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“To Blow and Even Scream”

It is Shabbat morning. Jerry Rabinowitz is decked out as usual in one of his colorful bowties. Jerry is enjoying the Shabbat morning minyan with his friends – the regulars – when he hears what sounds like gunshots outside the room where they are praying. Jerry is a physician, so his impulse is to run outside toward the sound, to see if anyone needs help. That decision costs Jerry his life, as he becomes one of eleven victims at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh in the first mass synagogue shooting in American history.

This is a sermon I never imagined having to give. Before this past year, the last time someone was shot in an American synagogue, I was three months old. A mentally ill young man shot his rabbi on the *bima* of their Detroit congregation. It was a bizarre, heartbreaking tragedy, a congregant not acting in his right mind. A one-off... for almost fifty-three years. Because Jews don't get shot at their synagogues in America.

In the year 5779, they did. Eleven worshipers were killed on that Shabbat morning eleven months ago. I hesitate to speak of the numbers of dead, because the Jerusalem Talmud famously teaches that each and every one of them is the most important number: “Whoever destroys a single soul, it is considered as if he destroyed an entire world. And whoever saves a single soul, it is considered as if he saved an entire world.”

So let's speak of just one, and begin to feel all the worlds destroyed on that Shabbat morning. Who was Jerry Rabinowitz, the diminutive doctor in the bowtie? To put it simply, he was a giant. A past president of his congregation. An old school physician who made house calls, sometimes just to talk. And among all the many patients he treated and advised and saved, it is those who battled HIV who will never forget the rare mixture of kindness and bravery that characterized their doctor.

Back in the 1980s, when HIV sufferers were writing their own obituaries and attempting suicide, Dr. Rabinowitz was lovingly taking them by the hand – with no rubber gloves on – and urging them to hold onto hope, for treatments were surely on the way. Just one of eleven murdered at his Shabbat service. But the destroying of this single soul destroyed an entire world... don't we know it?

One other thing about Jerry Rabinowitz. He was the shofar blower for his congregation in Pittsburgh. And so today, his fellow worshipers are greeting the new year, and the sound of the shofar is overwhelmed by the sight of who isn't there to sound it.

In *Sefer Hachinuch*, one of our tradition's great medieval texts, we are taught that "the Torah commanded us to make a sound similar to wailing" when we lift up the shofar. "Since (people are) physical, (they are) only aroused by something that arouses, like the way of people during wartime (to) blow and even scream in order that they should be properly aroused for war." That's what our sages instructed us to hear when the shofar is crying out.

What is the wail we will hear this year? To what war must we be aroused? For what do we blow and even scream?

One scream that you have uttered... that we have uttered... is already clear: We will not be terrorized away from one another. You are here, despite knowing what happened in Pittsburgh and then again in Poway during this past year. Hundreds of you were here on that very first Shabbat after the Tree of Life shooting – here in defiance and solidarity. And being here, you began to notice new protocols for what being here safely would require. I know that you noticed, because we heard about it from so many of you. And to be sure, it has been an adjustment for us all. But what's noteworthy is that your feedback has all been in the name of helping us to make things work as well as possible. Literally nobody has attempted to talk us out of these new steps. I say that with gratitude and with more than a little sadness – because not long ago, when times were different, there would have been an enormous outcry from you over our enhanced safety measures. No outcry now. Just a scream: "We will not be terrorized."

For what else do we blow and even scream? Well, we know plenty about the scream that the shooter in Pittsburgh heard. His friends and colleagues from years ago describe him very differently than he was discovered to be last October. He was known to be conservative, with something of an anti-government bent, but displaying no signs of anti-Semitism. In fact, he had worked harmoniously alongside Jewish coworkers in a bakery through 2002, and was said to be a loyal and generous friend.

As his closest buddy from those years put it, “He wasn’t like that back then, with the hate. He was a happy dude.” But after he quit his job at the bakery, the two friends lost track of each other. That’s when the man who would become the murderer became immersed in right-wing talk radio, which then led him into the unfettered radical right echo chamber of the internet.

This is the way it works, says Chapman University sociologist Pete Simi, co-author of [American Swastika: Inside the White Power Movement’s Hidden Spaces of Hate](#). His twenty years spent studying the behavior of hate groups reveal that provocative speech on the radio “can be very influential in terms of getting a person moving in a certain direction... it’s an entry point of sorts to a world of ideas.” Once that world leads a person to the internet, he becomes ensnared in the endless loop of the algorithm, that electronic mechanism which makes billions for online hosts by feeding you more and more content and ads designed to keep you clicking and to escort you further and further down the road you are already walking. Soon, he dropped away from a number of longtime relationships, years passed, and by the time he entered the Tree of Life Synagogue with an AR-15 assault weapon and three .357 Glock handguns, he had become a repository of hate.

