



## Kol Nidre 5780: Speak Up, Show Up, Ease Up, Stand Up

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“One day,” Adam Biro, the storyteller, writes, “the Lord got fed up with humankind.” In classic divine manner, God decides to bring a flood, to drown the inhabitants of the earth and start over. An angel brings the message that the world will end in ten short days. And then:

Indescribable panic took hold of all the nations, all people. This time, there was no appeal. Priests were preaching: “This is righteous punishment for all your sins.” Politicians accused their opponents, heads of state their neighboring countries, scientists their colleagues who had rejected their theories, parents reproached their children for not having followed the path they should have, children reproached their parents for having taught them useless things, artists thought that if their works had been understood they would have saved the world, neighbors blamed neighbors, brunettes blamed blondes, misogynists blamed women, misanthropes blamed everyone, atheists blamed believers, believers blamed atheists, [and] both blamed God...<sup>i</sup>

In the midst of all this, the leaders of all the different countries and religions made announcements to their people: to eat, drink, and be merry while they could; to search for salvation; to repent in hope of change.

As for the Jews... [their representative – selected after much debate] made a very short speech. He addressed the people, the whole of the Jewish people, as follows:

“Jews of the whole world! You have ten days to learn to live underwater.”<sup>ii</sup>

It’s an old joke. But this year, I read it with new eyes. I caught myself wondering: how long until Jews get blamed in relation to climate change? And then, the next morning, the answer appeared in my inbox: an article from the Forward, with this headline: “Fake News Trolls Are Trying to Tie Greta Thunberg to George Soros.”<sup>iii</sup> Apparently, a manipulated image was circulated on social media in which teen climate change activist, Greta Thunberg, was shown posing with Jewish financier and philanthropist George Soros – who is often accused of being behind vast conspiracies in the anti-Semitic press. The article also suggested that Thunberg was Soros’ granddaughter. “As soon as I saw the pic,” someone who spread the image wrote, “I noticed there is a very strong resemblance. I feel he is behind all these climate change marches for his Globalist agenda.” Globalist being, of course, short-hand for Jew.

These claims are somewhat undermined by the discovery that someone had photo-shopped George Soros’ head onto Al Gore’s body. Personally, I think that combination would have serious traction as a super hero for our time, but that’s a topic for another sermon.



But all this has left me asking, as I have never asked before: What does it mean to bring a child into this world? As you know, it's not a theoretical question for me, as Shelley and I had a baby this past summer – and when you're a same-sex couple having a child, there really are no accidents. Maybe I worry more because I'm older; or maybe the world really is that much more of a mess than it was fifteen years ago, when my eldest daughter was born, or even nine years ago, with my second.

"The fact is," a New York Times advice columnist, Megan O'Grady, writes,

...even in the best of times, parenthood is an alarming prospect. In our culture, parents... are inculcated in fear. Here's a short, quaint-feeling list of things I worried about, back when I had a baby, in comparatively less dire 2015: phthalates, sulfates, bisphenol A, pesticides, carbon-monoxide fumes, the leaching lead pipes in my Victorian-era home, crib bumpers, plush toys, the flame-retardant chemicals sprayed on every stroller sold in America, high food-chain fish, turkey sandwiches, unpasteurized cheese... And then there's sudden infant death syndrome. Because putting an infant down to sleep on their stomach or side increases the risk of sudden death, babies are advised to sleep only on their backs, a position inhospitable to sleep, and so they must be swaddled, wrapped and bound... I had finally, possibly, mastered this form of textile origami when one of the baby apps I had installed on my phone sent me a push notification: "Swaddling Linked to Sudden Death."<sup>iv</sup>

Granted, there is a whole industry attached to making parents worry. As Jill Lepore writes about *Parenthood Magazine*:

To sell a magazine about raising children, you have to convince parents that they need that magazine. They need it because, at parenting, they are amateurs. And they need it because their children are in danger. To sell that magazine every four weeks, those children need to be in danger every single month.<sup>v</sup>

But you can't help but wonder – what if, this time, the danger is real? I remember being a kid and being absolutely terrified when I realized the sun would one day disappear. The panic subsided once I understood this event was a few billion years away. Now, I have no doubt that this next generation will witness all kinds of planetary disaster – as will we, who are sitting here today.

