

Watching Our Tent

From the moment it's confirmed that you are expecting a child, you start to view the world a little differently. The giddiness, the excitement, the bubble of joy-it is overwhelming! Sure you may be uncomfortable, but the promise of a new life, that new baby smell soon to come, that promise of a first smile...it pulls you right through anything rough...the swollen feet, uncomfortable nights, the small worries, and any of your memories of what it really means to have a sleepless night once the baby arrives. The pregnancy "glow" is a safety bubble of excitement. Oh how I relished living in that bubble; yet, over the summer my bubble burst. I could not keep my head in the sand, I could not hide in the safety cocoon of my bubble. While soon my family would feel complete, soon I would be rocking a baby in my arms, the world around us was so chaotic, unsettling and downright scary. Oh how I may have wished to stay hidden away in my safe place, my glow, my fog, but that was simply impossible and wrong. The world deserved my attention, and I believe the world deserves all of our protection...even from the safety of our American bubble.

I think we all have times in our lives where staying in a safe bubble would be so much easier than having it burst, having to face the world and realities around us. But, we must take deep breaths, push back the fog and confront the hard things."¹ When we do, we can help others along the road who feel pain or loss, who are scared or suffering. We do better when we go at life with another at our side, when we are that other for someone else.

While Rosh Hashanah lifts our souls with the promise of sweet clean and fresh New Year, it also demands of us to pull back the layers, confront ourselves and the world around us. We are at our best, when we sit back and take time to examine our lives, when we change the way we approach this or that in life. We are at our best when we are in tune with the world around us, when we respond to situations, when we stand up to right a wrong. Living in a bubble of "everything being perfect" isn't really living our best lives. So it is at this season that we examine ourselves, we review the past year, and we set our course for the coming year.

When I examine this past year, I see many areas for personal growth which I will work on privately throughout these days of *teshuvah* of return, and throughout the year with the help of *mussar* – a practice of Jewish study that asks us to see life as a constant lesson, always growing ourselves and changing ourselves each and every day by working on character traits one at a time.

And, as I review these past few months, when I think of what shattered my bubble, it goes way beyond me to where I live and to the world around me....the conflict in Israel, an increase in anti-Semitism on our soil and certainly world-wide with which I struggle. Rosh Hashanah will not let me hide from my innermost feelings. If I am honest I feel scared, guilty, grief riven, worried, disgusted, and downright angry.² And if I dig deeper, I recognize that I feel hopeful and grateful, for I believe in a tomorrow with the Jewish people, I believe in dreaming of a brighter tomorrow for humanity; I believe in

¹ Bubble approach inspired by a blog posted by Rabbi Phyllis Sommer in her Ima on the Bima blog site leading up to the high holy days.

² Yossi Klein HaLevi wrote an article, "At Rosh Hashanah: Grief, Fear, and Hope published by *The Times of Israel*. A powerful piece that defined the tone of this sermon and from which I drew material for the sermon. You can find this article at <http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/as-we-enter-rosh-hashanah>

the ability to be - myself- a tool for change; I believe in the ability to move forward. I believe that each one of us has something to offer the other and the place that we dwell.

So why have I been scared? There is too much hate in this world, and the increase in Anti-Semitism is far too real. I am uncertain if as an American post WWII we are truly aware of this. I recognize that some of the increase may be in part due to perception as what once was politically incorrect to voice post WWII has been uncovered and unearthed during an opportunistic time when Israel forced to defend herself engaged in her Operation to Protect in Gaza. But, we also see far too much evidence of something bigger. For example, the Newsweek Magazine cover article titled, “Exodus: Why Europe’s Jews are Fleeing **Once** Again.” Accompanied by an image of a Belgian woman carrying a suitcase declaring she never felt that it was home.³ “In Brussels it began last May with the shooting death at the Jewish Museum, and again on September 14, which marked the European Day of Jewish Culture. As people gathered to dedicate a plaque at a Holocaust memorial, youths hurled stones and bottles until the police arrived. Three days later, a fire erupted on an upper floor of a synagogue in the city’s Anderlecht district; the authorities are investigating the incident as arson.”⁴ And with posters advertising the raid in advance, like the pogroms of Tsarist Russia, 400 protesters attacked a synagogue and Jewish-owned businesses in the north of Paris, shouting “Death to the Jews”.⁵ Sadly, we here of commuters taking trains to work when suddenly it is announced “Next stop Aushwitz. All Jews must exit.”⁶ In Turkey, Jews are being asked to repudiate Israel as the price to remain citizens in good standing.⁷ And yet another example of how we know anti-Semitism is real, when we witness three European leaders – the foreign ministers of France, Germany, and Italy – feel the issue so important that they must come together to share an unusual joint appeal against the surge of anti-Semitism.⁸ There can be no question.