Was that hate aimed at Jews? Of course – but perhaps not for the reasons you might have imagined. In the weeks before his attack, the murderer’s focus was really not trained upon Jews. He was obsessed with the “caravan” from Central America through Mexico. He bemoaned the “mass migration” of immigrants and refugees. And then, right before his attack, he posted the following about HIAS, founded as the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society: “HIAS,” he wrote, “likes to bring invaders in that kill our people. I can’t sit by and watch my people get slaughtered. Screw your optics. I’m going in.”

So what’s HIAS? HIAS was founded in the 1880s to help the great majority of our ancestors – the parents and grandparents and great-grandparents of so many of us gathered here today – successfully settle in the U.S. Since 1975, when President Ford’s administration asked for HIAS’s assistance in resettling Vietnamese refugees, HIAS has directed its efforts to refugees and immigrants of all religious and ethnic backgrounds. More than 4.5 million people have been helped to resettle by HIAS, under its banner, straight out of the Torah, of helping the stranger and repairing the world, *tikkun olam*.

That’s why the Jews in Pittsburgh had to die. But surely, you noticed in the shooter’s message the now-familiar trope about those seeking to cross the border from Mexico. He called them “invaders” – a term we’ve grown used to hearing, an epithet of hatred that used to be trafficked only along the fringe, but has now been mainstreamed. After all, none less than the President of the United States regularly calls immigrants and refugees “invaders” – and of course, turn a refugee into an invader, and all sorts of

things become possible. No one murders a person fleeing violence or hunger. But someone who comes to invade? That's not murder. That's self-defense, just as the Pittsburgh assassin described it. That's the scream, the arousal to war, that he heard.

So let there be no doubt – no matter how white many of us may appear to be, we are not white to those who want a white nation. We are no more white than those “invaders” who dream of crossing our border. Anyone who doubted that before October 27<sup>th</sup> last year was delivered a rude awakening in Pittsburgh. But just in case we somehow missed the message, exactly six months later – and that was not at all a coincidence – a young nursing student, who, during the past two years, had been radicalized in the exact manner by which the Pittsburgh shooter had been, bought an AR-15 assault rifle from a San Diego gun shop one day, and the next day opened fire on Shabbat worshipers on the final day of Passover in Poway. His online manifesto was littered with slurs against Jews – and also Middle Easterners... and Latinos... and African-Americans. But what was perhaps most chilling was his gratitude for the inspiration he received from the actions of the killer in Pittsburgh – and also the shooter at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, where fifty-one Muslims were murdered this past March.

These were the two people the Poway murderer wished to emulate – a man who massacred Jews in October, and a man who massacred Muslims in March.

While the Jewish community was understandably reeling from the second synagogue shooting in just six months, the killer's hatred of Muslims barely even managed to register with us. I myself had for the most part either missed it or paid little attention to it, so focused was I on the uptick in anti-Semitism that this second shooting represented. But then, just a couple of months ago, my friend and fellow faith community leader, Salam al-Marayati of the Muslim Public Affairs Council, pointed out something to me that I had missed entirely about the Poway shooter – something I'll bet that most of you missed, too.

On the very day the assailant was charged for his attack at Chabad of Poway, he was *also* charged with having set a mosque on fire in Escondido just one month earlier. There were seven people sleeping inside that mosque. They were on a spiritual retreat and awakened to flames. Thank God, they survived. But I can assure you that no Muslim inadvertently overlooked that part of the Poway story.

So in a year that has cast our eyes upon anti-Semitism in America like no other year in our lifetimes, might there a bigger, broader story within which all this anti-Semitism sits?

A story upon which our eyes should be focused even more intently? The story for which we must blow and scream, as we take our first uneasy peek into the Book of Life on this Rosh Hashanah?

Pondering this question led me back to an experience I had in 2016. I received an invitation to join a group of eighteen religious leaders at the White House for an Interfaith Roundtable conducted by the State Department. The gathering included briefings on the work of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, on the findings of the Task Force on 21<sup>st</sup> Century Policing, and on domestic hate crimes. But the one briefing that has really stuck with me was the one that ended the day. It was a presentation on global anti-Semitism by the State Department's Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism, Ira Forman.

Forman opened by asking our group of Christian, Jewish and Muslim leaders from all corners of the country to raise our hands if we had known, before receiving our programs for the day, that there even was a special envoy dealing solely with anti-Semitism. Just a couple of hands went up – no, mine not among them. His point, though, was actually not to shame us. It was to underscore just how routine and how nonpartisan the American commitment to combating anti-Semitism is. His office had actually been created by federal statute back in 2004, so it was not a “red thing” or “blue thing” thing to combat anti-Semitism... it was an American thing.

