

PARSHAT TOLDOT  
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On November 9, 1988, after being the Rabbi of this Congregation for approximately four months, I organized a joint program together with North Shore Congregation Israel and one of its Rabbis, Rabbi Paul Golomb. We decided to commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Kristallnacht in both of our communities in tandem. Each synagogue would commemorate the events of November 9-10, 1938 when the Nazis burned 267 synagogues in Germany, Austria and Sudetenland, destroyed over 7,000 Jewish businesses, arrested 30,000 Jewish men, and killed 91 Jews. In order to make it a joint event I started out at North Shore Congregation Israel and Rabbi Golomb started out at North Suburban Synagogue Beth El. We later joined our own synagogues. While the commemoration service was basically the same, we understood that the culture of each congregation was a little bit different. Therefore, the commemoration was tailored to the individual community. By my beginning the commemoration at North Shore and Rabbi Golomb here at Beth El we intended to show the community that it made no difference whether one was a Reform Jew or a Conservative Jew, whether one lived in Glencoe or in Highland Park, we all were part of the same history and fate.

At that time, on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Kristallnacht, I think both of us believed that we were dealing with a historical event. Anti-Semitism, as we understood it, seemed to be a thing of the past in the United States. But since we are a people of history we felt we had to commemorate the events even as we believed that nothing like that could ever occur again. This week as we commemorate the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Kristallnacht my feelings are a little bit different. No, it is not 1938 in Germany and, thank G-d, I don't believe that we are on the verge of anything close to what occurred in Europe following that date. However, our antennae have been raised. Our anxieties have been heightened. Our concerns are real. Two weeks after the synagogue massacre in Pittsburgh we are called to evaluate what is happening in our country and throughout the world with the Jewish people.

While anti-Semitic incidents have increased in Europe with hate crimes in France, anti-Semitic events in Germany, Sweden, and other countries, and accused anti-Semites active members of the Labour Party in England, we thought that America was a safe place. Anti-Semitism was over there, in Europe, a vestige of the old country.

After all, American Jews have been welcomed in universities, country clubs, and corporate boards that once excluded our grandparents. In 2000, the first Jew ran for Vice President of the United States on a major party ticket and his Jewishness was never an issue. But now, we have seen hatred, anti-Semitic tirades, and physical acts against Jews too often in the last few years. This hate in the United States came into full view last year as white supremacists marched in Charlottesville, Virginia with lines of men carrying torches and chanting, "Jews will not replace us." There have been swastikas and other anti-Semitic graffiti cropping up on synagogues and Jewish homes around the country. On line, in social media, Jews are subjected on a regular basis to vicious slurs and threats.

George Soros has been singled out in Hungary and in this country for vilification. In fact, one of the recent pipe bombs was sent to him. As a human rights lawyer stated: “He’s a banker, he’s Jewish, he gives to Democrats – he’s sort of a perfect storm for vilification from the right, here and in Europe.” Soros has been called a “globalist” which is another way of using anti-Semitic language against him and all those who may think like him. We may agree or disagree with his politics, but to single him out because he is Jewish takes us back 80 years to the night of Kristallnacht.

In this country the Anti-Defamation League logged a 57% rise in anti-Semitic incidents in the United States in 2017 compared to the previous year – including bomb threats, assaults, vandalism, and anti-Semitic posters and literature found on college campuses. On both sides, on the far left and on the far right, Jews are again being singled out for special hatred and vilification. Whether it is white supremacists or Louis Farrakhan the language spewed out against our people is vile and unacceptable. Most of us thought that America was a safe haven, a place accepting of differences, offering respect for all. We have learned that is not necessarily the case today.

In an article a few days ago in the *New York Times* Ginia Bellafante asked the question: “Is it safe to be Jewish in New York City?” She wrote that, “New York has become an increasingly unsettling place to be Jewish.” She states that anti-Semitism was already quietly on the rise. For several years now expressions of anti-Jewish sentiment have made up the preponderance of hate crime claims in the city. “There have been four times as many crimes motivated by bias against Jews – 142 in all - as there have been against blacks. Hate crimes against Jews have outnumbered hate crimes targeted at transgendered people by a factor of 20.” Swastikas and anti-Semitic graffiti have appeared in all parts of New York City and last year the Anti-Defamation League reported that 9 of the 12 physical assaults against Jews categorized as hate crimes in New York State were committed in Brooklyn and involved victims who were easily marked as members of traditionally Orthodox communities.

