

A Shabbat Sermon in Response to Charlottesville
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My friends:

It is a privilege to stand before you as your rabbi today and speak to the very real pain, suffering, and fear we all share right now.

This week we watched as white supremacists marched in Charlottesville chanting “Blood and Soil,” we saw innocent counter-protestors standing for values of equality—and standing up for the Jewish community!--get mowed down by a domestic terrorist, we watched an American president shirk his duty to condemn neo-Nazism, we felt the deflation of any last pretense of a moral American voice of government leadership, and we are left in shock as we anticipate the arrival of these same white supremacists to our beloved Bay Area over the course of the next two weekends.

And with all that is happening in our country right now I want to say before you first and foremost how blessed and proud I feel everyday to be Jewish and what an absolute privilege it is to be your rabbi every day, but all the more so during these times of rising public expression of hatred that call us to conscience.

On my ordination day in 2012 Rabbi Angela Buchdahl ended her charge to us with a song called “Taking Our Place”—which resounded:

“It is said we stood at Sinai, and today we know we’re there, we’re the promise of a people, a blessing and a prayer.”

To stand at Sinai means to be powerfully connected to our Jewish past, while standing in our Jewish present, and visioning our Jewish future.

To stand at Sinai means to inquire: What does this historic moment ask of us?

What does it mean to take our place in our tradition at this time in history as Jews? What does it mean to take our place in this time in history as Americans? What does it mean to take our place at this time in history as human beings?

For me one answer lies, perhaps simply, in being boldly and proudly Jewish. It means to stand proudly on the mountaintop of Sinai, to honor everyday our tradition no matter the times and tides of history, no matter the threat to our community. It means to know we are entrusted with the Jewish future *and* we have a voice of moral courage to add to the conversation.

Many of you I’m sure read the comments from the President of the synagogue in Virginia, a Jewish community who prayed together this past Shabbat while neo-Nazis paraded outside with weapons. At the end of the service the rabbi made the decision to leave with everyone through the back of the synagogue with the Torahs. That rabbi is a

friend of mine and I am overwhelmed by the courage of her synagogue and their defiance through prayer and Torah.¹

So I stand here today, on this *bimah* before you, to say—

I am not afraid.

Let our love for Judaism flower and flourish.

We are so blessed to have inherited this rich tradition—with all of its joy and suffering.

I have always known it is a tradition and heritage and identity for which I am prepared to defend and die—if ever it were to come to that. Because the love I have for being Jewish and being able to wear that proudly, fully outweighs the risks.

But I should not have to live in a world where I have to ask myself this question.

This Shabbat we read from *Parashat Re'eh*—meaning—SEE, or VISION.

In the opening passage we are enjoined to choose between blessing and curse. Blessing if we place Torah in front of us always. Blessing if we walk in the footsteps of righteousness. Reading Re'eh this Shabbat I am reminded of the blessing that God gave to Abraham –*Vehe'yeh bracha*—be a blessing.² Live the kind of life that others will want to emulate. Be a blessing. Be a force for good in this world.³ Be a model of compassion and love and right speech.

Let us use this moment to connect deeply to the blessings we can each bring this world at this dark time. Let us use this moment to feel deeply into the beauty of our tradition, to honor it more than ever—to walk in Gods ways and follow the path of Torah that this portion encourages by bringing forth the values it speaks to of loving our neighbors be they stranger, widow, orphan, or fellow Jews—the values of celebrating Shabbat together, of engaging deeply in *teshuvah*, of right and kind speech free from judgment, of pursuing justice and like Abraham before us voicing our moral outrage. In our defiance of hatred let us follow these commandments of Torah more fiercely than ever.

“It is said we stood at Sinai, and today we know we’re there...”

What does this historic moment ask of us?

This is a question without a simple answer. And it is one I know we will be discussing for some time to come. (Please share your thoughts with me following this sermon so that we can build the response and the world we want to see together).

Here are some preliminary thoughts and I welcome your discussion and dialogue:

What does this historic moment ask of us?

To define and know what being Jewish means to you. As we all know well, not all anti-Semitism is as public as Charlottesville.

¹ Alan Zimmerman. <http://reformjudaism.org/blog/2017/08/14/charlottesville-local-jewish-community-presses>

² Genesis 12:2

³ Connection between Re'eh and Lech L'cha based on Rabbi Jim Rosen's *d'rash* for Shabbat Re'eh.

We've all had the experience of being somebody's "first Jew". You know what I'm talking about right? I know I've had the experience many times. I'll give just one example. When I walked the Camino de Santiago across Spain I encountered many Europeans who had beliefs and assumptions about Jews and Judaism, but had never met a Jew. I was their first. Know how to respond to the questions and stereotypes, know how to explain the meaning of our traditions, know how to speak about what Judaism means to you so that you can be a change-maker for the world's hearts and minds.

Make space for grief. The images of this week caused so many of us to connect back with our painful collective history—who among us could avoid images of Nazi Germany, for some of us images of our own childhood. We cannot be separated from the past that has shaped us. This week, let us mourn together the pain of anti-Semitism. The pain of experiencing a timeless and senseless hatred that refuses to die. Let us mourn together and help each other shoulder the burden that there are people in this world who hate us because we are Jewish. **This grief is grief we carry. And it is so heavy.** We must find ways to metabolize the hate we are experiencing so that we can respond with wisdom, strategy, moral purpose, and intentionality, rather than reactivity.