What Forman did not know when he told us this was that the next president would defy the statute by leaving the post vacant for two full years, until sustained pressure from both sides of the aisle resulted in an appointment finally being made just this past February. I say this not to be partisan. After all, the position was created during the George W. Bush administration. I say it to be transparent, because we're talking about anti-Semitism.

So the Special Envoy wanted us to know that America was all in on fighting anti-Semitism all over the world, in more than 200 countries, in fact. And the fundamental truth that this work had revealed to him – the first thing he wanted us visiting interfaith leaders to know – was: If Jews are targeted with anti-Semitism, other minorities aren't far behind. And if others are targeted, Jews aren't far behind. The two reliably go hand in hand.

He cautioned us to stop saying it's the 1930s again – both out of respect for those who suffered the unique horrors of the 1930s, and out of respect for the plain truth. I suspect he'd still offer that same caution today, even with the recent surge in anti-Semitism.

But he wanted to be sure to disabuse us of the notion that Jews are historically targeted in some sort of vacuum... or that Jews might escape persecution while other minorities are being targeted.

So it seems that preventing the targeting of others is not just “love the stranger” like the Torah says. It’s actually a matter of Jewish self-interest. It seems our anti-Semitism problem, interestingly enough, is not so much about us Jews. What we have is a hate problem, mixed with a gun problem. How do we combat this scourge?

The Special Envoy made it clear where that effort begins. The big issue, he said, is pushing back against hate speech – from as near as our kitchen tables to as remote as the internet. Words of hate are the soil in which acts of hate grow. The evidence is linear and irrefutable. And every one of us is a part of the problem and a part of the solution.

Pushing back against hate speech in the United States is no easy task. After all, the U.S. remains one of the only liberal democracies in the world that does not regulate hate speech. Say so much as “Sieg Heil” in Germany, and you’ve broken the law. But our nation’s uncompromising fealty to the First Amendment has always stood in the way of such steps here. It’s a fair question to ask whether the time has come, in an increasingly hate-filled era, for us to revisit just how uncompromising we should be regarding our First Amendment freedoms. But since we can assume that there won’t be major regulations on hate speech in America anytime soon, the Special Envoy argued that we need to take what steps we can, particularly with regard to the internet, in demanding the implementation of service agreements that begin to check the unbridled proliferation of hate on our computers and phones. At last, there is some momentum in our country for addressing the Wild West nature of the Internet. We need to back any measure designed to stunt the growth of those echo chambers of hate.

But that’s not all he said about how we stop the hate speech. He also asked us to look at civil society... or uncivil society, as it is steadily becoming. Civil society, he said, needs to be developed as a consequence against speaking hate. Acts of anti-Semitism and other racisms are markedly reduced in societies where hate speech carries a social price – where the hate speaker is seen as a crank, a nut job, someone who is “outside the family.” The minute saying outrageous things about Jews – or Muslims... or immigrants... or African-Americans... or any other embattled minority – the minute saying outrageous words of hate becomes socially acceptable, your society is on its way to the terror that changed Jewish America this year, that is changing all of America.

For this, we have come here on Rosh Hashanah – to blow and even scream. Can any of us deny how prescient Special Envoy Forman’s words have proven to be during the Jewish year now ended? Let’s start at the kitchen table, because that’s the much harder place to look – and certainly the more important place to look on this *Yom Hadin*, this Day of Judgment of ourselves. Do you hear yourself speaking more hatefully of your political adversaries – sometimes even to them – than you can ever remember in your life? I do. Do you feel that raging hatred welling up inside you and know that it’s bad for you... and for us? I do. Do you feel justified when speaking *your* hateful words, because their target deserves them? I do. Do you think your contributions to this cesspool of hate in our society are actually making us better? I do not.

There is a difference between calling out hate speech and calling someone an anti-Semite – and to my memory, I have no recollection of anyone ever being moved toward their better angels by being called an anti-Semite or a racist or a bigot. So we have to ask ourselves sincerely: when we respond to hatred with hatred of our own, what is our intended outcome?

Of course, some of us have a larger platform with our hateful words – and therefore a larger influence on what becomes socially acceptable – than the rest of us. There are, in our congregation, plenty of people who are supporters of our country’s president. I know of no one in our congregation who approves of what he has done to our nation’s norms of how we speak to one another. We all remember how it felt to hear our president call Jewish Americans who vote for Democrats “disloyal.” It was a slur Jews are used to hearing – for centuries. But I want you to pause for a moment and think about what you’d be feeling if our president said this year about *you* any one of the things he has said about immigrants and people of color.