Personally, I would have never thought we would arrive to the day when we have to be concerned about security in our synagogues, our JCC’s, our Federation buildings, our schools, and beyond. As Deborah Lipstadt, who has written about the Holocaust and anti-Semitism, stated: “I am not a Chicken Little who is always yelling ‘It’s worse than it’s ever been!’ But now I think it’s worse than it’s ever been.”

This past election cycle has raised deep concerns for all of us. Republicans in Alaska, Washington State, Connecticut, North Carolina and California ran ads showing Jewish Democrats handling cash. For example, in North Carolina, the state Republican party ran an ad featuring Senator Chuck Schumer clutching a wad of cash. Neither Hillary Clinton nor Nancy Pelosi, also featured in the ad, are shown with cash. A Green Party congressional candidate in Cincinnati launched a radio ad blaming “anti-American Communist Jews like George Soros for fixing elections.” And on the left wing of the Democratic Party there have been calls for support for BDS against Israel, and using intersectionality ideology they have seen Jews as part of the problem in American

society, as Jews are accused of being oppressors of others. All of this is simply unacceptable. It is un-American and must be condemned.

So how are we to take what's happening in America 80 years after Kristallnacht and two weeks after Pittsburgh? There is no doubt in my mind that we have to be concerned about security. Fortunately, here in this community the Highland Park Police have been extremely helpful in maintaining the security of our community. Homeland security, itself, has given us advice and counsel. It is sad that we need armed guards standing at our doors as school children enter, when worshippers come to pray on Shabbat morning, and when we have large community events. We want to be a welcoming place, but unfortunately we have no choice. If nothing else we have to show deterrence against those who may wish to harm us.

On a national level we must hold our elected officials to account. As I have said many times before, words matter. We will not accept any political leader, any elected official, using words or actions which profess hatred, bias, and prejudice. We cannot accept any words that may lead others to believe that the actions they take or the words of hatred and enmity they utter are acceptable to leaders of our society. We cannot and we will not accept our elected leaders showing a lack of concern for physical, emotional or verbal abuse of Jews without calling it the anti-Semitism that it is.

At the same time, we cannot allow anti-Semitism to change who we are and what we represent. As a people who are to be a "light to the nations." We must show in our language and in our activities the standard that we expect of others. We must strive for civil dialogue and respect for all. We must make sure that it starts with us - in our homes, in our offices, in our own social media comments. We must insure that the words that George Washington wrote in a letter to the Jews of Newport, Rhode Island in 1790 are heard by all: "For happily the Government of the United States gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support."

And we must make sure that the anti-Semitic behavior of others does not overwhelm us. Deborah Lipstadt on November 5<sup>th</sup> in the *Forward* wrote a very important article which she entitled "In the Wake of Pittsburgh, We Can't Let anti-Semitism Define Us." The same Deborah Lipstadt, a professor at Emory, a student of the Holocaust and anti-Semitism, who is concerned about anti-Semitic comments and actions in our country, wrote: "We cannot let anti-Semitism become the building block and the foundation stone of our Jewish identity. Doing that, hands our enemies a victory." She pleads with us to make sure that the fight against anti-Semitism not become the sum total of our Jewish identity. Though we must be concerned with what is happening around us, anti-Semitism cannot be, and should not be, the organizing principal of our lives. "Enriched Jewish life, Jewish culture, the accumulated wisdom of a millennia old tradition" constitutes, she writes, the foundation of who we are. Synagogues should be filled on Shabbat morning not only for solidarity Shabbat with the Jews of Pittsburgh, but every Shabbat. Young Jews need to learn about the joys of Judaism and not just the dangers of being a Jew. All

of us need to stand tall and strong for who we are, who we represent, and what our ancestors gave us. We will not survive on fear, we will only survive as we make our tradition meaningful for us and for those who follow us.

These are difficult times. When I commemorated the anniversary of Kristallnacht in 1988 it was different than it was this year. We have greater fears, concerns and anxieties today. We need to concentrate on security today more than ever before. But since our past serves as a prelude to our future we cannot be simply beholden to the lachrymose theory of Jewish history, but one in which we rejoice in our heritage making it meaningful in the modern age.

We remember the words of the Haggadah of Pesach which state: "For not only one has arisen against us to annihilate us, but in every generation they rise up against us to annihilate us." However, the Haggadah continues: "The Holy One, blessed be He, rescues us from their hand." But faith alone is not enough. It is also up to us. We must be strong insuring that the phrase "never again" is not only part of our lexicon, but part of our daily activities. "Am Yisrael Chai," the people of Israel lives. I am convinced that our future is bright in the United States and throughout the Jewish world. Let us work to make it so.