If you're having trouble holding this on your own, please reach out—to us, to one another. There is no reason for you to experience this on your own.

"It is said we stood at Sinai and today we know we're there"

What does this moment ask of us?

Practice Compassion and Right Speech. There is no moral equivalency between white supremacists and our own voices of protest. But it is possible to cultivate love and compassion for their humanity and their families while publicly denouncing their white supremacist methods and beliefs and influencing our government officials to do the same.

What does this moment demand of us?

We must build community and coalition. Intersectional coalitions are difficult. There are values we share with our coalition that opposes white supremacy: a demand for equality and freedom from oppression being but one shared value. But, there are also opinions and ideas on which we do not always directly see eye-to-eye. One of these flashpoints is often Israel and/or Israel-Palestine.

But at this time we need to find ways to come together.

To build relationships and see our common cause as transcendent.

To build relationships so that we can one day, in community, address our differences.

To learn to talk to one another calmly and openly rather than in reactivity about difficult subjects.

To do our own deep inquiry and reflection around our own biases, gaze, and privilege.

Because this is a moment, *the moment*, to come together and we cannot afford to let our differences divide us.

What does this moment demand of us?

To not just speak loudly, but to educate ourselves and others deeply, intelligently, and in a nuanced way about anti-semitism on the right and the left.

Educate yourself on the history of anti-Semitism on the right and left. Learn to recognize the difference between anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism. Because there is a difference and at times they come as a package, at times they are absolutely distinct. Learn how to talk about what anti-Semitism means to you and pinpoint how it arises in different spaces. Help us make raising awareness about anti-Semitism a community cause. In May one of our congregant's Jeff Greendorfer encouraged Rodef Sholom to bring the program Not In Our Town to the JCC. The Not in Our Town program encourages a discussion of the various forms that hate, including anti-Semitism take shape in a community. Together we told stories publicly and dispelled the myth that Marin County is immune to expressions of anti-Semitism, racism, and other forms of bigotry. This program is continuing with additional screenings in Marin and opportunities to get involved. Please contact Jeff if you are interested in getting involved in this work.

It is said we stood at Sinai, and today we know we're there.

What does this moment demand of us?

To make it clear to our elected officials that we expect more from them. That we expect hatred to be denounced forcefully and swiftly.

To make it clear to our elected officials that there is no moral equivalency between protestors espousing hatred, bigotry, racism, and anti-semitism and those who show up to protect freedom and justice for all.

To make clear that as Jews we will not tolerate hatred or oppression of any marginalized groups in America and that anti-Semitism is not an isolated evil, but a hatred linked with the oppression of so many others. When we understand the interrelationship of structural oppressions, when we know how to define the difference between anti-Semitism and racism but also understand how they are linked we are taking a stand against hate.

And to the question that I've heard many of you ask this week—if I don't face the neo-Nazis face to face if they come to the Bay Area does that mean I'm not answering the call of this moment?

Let me be clear.

There is more than one way to answer the call of this moment.

There is more than one way to be brave.

There is more than one way to make a difference.

Direct counter-protest that may lead to violent conflict is only one way.

And it may be your way. And I stand with you in solidarity if it is.

But feel no shame if it is not.

When we call the National Park Service and ask that they revoke the permit to allow white supremacists to gather at Crissy Field we are taking a stand against hate.

When we show up at interfaith prayer vigils and counter-rallies at alternate sites of resistance we are taking a stand against hate.

When we reach out to Jewish communities around the country, to the synagogue in Charlottesville to offer our help and support with are taking a stand against hate.

When we teach our children to love and to reach out to those who are different from them we are taking a stand against hate.

When we joined Venetia Valley at the Richmond ICE detention center this past Sunday morning to demand Hugo Mejia's release from prison and when we will do so again, praying and blowing our shofars alongside Rabbis for Human Rights on Tuesday morning at that same detention center, we are taking a stand against hate.

When we meet our Muslim neighbors and learn about their faith as they learn about ours we will again this Saturday afternoon we are taking a stand against hate.

When our *chevrah kaddishah* cares for the bodies of this community's dead—sitting with their soul throughout the night—accompanying them to burial as the ultimate act of kindness we are taking a stand against hate.

When we welcome everyone to our synagogue, our Passover Seder, our Shabbat table, our Sukkah regardless of race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, ability, we are taking a stand against hate.

When we celebrate Shabbat together we are taking a stand against hate.

On this Shabbat we say to white supremacy

“NOT ON OUR WATCH. NOT ON OUR WATCH. Not today. Not tomorrow. Not in this country that was founded on liberty and justice for all. Not on this soil that took in our ancestors and has prided itself on diversity as its strength.

When you preach ignorance, we will preach knowledge.

When you preach hate, we will preach love.

When you preach war, we will preach conversation.

When you show your face, we will show our faces ten fold.

When you scream, we will sing.

When you fade away, we will be here even stronger.”⁴

It is said we stood at Sinai, and today we know we're there...

And we're here to stay.

Taking our place in an enduring line

This is the day that we stood up to say, “Our tradition is love.”

We walk with our Torah, forging links with the past.

We're the face of our future, and the reason we last.

Lalechet bidrachav v'lishmor mitzvotav kol hayamim.

May we walk in Gods ways and may all of our days be blessings.

It is said we stood at Sinai, and today we know we're there.

We're the promise of a people, a blessing and a prayer.

⁴ Prayer written by Rabbi Evan Schultz, posted to Facebook August 17th.

