

Stepping Out of Line  
 Rabbi Rosalin Mandelberg  
 Ohef Sholom Temple  
 Kol Nidrei 5780/October 8, 2019

The most memorable moment of this year's Emmy Awards show came in the acceptance speech of Best Actress in a Comedy Series winner, Alex Borstein for her work on the Amazon Prime hit, "The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel." The petite Jewish actor, with jet black hair, piercing eyes and a radiant smile, took to the stage and said: During the Holocaust "my grandmother turned toward a Nazi guard—she was in line to be shot into a pit—and said, "What happens if I step out of line?" and he said, "I don't have the heart to shoot you, but somebody will. And she stepped out of line. And for that, I am here. And for that, my children are here. So step out of line, ladies. Step out of line." When I posted her picture and message on our Temple's Facebook page, I described her grandmother's heroism this way: "Courage isn't living without fear; courage is taking a step forward in spite of your fear."

I find Ms. Borstein's words particular poignant tonight on *Kol Nidrei*. Not only is it the holiest night of the year, but also it is the most terrifying because beginning now and for the next twenty-four hours, we come face to face with our mortality. Refraining from food, drink, sex, and all other pleasures, we lay our souls bare before God, atone for our wrongdoings, and await God's judgment. Who will live and who will die? Who by fire and who by water? And tonight we might add: Who by crazed gunman and who by terrorist?

Indeed, nearly one year ago, on October 27, 2018, during a peaceful Shabbat morning, a hateful white supremacist, declaring that "all Jews must die," entered the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh and slaughtered 11 innocent worshippers. Six months later, on April 27th, during another beautiful Shabbat morning, another odious neo-Nazi murdered one and maimed many others at a Chabad in Poway, CA. His rationale, as stated in his vile manifesto -- that the Jewish people are "a squalid and parasitic race." And just over six weeks ago, during the last week of August, there were three horrifying physical assaults on ultra-Orthodox Jewish men in Brooklyn that included being beaten with a brick and whipped with a belt. Many, many other incidents don't make the news at all.

Yet, you don't need me to tell you that anti-Semitism is on the rise on the right and the left both here and in Europe. Brazen, vile anti-Jewish, anti-Zionist rhetoric and violence are commonplace today. And make no mistake, anti-Zionism is not even thinly veiled anti-Semitism; they are one and the same. It is no wonder that the ADL reports that in the United States hate crimes against Jews are up 57% and that we Jewish people still remain the largest target of such antipathy and malice among any demographic in this nation . . . period.

While social scientists may debate whether or not this statistic is wholly accurate, and even whether or not there is really an increase in aggression against our community, no matter how you crunch the numbers, it is frightening to be a

Jew in the world today. And how to best protect ourselves is a topic of great discussion even right here in our own congregation:

Some of you think the new safety protocols for drop off and pick up of our religious school children are a nuisance, much ado about nothing. Others of you believe armed off-duty, but uniformed Norfolk Police officers are not enough to protect us any time people are in the building.

There are differences of opinion about whether or not you should be able to carry weapons on site and whether or not knives constitute the same risk as guns. You are conflicted about whether or no we should celebrate activities outside our campus: a social outing at a bowling alley, a Shabbat service in Great Neck Park, or even our regularly scheduled *Sukkot* observances in our outdoor *Sukkah* on OST's Forman Field.

Even after conferring with the FBI, Homeland Security and our own private consultant who has advised the Pentagon on these matters, some of you are convinced whatever is decided is political. But I think all of it is about something very different. Regardless of your position or my own, I believe our passionate viewpoints speak to our primal fear about how best to keep ourselves and those we love secure in a world that has run amuck with insanity, chaos and constant uncertainty.

I get it. I really do understand and I feel the same fear. I can't and don't fault or blame anyone for clawing at or clinging to anything that you believe will keep you safe. The problem is, and I wish it weren't so, that no matter what decision is made, there is no absolute certainty in life. Regardless of how careful we are, there are no ironclad guarantees.

We can and do do everything humanly possible to protect ourselves, with hyper vigilance, the best security systems money can buy, dozens of the most advanced cameras available, the eight finest highly tactically trained officers on our perimeter, and even reinforced glass and panic buttons -- all of which we are employing tonight; and yet, in the end, every time we walk out the door, all that is left is our prayers.

