

Yom Kippur 5782

Rabbi Spike Anderson

Gud Yuntif.

The Jewish expression for when we have fallen short of our best selves is called a 'Cheit', as in '*Al cheit shechatanu l'fanecha*'.

Sometimes this is mistranslated as 'sin', but it is more accurate to say that we have 'missed the mark.'

On Yom Kippur, we seek to adjust our efforts so that we can become both healed and whole. We call this, Teshuvah.

Like any of the spiritual exercises in Judaism, you can do this anytime, but most of us don't. Or can't. Or won't. Honest assessment of self takes real courage. For when you look into the proverbial mirror, you need to be ready to see.

Today we do this as a community, which bolsters our resolve to face some difficult truths.

I want to share two stories with you. Both are true. Each one has vital lessons for us to learn.

About 30 years ago, in the small town of Billings, MT, there lived a Jewish family. There were not many Jews around, so the community was tight knit and supportive. Each Sunday, mom and dad would take their young son to Sunday school, which was taught by other Jewish parents. At Hanukkah-time, the kids made paper menorahs to tape onto their bedroom windows as a way to bring the holiday into their home, and Jewish pride into their lives.

A few nights later, while the boy was sleeping in his bed, the Ku Klux Klan threw a rock through his window. Shattered glass rained down on

his bed covers. The Klan wanted to send a clear message about the open display of a Jewish symbol, and their disdain for Jewish people.

Thank God the boy was not hurt.

His parents were horrified that anyone would do this, and scared that their family had been targeted. The boy's father wanted to avoid any further attention, and, understandably, wanted to retreat behind a wall of silence. I've been told that his reaction, as irrational as it might be, was to feel shame. Shame to have been targeted. Shame to feel so powerless. Shame that he felt so very isolated and alone.

The boy's mother, however, who, by the way, was not Jewish, took the opposite approach. She was furious that the Klan was trying to cower them, and rather than retreat into isolation, she spoke about it openly and called everyone she knew. She called the other Jewish families in town, and she called their gentile neighbors; she called the school; she called the churches; and she called the local newspaper.

The reaction of the town, in this little corner of Montana, was incredible. With a plan in mind, the newspaper printed a paper menorah in its next addition, and hundreds of families took that centerfold, and taped it onto the windows of their homes.

The Klan responded with more rocks through more windows.

So, the newspaper printed the menorah again! And even more townspeople posted it, visibly, for all to see. The town brought in speakers to teach them about Anti-Semitism, and how to counter it. Pastors preached against Anti-Semitism in church. The schools used this as a learning opportunity to teach that there was no place for hate, of any kind.

The culmination, and the ending to this first story, is that nearly everyone marched down Main Street. Each person carried their own

menorah. Together they stood shoulder to shoulder against Anti-Semitism, bigotry, and hatred.

The iconic photographs of the march show the townspeople, menorahs held high, staring into the camera, conveying strength, and defiance. People of all colors and cultures-Native Americans wearing headdresses, next to neighbors in wheel-chairs, next to African American pastors, next to school teachers, children, the mayor...

I like this story. I've told it many times. Usually to kids. It has just enough Anti-Semitism to hint at the dangers without being overwhelming. We know that the rock through the window is a white-washed example that represents thousands of years of Jew-hatred; from Pharaoh to the Spanish Inquisition, from Pogroms to Hitler's final solution. The 'rock through the window' is just enough to remind us of what has happened before, and what might happen again if we give Anti-Semitism a 'pass'.

I like this story because it has the Jewish family refusing to be cowered, despite their fears. And with it, they remind us of the lessons we learned from Nazi Germany.

I like this story because it has the gentile neighbors doing the right thing. For I want to believe that most people are good, and, if given the chance to stand up for what is right, that they will.

I like this story because the newspaper names the incident, and the editors attach a moral judgment to it. Hateful. Unacceptable. Wrong.

And of course, I like this story because hundreds of people taping paper menorahs to their window and then marching together in solidarity means that the people of character have triumphed. It is literally the best possible outcome, and it lifts our spirits.

The good guys overcome. The bad guys get shown up. And the problem goes away. At least, in this version ...

Although I have talked about Billings, MT in many settings, usually I reserve it for really tough situations.

For instance, when one of our Temple Emanu-El families came to me because their 2nd grade twins were told on the playground that they couldn't join in the game because they had "killed Jesus...and were going to Hell."

And, when one of Temple Emanu-El's 8th graders was approached in the football locker room, after practice, by kids who demanded to see his horns.

I've told this story when the Confirmation class wanted to talk about Jews getting attacked by 'pro-Hamas' thugs during this last round of Israel-Hamas fighting.

And I've used this story with college students who are subjected to blatant Anti-Semitism on their campus by both students and professors alike.

This story has led to conversations with Jewish women who were rejected from marching in womens' rights rallies because they wanted to display their Jewish star.

This story is an opening for Jews who want to share their own experiences with micro-aggressions and blatant Jew-hatred. It helps them feel less isolated, but also that we, as a community, are not helpless. We are capable. We are educated. And when we are at our best, we are organized and incredibly effective.

But, of course, we are also human. And we get distracted. And tired. We have seen the statistics, and the reports, telling us that in recent years things have gotten worse. Just look at the ADL's website.

So when we hear story after story of Anti-Semitism, we begin to get desensitized. Even the best of us.

And we make excuses for it.

I have observed that some of us will only call out Anti-Semitism when it comes from 'the other' political party; from the Right or from the Left; almost as if it is being celebrated. 'See- look how bad they are!' The landscape is changing. Anti-Semitism is no longer part of the extreme, it is now becoming more mainstream.

When we are quick to point out Anti-Semitism when it is coming from people we oppose, but refuse to call it out from within our own ideologies, we are guilty of using Anti-Semitism as a weapon.