And I am scared when I read the report following the Anti Defamation League’s interviewing of 53,100 individuals in 96 languages in 100 countries, again that is 53,100 individuals in 96 languages in 100 countries. The results determine that over one **billion** (1.09 billion) people in this world are anti-Semitic- that correlates to just over 26% of the individuals interviewed holding negative opinions and hateful feelings towards Jews. (SLOW) They also discovered that two out of three people interviewed either had not heard of the Holocaust or believed the historical accounts of the Holocaust are inaccurate.⁹

Why do I worry? Hate is too rampant, period. Americans are targets. Christian are targets, the Yazidis, Baha’i, and moderate Muslims are targets. Journalists are targets. And our sweet children are targets – having guns strapped on them at the age of six forced to fight in wars, raped to forcefully convert them to a new religion, forced to learn in schools whose rooftops are rocket launching pads. Sweet babies, our children, who are targets of violence time and time again, at the hands of the too few extremists whose voice and actions seem to dominate in our world. Unacceptable.

I am also disgusted and quite frankly angry? The media has been less than kind with Israel during her war of self-defense through misleading headlines, rhetoric filled articles, printing “facts” before

³ Newsweek magazine August, 2014. <http://www.newsweek.com/2014/08/08/exodus-2hy-eurpoes-jews-are-fleeing-once-again> By Adam Lebor July 29, 2014

⁴Europe’s Anti-Semitism Comes Out of the Shadows. *New York Times* September 24, 2014

⁵ ibid

⁶ Europe’s Anti-Semitism Comes Out of the Shadows. *New York Times* September 24, 2014

⁷ Article by David Harris, Executive Director of the American Jewish Committee and Yossi Klein Halevi article.

⁸ Summarized from article by David Harris, Executive Director of the American Jewish Committee.

⁹ ADL 100 Global Report Facts: An Index of Anti-Semitism <http://global100.adl.org/>

checking them for accuracy, time and again comparing Israel to the Nazis. Preposterous! A nation who cares for all civilians, who sends texts and flyers prior to rocket shelling, who secures electricity and ensures a safe crossing for shipments of food and medical supplies. Oh, sorry that is my anger.

I am disgusted that hate can be so rampant in our country, a place where freedom of religion is one of our core founding values as a nation. Our truly beautiful gift of freedom of speech, gave the right for the President of the Student Senate at Ohio University to post on Facebook, not her Ice Bucket challenge, but her Blood Bucket Challenge where she spilled a red liquid over her head in opposition to what she called Israel's committing of genocide. She was asking the Student body, as is happening on university campuses in America and around the world, to boycott Israel. If these young adults were informed they would have the power to stand up to such messages. And there were four Jewish students who went to protest in a nonviolent manner using their freedom of speech at the Ohio University Senate meeting, they were arrested for disturbing the peace as they caused a filibuster.

Our very important freedom of speech, protected the disgusting action of an ignorant white supremacist, who stands absolutely no chance at winning his bid for the Kentucky Senate seat, to run with the slogan "With Jews We Lose" just to be able to spread his message of hate. Swatizkas are being painted on our streets, even recently in Van Nuys, and on our temples around the U.S. And I am saddened that a prior Los Angeles Rabbi, Ted Riter, was just last week kicked out of a place of business while trying to order lunch to go. He stepped to the counter asked the owner for a Greek salad. The owner responded, "Large or Jew size." Rabbi Riter looking puzzled responded, "What does that mean?" The owner then questioned him, "What are you a Jew?" Rabbi Riter, "Yes." The owner than began cursing at him and repeatedly screaming at him to get out. Rabbi Riter recognizes that not all of Jackson is like this, mostly he has been welcomed and embraced, but this one individual's voice rang so loudly and violently.¹⁰ These facts make me hurt in a way that is indescribable.

I am moved from disgust, anger, and worry to deep feelings of sadness. I am so very sad for Israeli children being raised in fear, waiting for the next siren in order to scramble as fast as they can to the nearest shelter, being woken in the middle of the night to race to the shelter time and again, giving up and sleeping their nights away underground. The same children whose summer break was stolen from them going to summer camp in shelters, no time for swimming and playing outside, just waiting for the rockets to fall. My friends tell me stories of their grown children wetting their beds again from the trauma, and the terrible sadness from the loss of family members who heroically fought for their safety when trying to bring down the tunnels of terror.

And, I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge my feelings of grief and sadness. I feel such sadness over the devastation Israel was forced to commit in the process of defending herself. I am grief riven over the loss of each and every human being, of innocent civilians, children, Israel's own neighbors. And I grieve deeply over the kidnapped and murdered boys, Jewish and Muslim, exactly the same. I was disheartened to hear that Israeli Jews took to the streets to shout harmful messages. And I grieve for the lost lives of Israeli soldiers, innocent civilians, children, each and every life no matter religious affiliation or where they lived geographically. Humanity should be beyond these acts of hate and war, so along with you, I grieve and I hurt.

I acknowledge how much I hurt, how scared and worried I am, but I don't hide from it. We can't afford to hide from it. We can't afford to let fear paralyze us. No, we must stand up in the place of fear. As Jews we refuse to sit idly by while innocent blood is being shed, while messages of hate dominate

¹⁰ CCAR Facebook page posted 9/24/14 and Rabbi Ted Riter's Facebook Page.

conversation and the media. We can't fall apart saying things like, well we've always been hated or this is our historical fate. No. We must stand up and keep hope at the forefront of our year 5775.

