

## Roll Into Light

Rosh Hashanah Morning Sermon 2017/5778

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Every new year is very different. Some have had years with new love, the birth of a child, exciting employment, purchase of a long sought home. Others face illness, loss, financial turnarounds, anger, and pain. Most of us had some combination of these elements.

But the year past, 5777, was certainly a challenging year for the world, for America, and for the Jewish people. We saw incredible divisiveness in politics at home and abroad, disagreements on Israel, rampant terrorism and gun violence, the threat of nuclear war, devastating storms and earthquakes, and the return of armed Nazis marching in the streets.

Watching or reading the news has become a painful chore like ripping off a Band-Aid. What fresh misery will we face today?

One of these dark spots in our country was the white supremacist protest in Charlottesville, Virginia in August resulting in the murder of Heather Heyer. We live in a world that we thought was unimaginable – Nazis with guns threaten the safety of a synagogue at prayer. Alan Zimmerman, the President of Temple Beth Israel in Charlottesville, wrote about the terror of seeing neo-Nazis and white supremacists outside the synagogue.

“For half an hour, three men dressed in fatigues and armed with semi-automatic rifles stood across the street from the temple. Had they tried to enter, I don’t know what I could have done to stop them, but I couldn’t take my eyes off them, either. Perhaps the presence of our armed guard deterred them.”

“Several times, parades of Nazis passed our building, shouting, ‘There’s the synagogue!’ followed by chants of ‘Seig Heil’ and other anti-Semitic language. Some carried flags with swastikas and other Nazi symbols.”<sup>1</sup>

This is America in 2017. These are images out of black and white documentaries and horrors from long ago. Did we ever imagine we’d see this again? Could we envision that the counter protestors, those people calling for peace and saying Nazis are wrong and evil, would be lumped together with blame on “both sides.”<sup>2</sup>

In the face of such pain, we struggle to figure what each of us can do. Our Junior Choir beautifully sang about rolling from dark into light. A simple response is to use the Hebrew phrase, “*Gam zeh ya'avur*, This too shall pass.” But just waiting for night to become day is not the Jewish way. It wasn't for Moses freeing the Israelites or the Zionists establishing the State of Israel. We can't wait; we must roll into light actively finding a way to bring night into day.

In response to the hurricanes of recent weeks, we knew what to do. We acted. We sent money and gift cards. We reached out to people we knew. There was something dark in the world and we brought the light to fix it. So too in the face of violence, brutality, and silence. Talmud Brakhot says that we are required to take action. This matter depends upon me, not on the person next to you; not on the government; not on someone else. On you. On everyone. Whether it is the destruction of Hurricane Harvey or the destruction of white supremacists, we must act.

Most of us are familiar with the Reverend Martin Niemöller's poem from the Holocaust that begins, “First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—Because I was not a Socialist.” Rev. Niemöller was arrested for speaking against the Nazis and was imprisoned in concentration camps from 1938 to 1945. My colleague and friend Rabbi Michael Latz offers this modern version of Rev Niemöller's poem.

First they came for transpeople and I spoke up -- because God does NOT make mistakes!

Then they came for the African Americans and I spoke up—  
Because I am my sisters' and my brothers' keeper.

And then they came for the women and I spoke up—  
Because women hold up half the sky.

And then they came for the immigrants and I spoke up—  
Because I remember the ideals of our democracy.

And then they came for the Muslims and I spoke up—  
Because they are my cousins and we are one human family.

And then they came for the Native Americans and Mother Earth and I spoke up—

Because the blood-soaked land cries and the mountains weep.

They keep coming.  
We keep rising up.  
Because we Jews know the cost of silence.  
We remember where we came from.  
And we will link arms, because when you come for our neighbors, you  
come for us—  
and THAT just won't stand..

When we struggle with what to do, we find an answer in our Holy Day liturgy. In the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer, we learn that our fate is set for the coming year – who will perish by fire and who by water. But the prayer gives us hope. *U'tshuvah, u'tefilah, u'tzedakah ma'avirin et ro'a hagezirah*, repentance, prayer, and charity temper judgment's severe decree.

It sometimes feels like the future is set. And it is – if we do nothing. Evil left unchecked will only grow in power and influence. Hate given free reign will take hold and become the norm. But love shared through actions of an open heart, an open soul, and an open mind can change darkness into light. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. famously said, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”

Coming together brings a light so bright it blinds the fog of apathy and bigotry. Take this past July in Panama City, Florida. A family of six had gotten caught in the rip tides of the ocean and swept out in dangerous ocean waters. Four passers-by tried to help them and were also caught in the strong tides unable to swim back to shore. Those on the beach searched for a way to reach them without getting more people stuck. A rescue boat was still many minutes away.

Rather than give up, one person shouted, “Form a human chain.” Five people grabbed hands and then 10 more joined them. Passers-by saw the rescue effort and added their arms to growing chain that reached out into the waters. The stranded were reached and one by one sent down the line to safety. All 10 people were rescued. Anyone on that chain could have done nothing, but they all acted.

Jessica Simmons, who led the formation of the lifesaving human chain, wrote, “To see people from different races and genders come into action to help TOTAL strangers is absolutely amazing to see!! People who didn’t even know each other went HAND IN HAND IN A LINE, into the water to try and reach them. Pause and just IMAGINE that.”<sup>3</sup>

To save a life, we must come together. We need to save our society now. We save it by bringing in the light. Every day, every action must be about building connection, creating relationship, and speaking out for what is good. Each of us must become a beacon of light in a world that is clouding over with darkness.

