

<sup>i</sup>Good *yuntif*.

I need to confess.

Most years, I know what I want to talk about months in advance of Rosh Hashanah. A topic or issue will keep me awake at night, demanding to be addressed.

But this year, with fires burning in our forests, with fires burning in our cities, our country is bitterly divided with no end in sight. Tensions are rising. There is racial injustice and racial violence. Abnormal natural disasters decimate our communities. Lies are presented as truth, science is under attack, and Corona Virus looms. Any clarity that I might hope to hear has been drowned out in the noise of what we face every single morning. All this, in addition to the complexities of sickness and health, loneliness and isolation, and just trying to make it through the day.

I spend many hours each week talking with congregants; and what I hear is emotional exhaustion, and a deep sense of despair.

Can you relate?

With so much wrong in the world, and the path forward so unclear, what could I offer to our congregation that would be helpful? That would be comforting? That would inspire?

I'd like to share a story that I hope will speak to you...because it is your story...even if you do not yet know it.

It is the story of the Jewish people immediately after the Holocaust.

Across Europe, the Jews who survived the horrors of the death camps, and the ravages of war, had nothing and no one to return to. Their villages had been erased, and their families murdered, by the Nazis. Those who tried to return to their homes met violent Anti-Semitism.<sup>ii</sup>

And so dozens of Displaced Persons camps were hastily established by the liberating allies in the places where they were needed most, often in the footprint of the German death camps themselves, places like Dachau, Buchenwald, and Bergen-Belsen.

These DP camps have been dismissed by history as mere transitions between the Shoah and the creation of Israel, but I assure you, it is worthwhile to give them our attention on this Rosh Hashanah day as we struggle against despair ...as we struggle to find hope.

Now, this is important- as you hear this piece of our history, I want you to read into it. I want you to recognize the parallels between then and now; between the existential crisis that they faced, and the existential crises that we face today. I want you to make the connections. For what is at stake is our future as a nation.

Will we make decisions that will condemn us, and our children, to fade away into nothing at all?

In our desperate desire for the familiar, will we repeat the same old patterns, making the same mistakes, condemning ourselves to cycles of futility?

Or, despite being mired in this deep national rut, will we embrace a third possibility, that our future *will* look different than our past, and that *we can be* different. That we can make decisions which will propel us, and the generations to come, towards an elevated America?

I don't pretend that what we are going through is anything like the Holocaust. No historical metaphor is perfect. But I believe that "we Jews, history's great survivors, have something to teach a country that sees itself as on the brink of the abyss; not just how to survive, but how to transcend."<sup>iii</sup>

The DP camps that opened right after WWII looked very much like the Concentration camps they were named after. Although the chimneys no longer spewed smoke, Jews still wore their striped pajamas, there was a lack of medicine, there was hunger, and they meandered amongst barracks surrounded by barbed wire.<sup>iv</sup> In the Bergen-Belsen DP camp alone, 14,000 Jews died in the first weeks AFTER liberation.<sup>v</sup> Intense feelings of abandonment, rejection, and

helpless rage rippled against the question that dominated the survivors' waking hours: what do we do now?

I feel a profound sense of reverence at what they did next. They reburied their dead. With shovels in hand, the living Jewish remnant dug up those mass graves where our people had been dumped like garbage. Our people combed the roads of the death marches, where Jews had fallen in their tracks from starvation and exhaustion. With tenderness, each one was gathered up, recognized, and buried with the full sanctity of Jewish custom.

And they created ceremonies of mourning: for individuals, for villages, even for cities where the Jews were no more. These ceremonies were more than veneration for our dead, they were crucial moments\ where decisions were made. Decisions that were not forgone conclusions. By separating themselves from their dead, the survivors were declaring that they were going to live.<sup>vi</sup>

But living is more than just breathing. It is about relationships, and sharing, and connection. In the wake of the trauma, still reeling from grief, Jewish survivors in the DP camps pushed back against their feelings of isolation by rekindling sparks of the human spirit. Hesitantly at first, and then with desperate urgency, they started theaters, and newspapers,<sup>vii</sup> to share their stories with one another through the thin veneer of art and journalism. They needed to express their trauma. They needed to speak. They needed to be heard. To sink into silence would overwhelm them. It would consume them. It would be too much for them to bear.

And they found one another, these young Jews who had endured the apocalypse of humanity, and they got married.<sup>viii</sup> Almost, it seems, with reckless abandon.<sup>ix</sup> As if making up for lost time. As if living for those who lived no more. Flickering flames combined together, heat against the cold, light against the vast darkness. Wearing rags under a makeshift chuppah, the DP camps averaged 6 weddings per day,<sup>x</sup> sometimes as many as 20 in a single afternoon.<sup>xi</sup>

No surprise, following all those marriages, came lots of children. Unprecedented numbers of Jewish children. By 1947, the DP camps had the highest birthrates in all of Europe, bringing the number of Jews in DP camps to a ¼ million. But for many newly-weds, having children was an agonizing decision. One survivor

related in her Yad VaShem interview, ““I can’t...because I can still hear the screams of children in Auschwitz.” They had real fears about bringing kids into this type of world, and they had real fears about what it would mean to Jewish continuity, and their own lives, if they did not.

When the war ended, some children walked into the DP camps. They had been hiding in the forests, or in convents, or behind parents returning from Soviet territory. In the Begin-Belson DP camp alone, 500 Jewish children were found in the children’s barracks. Kids are resilient. The sounds of their play, their footsteps, and their laughter, must have been jarring to the adults. “Oh yes, I know those sounds. I know that laughter. What will we do for them so that these children can have a future?”