So, I am hopeful. Let me start with the glorious fact that Israel exists. One of the biggest differences in anti-Semitism from the 1930's as compared to today, is that the State of Israel exists. We have a Jewish home. There is much hope knowing she is there for us and for our people. And Israel is also a beacon of hope, not just for us, but for others who are marginalized in the middle East and around the world. She is one of the only countries on her side of the globe willing to take in Darfur refugees. Israel opens her hospitals to all regardless of religion, she serves Syrian refugees medical needs in Jordan camps in order to help both the Syrian refugees and Jordanian infrastructure. She is the only countries in the mid-East to embrace the LGBTQ community, she opens her doors to Ahmadi Muslims, and Baha'i followers are embraced within her borders. She offers full democratic rights to all of her citizens no matter religious affiliation or observance level. She is a light in the Middle East, a light for us and for all people, *Or l'goyim*.

Israel's sheer existence brings me hope. And hope is powerful and inspirational. It can bring wholeness to our shattered world. As Elie Weisel taught, "Hope is like peace. It is not a gift from God. It is a gift only we can give one another." As a Jewish people we are to be pursuers of peace, *rodef shalom*. It is our job to spread this hope, this message of peace, soothing ourselves and helping others. This is our task.

And, so I am incredibly grateful to be a part of this Beth Hillel community, to know I can safely be a part of a Jewish community. I am hopeful, as I look out at your faces. Your commitment to Jewish values is part of the reason you are here today. Those same values are what unite us together in serving the community and righting wrongs. Through action steps like Mitzvah Day, lobbying for the rights of care givers across the generations, or participating in dialogue, learning and worship with our Muslim for Progressive Values partnership and coming together in prayer at our Interfaith service, and working in our Interfaith Food Pantry.

And, these same values we pass on to our children. As with our Beth Hillel Day School students, who each day strive to fill someone's bucket through appreciating another person. The students cry out when they think someone is bucket dipping, putting another down, hurting someone's feelings, causing his or her bucket to be less full. When our little ones know that we spread goodness and not hate, this is hope. This is something to be grateful for.

I am grateful to know that we can challenge the hate around us. Starting close at home with our everyday language and interactions with our neighbors. As we come panim el panim, face to face, with each other we have the opportunity to make it sacred, meaningful, and a place in which God can dwell amongst us.

And, I am grateful that we **can** challenge hate in our greater community, across the United States, through our freedom of speech to stand up to hate across the world, refusing to remain silent when others are being hurt, through the writing of op-ed pieces, by contacting our public leaders, by being careful consumers of media coverage ourselves and selective in messages that we send...using social media to inspire and spread hope and peace, not the proliferation of hate.

I am grateful and hopeful as well, that it is not just Jews standing up and fighting against hate. We are not alone. The largest pro-Israel demonstration was not held in New York or in Los Angeles. No, it was actually held in Calcutta- where thousands of Hindus, Buddhists and Sikhs affirmed Israel's right

to self-defense. And Germany's Chancellor, Angela Merkel, delivered one of the strongest condemnations of the link between Jew-hatred and Israel-hatred in Berlin over the summer.¹¹ A German Chancellor, we are not alone!

I am grateful we can heed the **call for action**, standing up and taking a role whenever we can. Whether it be walking to end genocide with JWW, giving monetary support to victims of hate or terror, supporting Israel and more.

It is a fine balance...the desire to live in a safe bubble, and the need to be aware. I do worry about living in our sweet American bubble feeling too safe, and I worry about being so exposed that we are crippled by fear. I know there is a balance, as exemplified by this Sherlock Holmes anecdote:

Sherlock Holmes, joined by his trusty aide Watson, left London by horse-drawn wagon for a case in the north. Darkness arrived, so they pitched a tent along the way. In the middle of the night, Holmes woke up, looked around, and elbowed Watson. "Watson, my dear chap, what do you see?" Watson rubbed his eyes before saying: "Why Holmes, I see the beauty of the stars, the transcendence of the universe, and the majesty of eternity." To which Holmes replied: "Watson, you fool. Someone has stolen our tent."

In a moment the shofar will cry out...it will cry out to us to declare wake up, wake up to who you are, wake up to where you are. Wake up, push out of the haze, pop the bubble, clear the fog. And look. Look deeply at oneself, begin our self-repair. For when we do, we can do better. The shofar sounds the alarm to look at ourselves and out at the world. It begs us to take action. To stand with our brothers and sisters who are persecuted, who are treated as other because of their religion, color of their skin, their ethnic background or sexual orientation. The shofar sounds the alarm, to be alert so that our tent is not taken from us, to stand up in solidarity and pride with our Jewish brothers and sisters around the world and with Israel our home. We are here, we are here for all of us. May the shofar's cry help us to know our purpose, to make change, to stay alert, to spread hope, to protect one another. Tekiah (Sarah sound Tekiah Gedolah)

¹¹ Yossi Klein HaLevi, "At Rosh Hashanah: Grief, Fear, and Hope published by *The Times of Israel*.