18 volunteers from an Austin Reform synagogue were out for a celebration a week after Charlottesville took place. They had finished resettling an Afghani family they had sponsored in town and were taking the family out for dinner at a Greek buffet. The large group of 23 shared stories of their efforts and the challenge it took to help this family. When they went to pay the bill, there was some confusion. The bill had been paid in full. A man had overheard their conversation. Knowing full well that they were a synagogue celebrating resettling Afghani refugees, he settled the tab and left without anyone knowing his name. The owner of the restaurant said he didn’t know the man’s name, but he did one thing – he was a Palestinian immigrant to Austin.

The hatred and violence we witnessed at Charlottesville and in countless other moments this year prompted a swelling of response among my Reform rabbinic colleagues. A joint statement was crafted and these words are being shared this morning by hundreds of Reform Rabbis:

“Today I speak words of protest, joining hundreds of my Reform rabbinic colleagues across the nation in fulfillment of our sacred obligation. We will not be silent....We, like the prophets before us, draw from the deepest wisdom of our tradition to deliver a stern warning against complacency and an impassioned call for action. We call on you to rise up and say in thousands of ways, every day, as proud Jews and proud Americans: You cannot dehumanize, degrade and stigmatize whole categories of people in this nation. Every Jew, every Muslim, every gay, transgender, disabled, black, brown, white, woman, man and child is beloved of God and precious in the Holy One’s sight. We the people, all the people, are created *b’tzelem elohim*, in the image of the Divine. All the people are worthy of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”<sup>4</sup>

Every day presents opportunities to be the light. We will encounter hatred and anger on the streets of New York City. We often don’t know how best to respond. On October 15 at noon, we’ll be co-hosting Upstander Training along with our neighbors from the First Presbyterian Church across the street. Sign up and learn how not be a Bystander, but an Upstander. Information is on your Rosh Hashanah handout.

Getting to know others of different religions, cultures, and backgrounds helps strengthen our community. We then care for each other and look out for each other. Come to our Interfaith Sukkot event on October 10 with Turkish and Afghan families held here at the Temple. At home, in your building or on your block, create your own intercultural exchange simply by introducing yourself to your neighbor who you smile at, but never have a real conversation.

Members of our Temple have become part of the Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom who strive to build bridges between Muslim and Jewish women to fight negative stereotyping and prejudice. The mission is to change the world, one Muslim and one Jewish woman at a time! It is working Lois Silverman told me. There are links we can build everywhere. What bridges are you building?

Speak your voice. In silence you do nothing, but give more room for the bigots and haters to share their venom. Go to a counter protest. Donate to the ADL or AJC. Join community events to clean up a neighborhood or create better education for our kids. Coming together in any fashion gives us strength.

“Every time you act or speak with decency, acknowledge the worth of a human being who is different from you, every time you acknowledge your own biases and privileges and how they might shape your actions, every time we show our children a different way, every time you stand with others who stand for compassion and freedom from persecution. Every time you recognize that this just can’t be about [swastikas] and scary symbols, but we have to address core policy issues that deprive too many Americans of genuine liberty and opportunity....Every time you reject apathy as the most pernicious of social diseases.” As Rabbi David Stern said, “Every time you stand with pride as a Jew it means to stand with pride as a creature of God bound in destiny and with hope for all of God’s creatures - then you are acting in counter protest.”<sup>5</sup>

Above the holy ark of Congregation Beth Israel in Charlottesville is a quote from Psalms: “By Your light do we see light.” It reminds us that our sacred work is to spread the light of God throughout the dark places in this world.

This is a time of transformational change in our country. In decades ahead, we will look back and our children or great-grandchildren may ask, what did you do in response? How do you stand up? What did you do to bring light into the darkness? History will side with a world of diversity, love, and caring. Were you silent in the face of those who despise difference, hate the other, and think only of themselves? Or did you speak out for people of all races, religions, sexual orientations and identities; for every minority and every person who is being denied their rights for freedom and success?

This may not be the world we wanted, but it is here. We have to respond. In Jewish history, Queen Esther was happy being married to the King and wanted nothing to do with the hatred and violence she saw from Haman and the antisemites. She decided to wait it all out. Her cousin Mordecai reminded her, “If you keep silent in this crisis, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter, while you and your father's house will perish. And who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis.”<sup>6</sup>

Earlier this summer, we saw an eclipse blot out the light and bring greater darkness. We don't have the luxury of waiting for the moon to pass. The darkness seems to have come for a long visit.

To bring light “we must share the goodness and kindness that we see and experience every day. The world needs more good news. The world needs to hear about acts of kindness and compassion. The world needs to hear that there are good people living within it. The world needs to hear that there is an alternative to hate. The world needs to hear that someone can win without someone else having to lose.”

“To bring light we must act. We must join together with everyone around and create a community of love and light. We must speak out, protest, get legislation passed, and vote.”

“Finally, we must all become the light - then and only then can we be sure that if one source of light is cut off, there will always be more.”<sup>7</sup>

Roll into dark. Roll into light. How will you bring the light in the year ahead?

*Shana Tova.*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://reformjudaism.org/blog/2017/08/14/charlottesville-local-jewish-community-presses>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/14/us/politics/trump-charlottesville-tim-scott.html?mcubz=0&\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/14/us/politics/trump-charlottesville-tim-scott.html?mcubz=0&_r=0)

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2017/07/11/a-riptide-swept-away-a-florida-family-then-beachgoers-formed-a-human-chain/?tid=sm\\_fb&utm\\_term=.e7ac657790b8](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2017/07/11/a-riptide-swept-away-a-florida-family-then-beachgoers-formed-a-human-chain/?tid=sm_fb&utm_term=.e7ac657790b8)

<sup>4</sup> From “One Voice,” collective sermon written by CCAR/Reform Rabbis.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.tedallas.org/sermons>

<sup>6</sup> Esther 4:14

<sup>7</sup> Rabbi Scott Nagel