There are other excuses, like: "We've dealt with worse." And it's true, we have.

Or "I did not know about it." And maybe you didn't. But now it is time to make sure that you do know what it is happening. It's your people, Your family, it's us.

Or the deflection of, "that doesn't happen here. Not in my neighborhood." And maybe it hasn't yet, until it hits home.

Which brings me to the second story. This one from last week, seven miles away, at Pope High School.

During the school day, some kids went into the bathroom, and graffitied two big swastikas, along with the words "Heil Hitler." This is in addition to ripping sinks out of the wall, breaking glass, and vandalizing stall-doors.

Now, the way that I see it, there are three major problems here.

First- that this happened at all.

Second- Pope High School's response, and even more so, the response from Cobb County's Board of Education.

Third- The Jewish Community's anemic reaction.

Teen-agers from our Confirmation Class shared that they thought that these were just kids being idiots. And they sure were. But their choice of what to graffiti was not a swear word, but rather, the words "Heil Hitler." I'm not suggesting that these kids are Neo-Nazi masterminds, I have no idea what ideologies they have been exposed to - but for sure there is something in the zeitgeist that made them write these words in particular. Three generations after the Nazi defeat, the swastika is still a call-sign for white supremacy. To the Jewish minority, it conjures up images of our grandparents being sent to the gas chambers. It triggers in us epigenetic trauma.

Hours after the hate symbols were discovered, Rabbi Larry Sernovitz from Temple Kol Emeth was at the school having an intense dialogue with the principalⁱ. Many of the Jewish kids at Pope are also part of the Kol Emeth community. Rabbi Sernovitz told me that the principal seemed to understand why we Jews were so concerned, and angered, by the Nazi graffiti. But that his ability to communicate with the student and parent body about this type of thing had to go through the Cobb County Board of Education's Communication department, who, for some reason, were opposed to having the facts about the Nazi symbols known.ⁱⁱ

This is the result of the Cobb County School Board having passed a resolution in June banning Critical Race Theory, or anything that resembles it.

Unlike the school in Billings, MT, Pope High School is not allowed to use this incident to teach any history, or values, or ethical lessons.

Not what Hitler's ideology was, or his calculations towards genocide, or his views on race superiority.

This also means that schools like Pope are strongly discouragedⁱⁱⁱ from inviting organizations like the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) to teach the kids and the teachers how to address these incidents; or to create an atmosphere where kids would be Upstanders, standing up for one another against hate of any type.

Under this resolution, it was determined that teaching about the Nazi symbols, and the terror that came with them, was forbidden... because it would make some people feel... 'uncomfortable.'

Meaning, I assume, that some white people would be uncomfortable talking about the murder of 6 million Jews because we were not Aryans.

Notice how the decision has been made that it is okay that Jews are uncomfortable by ignoring the hate directed at us. Our Jewish kids are supposed to go back to school as if it never happened. As if nothing is wrong.

When you deny a people's history, you deny lessons from that history. How can we teach 'never again' when we aren't even allowed to talk about it?

The third problem with what happened at Pope High School last week, is the Jewish community's ambiguous response.

Let me make myself clear, this is not Kol Emeth's problem. This is not the Jews of Cobb County's problem. It's our problem. Yours. Mine. Ours.

Are we applying the lessons of Billings, MT, to our current situation at Pope High School? Did we reach out to the Jewish families there so that they do not feel isolated and alone? Did we drag the hate symbols into the light? Did we garner support from our neighbors, and engage them in acts of solidarity? Did we send a message that hate will not win, not with our kids, and not on our watch?

No. We gave Pope High School, and Cobb County Board of Education, a pass.

In Atlanta, we have superb professional Jewish organizations who make it their business to address Anti-Semitism; ADL, AJC, Hillel, Birthright, and Federation... and it is on us to support them and the work that they do. But that is not enough. But that is not enough.

Remember that our identity burns brightly from within and is not the fun-house refraction that some people project onto us.

We can no longer afford to be desensitized to the current reality.

We cannot wish it away.

So...We need to get involved.

We need to build bridges.

And we need to call out Anti-Semitism whenever we see it, not just to our adversaries, but also to our allies.

If this call to action is calling to you, I want to hear from you after Yom Kippur.

Our Al Cheit is that we have been lulled into complacency.

This year, our teshuvah is to have pride in who we are as a Jewish community.

This year, our teshuvah is to stand up for ourselves,

This year, our teshuvah is to stand against hate in all of its forms.
Then, maybe we can begin to heal ourselves,
Ours children's future,
And the American dream.
Kayn yeheyeh ratzone- May it be God's will.
Gud Yuntif.

ⁱ Dr. Thomas Flugum

ⁱⁱ **Message from Pope High School**

Dear Pope Family,

As you may be aware, this week, I have spoken to and been meeting with concerned students, parents, and community members about an incident that unfolded this week on our campus.

Several students have defaced our beautiful school with hateful graffiti and also damaged our facilities. As we investigate, I want to assure you that we will hold those responsible accountable to our district policies and applicable state laws.

I also want to take a moment to speak specifically about the disturbing content of the defacement.

The Cobb County School District is one of the most diverse school districts in the nation. We enjoy a wide variety of racial, ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity among our population. At Pope High School, we are proud to be a welcoming, safe, and considerate community for all of our students. Disturbing acts like what occurred this week have no place in our district or at our school and will not be tolerated.

If you have any concerns, questions, or comments, please feel free to contact our offices.

Thank you for your patience and continued support,

Principal Tom Flugum

ⁱⁱⁱ What Cobb County passed is a resolution, not a law—so schools *could* invite the ADL in, *if* they were brave enough to go against the county