Why? We always ask, "Why? Why us? Why the Jews?" Why is anti-Semitism not only one of the oldest evils known to humankind, but also among the most enduring? One of the hardest things about it is that it is wholly irrational. Rabbi David Wolpe explains: "Anti-Semitism is a different sort of hatred, the most durable and versatile in history. You can hate Jews because they are communists, capitalists, foreigners, residents, immigrants, elitists, have strange ways, are too assimilated, bankroll the left (George Soros) or bankroll the right (Sheldon Adelson). You can hate them because they were weak and stateless or now because they are Zionists and defend Israel. There is always a reason and, of course, it is never just because they are Jews."<sup>[1]</sup>

Wolpe is right. We can try all we want to explain why, but we will never make sense out of anti-Semitism because it is nonsensical. On the one hand there are those who accuse us of being too clannish and exclusive; and if you point out to them how many Jews reach out and become part of the mainstream of American life, the same people will say that we are just imitating others, or perhaps being

overbearing and pushy. There are those who, in the same breath, will say that Jews are tightfisted, but when Jews give to worthwhile causes it is because they are simply being ostentatious. In the 1940's and 50's, Jews were accused of being socialists and Communists by some and of being money hungry capitalists by others. You don't even have to know Jews to be anti-Semitic. In Japan, there is a very small Jewish community, yet some of the nation's best sellers focus on the Jewish control over the world economy.

Yet we are targeted not only because we are different, but also because we are symbols of freedom itself. Our sole purpose is to do *mitzvot* like loving our neighbors, welcoming the stranger, and doing the hard work of creating a civic society of mutual responsibility even when it isn't expedient. We represent all of those things I spoke about on *Rosh Hashanah*-- building community, supporting the vulnerable, educating children; no matter how counter-cultural, we cling to our distinctiveness and remain devoted to law and story, deep literacy and an absolute obsessiveness about transmitting these values between generations.

Of course unhinged killers hate us; we negate everything they believe in. They are about fondness for tyrants, an obsession with the absoluteness of their truth and the supremacy of their people over all others, not to mention the oversimplification of complex problems; in short, they believe in freedom with no responsibility. We, on the other hand, believe in equality and the dignity of all people. Indeed we were freed from Egypt with the proviso that we accept the Torah and follow its precepts; for us there is no freedom without responsibility.<sup>[iii]</sup>

Whether in our own time or in eras past, our people have responded in different ways to anti-Semitism and employed different strategies to keep us safe. One strategy has been to accommodate ourselves to our surrounding society. "If we can just show we are perfect Greeks, patriotic Germans, and so on, then they'd love us (or at least not kill us)." But in each of these cases, the regime we were trying to please rounded us up, too. A diametrically opposite way to secure our community is to be our fullest, freest Jewish selves, even if being strong and proud makes us deeply unpopular or despised. The Maccabees and Zionists, both of who lived this way, triumphed against all odds . . . and still do.

My friends, history and experience have proven that this is the only way forward for us. It is also the lesson of this Yom Kippur day - the only answer to anti-Semitism is for we Jews to choose life: whole Jewish lives, not partial ones.<sup>[iii]</sup> No matter how much we strive to protect ourselves, whether by trying to pass or fit in, we will always be Jews to those who hate us. And so, in spite of our fear, we must step out of line.

There is actually a word for this living this way -- pro-Semitism. Pro-Semitism means Jews living our Jewish lives with intention, with pride and with self-assurance. Both vigilance and reactive responses to either overt or covert anti-Semitism are important, but proactive positions are more critical. What we sorely need from Jews today is this very pro-Semitism. We have to stop buying into some of the prejudices that many harbor against Jews; we have to stop believing others' distortions, and we need to let go of worries about being "too Jewish." If we choose, it's okay to keep Shabbat, to limit pork and shellfish from our

diets, to cover our heads when praying; it is imperative to care about and support Israel.

Every time we join a synagogue, show up for Shabbat, support Jewish agencies, affiliate with Jewish organizations, become engaged in their programs, visit Israel, and stand up against hatred and bigotry against anyone anywhere, we are not only elevating ourselves spiritually, but also we are spitting in the face of anti-Semites and haters and saying "We Jews – we're here to stay and we're not going anywhere." Living moral, rich, full and free Jewish lives, giving of ourselves to help others, contributing positively to our community are the best ways to live lives of meaning and to show society that our mission is the uplift of all of God's people and the betterment of our world. There is no shame in reaching for our full potential and living our best lives -- in fact, it is our mandate.