I try to balance my Jewish mother panic with Jewish mother pride – surely, my kids, *our* kids, will be the ones to solve the problems! Until I start worrying about their safety, here at Temple. And I can't help but wonder – what if, this time, the danger is real?

Those saying kaddish for the eleven Jews murdered at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh last October are only now coming to the end of their year of mourning. We will mark their Yahrzeit together with a special service on October 25. As we enter a new year, we have to



acknowledge the last one. A year which saw not only the Pittsburgh shooting but the shooting in Poway. A year which saw unprecedented levels of anti-Semitic attacks from Paris to Brooklyn to Berlin. A year in which Shelley's aunt who lives in Munich was warned, in her New Year's greetings from the Jewish community, that Jews shouldn't wear a kippa in public. A year in which a Torah school parent asked me how to explain anti-Semitism to her young son, without scaring him away from synagogue. A year in which one of our Confirmation students said, "some days, I want to run away from my religion." A year in which I stood at my son's bris and marveled that we have continued this tradition for thousands of years, marking our baby boys' bodies to show that they are Jews, in a world which so often hates us.

Judaism teaches that we are permitted to welcome our children into the covenant because it is for their benefit; we believe it is good to be a Jew. And yet here we are, in 2019, still having to ask of so many things: "Is it good for the Jews?"

I don't know how to save this planet. But I do have some ideas about how to make it a planet we want to live on, one in which we can not only survive, but thrive.

There are four things that we can do, and carry with us into this new year: speak up, show up, ease up, and stand up.

One: Speak up. Shelley and I took a pre-natal class this past spring. We had a break during one of the sessions, and a few of the couples went out together to lunch – one of those awkward social moments where you hope that despite having nothing in common except the fact of gestation, you might somehow make lifelong friends. From one of the many conversations going on at the table, a phrase jumped out: "Jewish lightning." "Jewish lightning" – as in, the idea that Jews are so money-hungry that they will burn down their own buildings to make false insurance claims.<sup>vi</sup> And I sat there, rabbi, Jewish community leader, mother of Jewish children – and I didn't know what to say.

With hindsight, of course, I had plenty to say. But going forward, I plan to have a line ready for such occasions. "You may not know where that phrase comes from, but it's anti-Semitic." Or simply, "I'm Jewish; that offends me." There is no need to shame, especially when someone speaks out of ignorance. But we also can't stay silent.

We have a real advantage, in our community at Temple. Look around this congregation, and you can see that anyone who thinks there is only one way to "look Jewish" is just plain wrong. We have Jews with all kinds of backgrounds and with all kinds of names. So we may end up in situations where someone doesn't know there is a Jew or an ally in the room; they say things they might not say in front of Mr. Goldstein or Rabbi Grushcow. I encourage you to use those opportunities to educate, as uncomfortable as it may be. Speak up.

Two: Show up. Anti-Semites know that synagogues are where the Jews are. Jews, not so much. To my understanding, the Tree of Life synagogue was struggling with attendance. How awful it



would be if new fears accelerated these trends. As much sleep as I lose about anti-Semitic attacks, I lose more sleep about the sustainability of synagogue life. I get that there are so many different ways to express one's Jewish identity, and going to Snowdon Deli or Schwarz's can be more appealing than coming to synagogue – especially on Yom Kippur. Also, the last thing I want to do is take the day that you're here to give you guilt over the days you're not.

But I encourage you to do two things. First, try to articulate *why* you come *when* you come. Why does it matter to you to be here? Is it because you have a sense of tradition or spirituality, peoplehood or family? Do you feel good about being part of this place? Do you look for ways to contribute, and do you talk to your family and friends about why it matters? Or is it more of a transaction, fee for service, without much value attached? Because I need to tell you that the latter approach won't last us for another 137 years. That brings me to the second request. If we are not getting it right – if you don't find what you need or what you want here, what moves you and connects you – help us make it so. Tell me. Take a leadership role. Try something new. Give this incredibly beautiful legacy the chance to mean something in your life, so that it is not just defined by those who hate us. Show up.