And so “they created schools inside the DP camps. Two different types, representing two very different options of how to move forward. Well, three really. The first option was to ‘opt out’.”<sup>xii</sup> To essentially give up, to remove yourself from the story, to stop caring and to stop trying. After what they had been through, our response to those who had nothing left... is empathy.

The second option was the Haredi schools, ultra-orthodox education. The Haredi response to the Holocaust was to do what they had always done after tragedy- to pick up the pieces and rebuild as closely to the past as they could.<sup>xiii</sup> Their faith is to be admired, but their strategy for survival merely cemented them into patterns that were clearly untenable.

The third option, and the one that dominated the DP camps all over Europe, were the schools that lionized Zionism: a desperate urgency to move away from the failed patterns of our past, towards self-determination in Israel. A place where everyone could live without fear, but more than that, a place where we could create a society to live our very best, aspirational, Jewish selves. This was dramatically different from the Haredi ‘rebuild, and thus repeat, the past’.

The brilliance of Zionism in this moment in history, was that it gave a people who were at their very lowest a new avenue, a new vision, of not just how to survive, but how to transcend.<sup>xiv</sup> It gave them an option that they could be more than their historical and political circumstances; that they could be different than a

people locked into destructive patterns. And so Zionism became the galvanizing force in the DP camps.

History presents Zionism as an incredible choice that Jews, and Judaism, made in 1945; but I think that the survivors realized that they really did not have much of a choice at all. They either had to find a dramatically new way to create a new reality for themselves, or, succumb to the death throes of the Jewish civilization.

“We Jews have lived through the apocalypse. We know how this story can end.”<sup>xv</sup>  
The horrors that neighbors can do to one another, hateful rhetoric that burns everything to ash, and obscene destruction justified as righteousness. We know that civilizations can tear themselves to shreds. And we know, that the only way to survive the unthinkable, is to transcend. To set our aspirations to our most “impossible, grandiose dream”<sup>xvi</sup> of how we could be, and then commit to it with everything that we have got.

In America today, we are as divided & deflated as we have ever been.

Apathy will only weaken us.

Trying to return to a flawed past will only condemn us to the same patterns that got us here in the first place.

What we need is an ‘American Zionism,’ not a new land, but a ‘new way of being’ in the land that we are in.

The Promised Land as a state of national consciousness.

Where we ‘love our neighbor as we would love ourselves’ by treating everyone the way that we, ourselves, insist on being treated.

Where everyone can live in safety: whether you are black, white, or blue.

Where we recognize that the vulnerable living amongst us need to be protected, because we have been there, and may some day be there again.

Where ‘making the desert bloom’ means protecting The Environment.

Where everyone is equal under the eyes of the law, and everyone is empowered to vote.

Where leaders lead by example, and cooler heads prevail.

Where the American dream of 'justice & opportunity for all' is not dependent on some messianic figure who will never come, but on the shared vision, and the all-out effort, of those who believe that it is possible.

We can not afford to despair.

Our existence here today is a result of our ancestor's fortitude.

Our children's future depends on our courage.

IN Hertzl's words: *Im tirzu, Ayn Zo Agadah.*  
If you will it, it is no dream.

*Gud Yuntif.*

*Shanah tova.*

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<sup>i</sup> This sermon was largely influenced by a lecture that I watched online from the Hartman Institute’s Summer lectures, 2020, by Yosi Klein HaLevi titled: [The Wisdom of Survival: How the Jewish People Overcame Despair in 1945](#) His lecture was the basis of a book that he is currently writing, but is still years away from publishing. I found his lecture inspiring on a profound level, and saw immediate parallels to our American situation today. His lecture provided the foundation for the homiletics that I applied in this sermon, as well as certain catch phrases like “we Jews, history’s great survivors”, “the brilliance of Judaism at this moment in history” and “impossible, grandiose dreams.” The structure of the types of schools, and the difference between the traditional Haredi model and the Zionist model, is also from his lecture. It is with appreciation that I recognize and thank him for these structures and seeds of inspiration.

Additionally, Yad VaShem’s video archive (<https://www.yadvashem.org/archive>), as well as content from the Holocaust Museum (<https://www.ushmm.org/collections/bibliography/displaced-persons>) were absolute influences on the perspective portrayed in this sermon.

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.ushmm.org/collections/bibliography/displaced-persons>

<sup>iii</sup> Yosi Klein HaLevi, Hartman Lecture, Summer 2020

<sup>iv</sup> [www.Yadvashem.org/articles/general/displaced-persons-camps](http://www.Yadvashem.org/articles/general/displaced-persons-camps) Report by Earl G Harrison to President Truman

<sup>v</sup> Yosi Klein HaLevi, Hartman Lecture, Summer 2020

<sup>vi</sup> IBID

<sup>vii</sup> <https://www.ushmm.org/collections/bibliography/displaced-persons>

<sup>viii</sup> <https://www.ushmm.org/collections/bibliography/displaced-persons> Fela Warshau describes the Feldafing DP camp

<sup>ix</sup> Yosi Klein HaLevi, Hartman Lecture, Summer 2020

<sup>x</sup> [New Beginnings: Holocaust survivors in Bergin-Belson](#), Gagit Lavsky, p 149-150

<sup>xi</sup> <https://www.ushmm.org/collections/bibliography/displaced-persons>

<sup>xii</sup> Yosi Klein HaLevi, Hartman Lecture, Summer 2020

<sup>xiii</sup> IBID

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