Just one example... this past May, while whipping a crowd of Floridians into a frenzy about the “invasion” on our southern border, a rally attendee screamed out, “Shoot them!” The President chuckled, and then said, “Only in the Panhandle can you get away with that statement,” wearing a grin on his face. Imagine if any president, Democrat or Republican, responded that way to someone calling out “shoot them” about Jews fleeing persecution. Our universal objection would certainly not be seen as a partisan matter. And it’s not partisan today, either.

This past August, I decided I needed to see things for myself. Instead of letting the president or his opponents or the news media tell me what is happening on our border, I wanted to see it with my own eyes. So with our faith partners at LA Voice, I traveled with Rabbi Berney and two temple lay leaders

to ICE's Otay Mesa Detention Center and then over the border to Tijuana. I wanted to meet the actual people I am routinely hearing called "invaders."

At Espacio Migrante, a shelter in Tijuana for migrants from all over the world – Haiti, Central America, Africa – we met Alda. She fled Honduras to escape violence from her husband. She begged ICE officials not to send her back to Tijuana, where despite taking work to send money back home to her children, she was still jailed and threatened with beatings. With two cousins in the U.S., she prays to try to navigate the asylum process with no attorney. "God is my attorney," she told us. She is still awaiting her second hearing. Said Alda of her experience with the American asylum process, "They treat us as though they hate us. It doesn't matter if we're children or adults, either."

We met Katarina, who escaped violence in El Salvador with her three young adult children. However, because they are all over age eighteen, each case is treated separately by the U.S. A lawyer could tie all four cases together, but she cannot get a lawyer. She had her last hearing back in March and got sent back to Tijuana. Said Katarina, "We are losing hope. I've had three hearings and still haven't even been given an asylum application yet."

We met Jenny, a nurse from Honduras who is trying to reunite her children, ages seven and five, with their father who lives in Chicago. She told us of their treatment in the "icebox" – that's the name for those American detention facilities you've heard about, the ones that are freezing cold, with the cages and the mylar blankets. She told us that she was walked outside by a detention official and told, "There's the desert. There's the cemetery. There's Tijuana. What's your choice?"

These are the "invaders" – the people HIAS helps with legal support and humanitarian aid. The people who inspired the murder of eleven Jews in Pittsburgh. Look in their eyes, hear their stories, and you will never be the same again.

Look, we can have a worthy debate about what type of immigration policy and asylum procedure our country should adopt. This is a miserable problem, and it has no easy solution, no matter what anybody tries to sell you. Our previous president has his own very checkered record on this issue, as do his predecessors. The desperate need for resettlement is almost certainly greater than even the most generous and efficient policy could ever accommodate. But that debate cannot be allowed to turn the victims into targets of our hatred. There can be no chuckling at the suggestion of shooting them. For we Jews learned the hard way in the year 5779 that talk of shooting doesn't remain just talk for long.

We're hardly the first generation of Jews to feel imperiled. Our sages taught that 2000 years ago, our people's expulsion from Jerusalem and dispersion into so many lands where we faced persecution happened for one reason alone – *sinat chinam*, groundless hatred. It brought us down before. Will we let it happen again?

In this new year 5780, let us stare down the hate in our own hearts – and refuse to allow it to rise to our lips. Let us repudiate the hate we hear and read and see, refusing to minimize it or explain it away... let us hold each other and our leaders accountable. And let us lean upon the institutions of this country that has been so great to us to beat back the advance of hate speech and hate acts. One great way to do that... remember this name... [integrityfirstforamerica.org](http://integrityfirstforamerica.org). They're the force behind the Charlottesville lawsuit – the only case currently taking on the leaders of the violent white nationalist movement. You can learn about the case and help fund it by visiting the site. In this new year 5780, let us defy the failure of our ancient forbears by waging war against *sinat chinam*, against hate without cause.

In a few moments, the sound of the shofar will fill this sanctuary. Why now? Why not at the beginning of our Rosh Hashanah service? The Jerusalem Talmud explains: "Once they sounded the shofar at the beginning of the service, and those who hate us thought that we were mobilizing against them. So they rose up and massacred the people in the synagogue. But now that they see that we say the Shema, pray, read the Torah, and pray [some more] – and only then sound the shofar – they see that we are just performing our rites."

No, we're not the first generation of Jews to be imperiled. But make no mistake – the sound of the shofar *is* a call to mobilize... in responsibility to those who perished, including the bow-tied shofar blower in Pittsburgh, whose absence on this day is the most penetrating presence. For him... for them... for us all – let us blow and even scream.