Three: Ease up. Don't ease up on anti-Semitism; ease up on how we talk to and treat each other. Dr. Yehuda Kurtzer of the Hartman Institute made an observation recently which resonated with me strongly.<sup>vii</sup> He said that anti-Semitism has become a partisan issue, and not only in the United States. Anti-Semites see us as one people, in solidarity with each other; but we Jews have lost that solidarity. Those who lean conservative focus on the anti-Semitism of the left; those who lean progressive focus on the anti-Semitism of the right. We are all too busy calling each other out to actually unite.

The greatest threats to disrupt our services this year came not from anti-Semites but from other Jews. We took a risk in inviting a Muslim leader to speak here, someone who works to build bridges with the Jewish community on local issues – and who had made statements years ago about Israel with which many Jews, including me, disagree. I learned from that episode, and there are things I would do differently – but it was despite, not because of, the vitriol we received. Perhaps I am naïve, but I was shocked by the Jews who called me a Nazi to tell me why I was wrong (as an aside, this is not a great way to make an opponent reflect on their actions). We have a great tradition in Judaism of arguing civilly with each other, and still uniting about what matters most. We have a great tradition of delving deeply into issues and questioning – not just believing everything we see or hear or read. I hope and pray that our values don't get swept away by call-out culture; I hope and pray that we care enough to call each other *in*, to talk about our concerns, to each face the anti-Semitism within our own circles instead of attacking each other, even and especially when we are afraid.<sup>viii</sup> Ease up.

Four: Stand up. In an era of increased anti-Semitism, it is so tempting to turn inward, to keep our heads down and hope we are not noticed. David Frum wrote a fascinating, challenging



article in the Atlantic this year, titled, “What if They’re Not Coming for the Jews This Time?” He concludes by saying, “Jews generally believe ourselves to be bound by an ethical code of tolerance and decency larger than our own parochial interests... that belief [is being put] to the test.”<sup>ix</sup> Will we stand up for our values, even when others are more vulnerable, and even when we are afraid? In Psalm 18, God is depicted in two ways. One is as a fortress which protects us; the other, as a force which helps us scale walls.<sup>x</sup> I pray that God will protect us. And I hope that God will help us keep scaling walls of difference and discrimination, so we can stand with others, and others will stand with us. Stand up.

That Confirmation student I mentioned at the beginning of the sermon, who said he was scared to be a Jew? His name is Noah Reich, and here is the full quote of what he said:

Some days I want to run away from my religion. It frightens me when I read in the news about synagogue shootings. When I see this, I am scared to be Jewish. I think a lot of Jewish people struggle with this, like I do. However, one way to cope with these feelings is to talk about our fears and come together as a community to create solutions. At Temple we have many projects that bring people together from different religions, so we can stop seeing people as “other.” Instead, we can learn to understand and care about each other. If we reach out and create community, I believe that we will start to understand each other, and hopefully stop these horrible acts.<sup>xi</sup>

I hear these words and I think: We must be doing something right. I think: It’s good to be a Jew.

Speak up. Show up. Ease up. Stand up. Anti-Semitism simultaneously accuses Jews of being all-powerful, and wants us to feel disempowered. But we stand here on this Kol Nidre night and we know that the truth is different. We are human; we are imperfect; and we have hope. We will love and we will lose, and then we will love again. We will fall down and get back up, and then we will fall again. We will bring new life into the world, and we will be inspired to improve it.

“Parenting,” Megan O’Grady concludes:

...is not a cozy retreat from the world but a full immersion into its problems and terrors... Love changes the terms on us; it raises the stakes, forcing us to lift our ostrich heads, breaded with sand. It makes the comforts of denial unworkable and even potentially hazardous, because you can’t really sustain illusions about life and safely guide your child through it. You have, literally, new skin in the game.<sup>xii</sup>

Jews of the whole world! The generations to come are counting on us. May we speak up, may we show up, may we ease up and may we stand up, together on this night.

