishness, or where anti-Semitism itself becomes more important than our love for the beauty of our religion and traditions.

The Torah tells us not to hate your fellow Jew. “Do not hate a fellow Israelite in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in their guilt” (Leviticus 19:17-18). Hatred

is, of course, one of the most deep-seated emotions there is, so it should come as no surprise that we see it in the Torah, and are cautioned against it.

However, the hatred that forms the core of anti-Semitism today comes from many alternative sources. Conventional neo-Nazi efforts and those on the left who also demonize Jews under the guise of attacking Israel share this vicious ideology. Next, we have terrorist groups like ISIS -- within the Arab world and outside it which have fueled efforts to promote Jew hatred. But the worst culprit, spreading anti-Semitism in the world today, is the Internet. Investigative journalists report, for example, that companies like Facebook have thoughtlessly sold advertising space to these hate groups. Up until recently, for example, Facebook sold ads to anti-Semitic groups based upon nothing more than mathematical algorithms, without any human supervision, which gave a go-ahead to hate groups to advertise their vile propaganda online against the Jewish people. Facebook COO Sheryl Stolberg took responsibility for this policy, and has promised to end this kind of no-holds-barred advertising.

But the greatest long-term impact upon the Jewish people from anti-Semitism online or offline, I think, has been that it has crept into our souls and become the lens through which we define our Jewishness. When we derive inspiration, for example, from being able to call out anti-Semitism and then defeat it, are we not more interested in doing that than in observing the tenets of Judaism? At the end of the day we need a better balance between defining ourselves from our faith and our traditions, rather than defining ourselves in opposition to our adversaries' world view. Somehow a better balance is needed which heeds the call to continual vigilance against an oppressor, and one that broadens our vision and enables us to identify with the beauty and joy of Judaism. I don't want neo-Nazis or any anti-Jewish behavior or movement to overshadow my own Jewish identity. I choose my own identity.

I felt this balancing act while I was in Germany and began to understand this complex challenge as I walked through the streets of Potsdam or Berlin. Initially, I found myself sitting on the bus, staring at people who looked just like any group of Americans, and they seemed so nice and normal. Then gradually, I became suspicious of my fellow travelers, imagining how many of the young and especially the older Germans, whose parents and grandparents might have been Nazis. How long can one engage in this sort of reverie before it just becomes senseless and futile?

I remember when I was standing in federal court at the sentencing hearing of the brothers who torched our synagogue and two other synagogues in one night in Sacramento, California. I was there to give a victim impact statement on behalf of my congregation. I asked the judge if I could turn the podium around to face the brothers sitting at the table with their lawyers. The judge had to rule on this request. Finally, he gave me approval. As I delivered my prepared remarks, the ring leader stared at me without any remorse, cold hearted displaying an almost arrogant smirk on his face. The other brother simply stared into space refusing to look at me.

Let me add that the brothers were also facing trial on the murder of a gay couple in Reading, CA. It was that investigation that led to the discovery that they were responsible for these hate crimes. While it has taken me a few years to deal emotionally with those moments and that experience, I learned how not to let that awful violence and their hatred plant itself inside me. As a post script, the older brother, the ringleader, shortly afterward hanged himself in prison.

So much about Yom Kippur talks about the mistakes or sins we commit. However, I think tonight's topic should also be about the sins others have committed against us, and how we have coped over the centuries with senseless hatred. Part of [the challenge of anti-Semitism] is finding renewal and redemption in our own lives and separating the hatred of some in this world against us from our lives and our duty to live with happiness and joy despite their hatred. That is the task we have. That is what I believe repentance is about, which is being able to love life and the citizens of the world knowing that not everyone is evil or against us. That we remember exposing anti-Semitism does not demand we become all-consuming in our hatred of the actions of bad people. They do not define us.

The Psalmist said,
Teach me your way, Lord;
 lead me in a straight path
 because of my oppressors.

12

Do not turn me over to **the desire of my foes,**
 for false witnesses rise up against me,
 spouting malicious accusations.

13

I remain confident of this:
I will see the goodness of the Lord
in the land of the living.

14

Wait for the Lord;
 be strong and take heart
 and wait for the Lord (Psalm 27)

Dear Friends in the face of hatred sometimes all we have left is heart to sustain ourselves and our faith in humanity and in God.

Shana Tova