The really good news is that unlike the 1930's and 40's, we don't have to do it alone. In Pittsburgh, not only was the massacre at the Tree of Life not organized or perpetrated by political leaders, but also, police officers were seriously wounded as they risked their own lives to help SAVE Jews.

And here at home, one of the most affirming experiences I have had as your rabbi was right here in this very sanctuary co-leading the "Standing with Pittsburgh Service of Healing and Solidarity and Town Hall" with Cantor Jen just two days after the shooting. In a full sanctuary, Cantor asked people of other faiths and ethnicities to rise. To our dismay and delight, half of the congregation stood, representing the Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and Sikh communities. There were people of African American and Hispanic heritage, there were young and old, and friends and neighbors and strangers as well, all of whom wanted to come out and show their solidarity. In addition to those who came, in the days before and afterward, many of all different backgrounds wrote to us to express their condolences for the unholy act. And OST, like synagogues around the country, was inundated with flowers, baked goods, and good wishes. The message was clear: an attack on the Jewish community is an attack on them, too.

And we were able to reciprocate our friendship and support not even a month later, when we gathered at the Islamic Center of Tidewater to mourn those Muslims who were murdered in the mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. We cannot overstate how important building bridges and standing together with our neighbors against hate are, and rest assured, we of OST,-- our clergy, our leadership, and our members -- are working together with other faith groups, civic leaders, and organizations committed to justice and good every single day.

All of these gatherings and efforts prove over and over again that there are exponentially far more good people than haters in the world. And every one of us who dared to step out of line and show up at Temple on that evening and on the following Shabbat and every Shabbat and Sunday and weekday and holiday since, are all heroes; we all stepped forward in spite of our fear. That, my friends, is the definition of courage --living our lives fully, intentionally, and with conviction, even though we are afraid.

Nowhere is this truth more profound than in the recent true story of a group of inmates in one of the Auschwitz subcamps who were sent on a distant

work detail on Rosh Hashanah in 1944 carrying with them secret contraband. They returned to report in hushed tones that they had risked life and limb to sound a shofar that had somehow been smuggled in. [iv] Not only does the story illustrate the lengths to which imprisoned Jews went to practice their religion in the face of their German tormentors, but also can we imagine an artifact that better symbolizes the Jewish soul than a shofar!?! Its primal wail elicits the most base terror of our people's near sacrifice and of our superhuman resiliency and infinite capacity to survive. That is the triumph of good over evil; of hope over experience; and of faith over fear.

We may never be able to answer the question, "why the Jews," but we know what we must do about anti-Semitism in our midst - EVERYTHING in our power. We must speak up, speak out, activate, donate, lose sleep and build a strong community of protectors and supporters. We can't assume the best, but God knows we can't accept the worst. So we will keep living fully, stepping out of line and demanding the end of hatred, violence, bigotry and, yes, anti-Semitism until the world feels safe again.[v]

And so on this *Kol Nidrei* we pray fervently and in our time: *Avinu Malkeinu*, Almighty and Merciful one, hear our voice, have compassion upon us and our families, and halt the onslaught of violence and the reign of those who cause pain and terror. *Avinu Malkeinu*, renew us for a year of goodness, a year in which our faith overcomes our fear; one in which we live our lives intentionally, Jewishly, fully, freely and joyfully; a year in which our actions befit your name, our hands overflow with your blessings, and our eyes behold the dawn of redemption, of peace. Amen.

[i] Rabbi David Wolpe, "Why Anti-Semitism Flourishes Whenever Hatred Thrives," *Time Magazine*, October 28, 2018.

[ii] Dara Horn, "Anti-Semites Don't Just Hate Jews. They are Targeting Freedom," *New York Times*, April 30, 2019.

[iii] Bari Weiss, "To Fight Anti-Semitism, Be A Proud Jew," *New York Times*, September 6, 2019.

[iv] Ralph Blumenthal, "An improbable relic of Auschwitz: A Shofar that defied the Nazis," *New York Times*, September 21, 2019.

[v] Archie Gottesman, *JewelsofElul.com*, 29 Elul, 5779.