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<sup>i</sup> Adam Biro, “The Deluge,” in *Two Jews on a Train* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p.2. Originally published in French as *Deux juifs voyagent dans un train*.

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*, p.5.

<sup>iii</sup> “Fake News Trolls Are Trying to Tie Greta Thunberg to George Soros,” Aiden Pink, *Jewish Daily Forward*, Sept. 25, 2019. <https://forward.com/fast-forward/432183/greta-thunberg-george-soros-fake-news-trolls/>.

<sup>iv</sup> Megan O’Grady, “Given the State of the World, Is It Irresponsible to Have Kids?” *New York Times Magazine*, Sept. 25, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/25/t-magazine/should-have-kids.html>.

<sup>v</sup> Jill Lepore, *The Mansion of Happiness: A History of Life and Death* (New York: Vintage, 2013), p.126.

<sup>vi</sup> See “Why Do People Call Arson ‘Jewish Lightning’ –And is it Anti-Semitic?” Aviya Kushner, *The Forward*, May 18, 2017. <https://forward.com/culture/372158/why-do-people-call-arson-jewish-lightning-and-is-it-anti-semitic/>

<sup>vii</sup> Yehuda Kurtzer, “On Pluralism, Collectivism, and Anti-Semitism.” Lecture at the Shalom Hartman Institute, Jan. 30, 2019.

<sup>viii</sup> On call-out culture, see: “The Cruelty of Call-Out Culture,” David Brooks, *New York Times*, Jan. 14, 2019 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/14/opinion/call-out-social-justice.html>); “I’m a Black Feminist. I Think Call-Out Culture Is Toxic,” Loretta Ross, *New York Times*, Aug. 17, 2019 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/17/opinion/sunday/cancel-culture-call-out.html>); “What Judaism Can Teach Us About Call-Out Culture,” *My Jewish Learning*, May 17, 2017 (<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/rabbis-without-borders/call-out-culture/>).

<sup>ix</sup> “What If They’re Not Coming for the Jews This Time? Trump poses a new test for the American Jewish community,” David Frum, *The Atlantic Monthly*, July 24, 2019. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/07/has-trump-abandoned-anti-semitism/594619/>. Other important reflections on anti-Semitism which have appeared this past year, include Deborah E. Lipstadt, *Antisemitism: Here and Now* (New York: Schocken, 2019); Marc Weitzmann, *Hate: The Rising Tide of Anti-Semitism in France* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019); and Bari Weiss, *How to Fight Anti-Semitism* (New York: Crown, 2019) – though note critique of Weiss’ book, including Talya Bloom, “Bari Weiss has Answers – But She’s Not Asking the Right Questions,” *Forward*, Sept. 11, 2019 (<https://forward.com/culture/books/431220/bari-weiss-anti-semitism-how-to-fight-review/>), and Jordan Weissman, “How Not to Fight Anti-Semitism,” *Slate*, Sept. 6, 2019 (<https://slate.com/culture/2019/09/bari-weiss-how-to-fight-antisemitism-review.html>). Significant articles on anti-Semitism this year include Dara Horn, “Auschwitz Is Not a Metaphor,” *The Atlantic*, June 6, 2019 (<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/06/auschwitz-not-long-ago-not-far-away/591082/>); Arielle Kaden, “The Culture Of Hiding: What I Learned From Concealing My Jewish Identity In Germany,” *Forward*, July 15, 2019 (<https://forward.com/culture/427230/the-culture-of-hiding-what-i-learned-from-concealing-my-jewish-identity-in/>); Yehuda Kurtzer, “The ‘Crisis Narrative’ Revisited,” *eJewish Philanthropy*, July 11, 2019 (<https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/the-crisis-narrative-revisited/>); and Yaroslav Trofimov, “The New Anti-Semitism,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 12, 2019 (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-new-anti-semitism-11562944476>).

<sup>x</sup> Psalm 18:2 and 18:30.

<sup>xi</sup> Noah Reich, Confirmation Address, 2019/5779.

<sup>xii</sup> Megan O’Grady, *ibid.*