

## **Erev Rosh Hashanah – Wednesday, September 20, 2017**

### *Wake Up and Show Up by Rabbi Copeland*

It should have been the very worst of days. The infamous Westboro Baptist Church known for its harassment of Jews, gays, Catholics and anyone else on their seemingly random checklist of offenders was headed to Stanford, more specifically to Hillel, the Jewish campus center where I worked. While their hatred finds many targets, harassing Jewish and LGBT people are this institution's pet projects.

We learned that they were going to demonstrate on a Friday morning at 8am, and wondered if any students on a college campus see that hour of the day. Since the group thrives on media attention, one proposal was to simply not grant them that victory. But we finally decided that to allow such a display of hatred to go unchallenged would be a cowardly silence. If even one student on the way to class that morning saw them holding a sign that read "Fags Can't Marry" or "God Hates Jews" without any response, we felt like they would have succeeded.

Once we made the decision and put the word out, support from groups across campus flooded in, from the cultural, to the religious – to the musical. At 8am that chilly, January morning, about fifteen Westboro members paraded their LGBT and Jew hating signs across the street from Hillel. Over 1,000 students, faculty, and administrators stood on Hillel's front lawn completely ignoring them. It was not a counter demonstration – we would not grant them their provocation. It was a celebration, really a party, that our inspired director, Adina Danzig dubbed, "Stanford United." In my many years in campus work, I had never seen such an outpouring of love and solidarity. Many found themselves teary-eyed as we chanted a unity mantra:

"We stand united, and we pledge:

When we are no longer at Stanford, we will go to the home of those who are unjustly targeted – whoever they may be. We will speak out with them. I pledge to fight hate at my doorstep or yours.

We stand united, affirming respect and diversity.

We are Stanford United."

The message was clear: we are a diverse group of people who even disagree vehemently with each other on any given day on campus, but when one group is attacked, we are all attacked. No one will have to stand up to hate alone. A highlight of the morning was a surprise visit from the wacky Stanford band, with the mascot, The Tree, bearing a sign that summed it all up nicely:

“Tree Hates Bigots.” Band members riled their bagpiper out of bed. He dramatically parted the crowd playing Amazing Grace in his bathrobe.

But *my* highlight came days before when an Evangelical pastor colleague on campus reached out to me. He called me offering to anonymously sponsor bagels for the whole crowd after the event. That’s a lot of bagels. With no credit. You’d think he would have wanted to make a statement to the campus -loud and clear- that Westboro’s views do not represent *his* church. But his only motive was chesed-lovingkindness.

Many students still report that this was their best day at Stanford, the kind of experience that solidified for them what community means. The church, ironically, had done us a favor. For years afterward, student leaders and administrators scratched their heads trying to figure out how to replicate or re-instill that sense of unity.

My experience with the Westboro Baptist Church occurred many years ago, yet it is *this* year that I keep mulling over those images in my head. I’ve struggled with whether the lessons I learned on that day are applicable to today’s situation-or if we are facing a different set of issues in a dramatically more complicated landscape.

At least two things can be extrapolated from that moment to this one: we need to “wake up” and we need to “show up.” On that January day, students literally had to “wake up” for each other by rolling out of bed. But they had to also be awakened at a deeper level before the alarms had been set. Our Jewish new year begins, and the most visceral way we are awakened at this time of year is by hearing the shofar. It wakes us up out of our complacency and with that haunting, primordial sound we are transported to another place in ourselves, an uncluttered self. Whether we have been literally asleep, existentially asleep or *pretending* we are asleep, we are forced out of our malaise.

The shofar’s connection with Rosh Hashanah harkens back to the ram caught in the thicket that we’ll read on Friday morning in the story of Abraham and Isaac. But that haunting sound wasn’t originally associated with the high holidays. We first hear of the shofar in the context of the revelation at Mt. Sinai in the book of Exodus:

“Amidst thunder and lightning... There was a loud shofar blast, and all the people in the camp trembled. ... The sound of the shofar waxed louder and louder; Moses spoke, and G!d answered him in a voice [Ex.19].”

This group of people seriously needed to be awakened, or they would have missed the revelation that followed. And they trembled! Being awakened can be terrifying. Staying

awake is even scarier. With the onslaught of global disasters, as well as national and local ones, staying alert is feeling like an all-consuming task. Allowing each sound to penetrate our souls is a constant decision.

Psalms 47 adds a layer of complexity to the shofar blasts: “G!d ascends [to the throne] with the Teruah, Adonai with the sound of the shofar.” A midrash on this verse tells us that the sounding of the shofar has cosmic significance. The shofar literally pulls G!d up from G!d’s comfortable spot in the Throne of Justice, moving G!d to the emotional, heartwrenching Throne of Mercy. So the shofar doesn’t only wake *us* up; it wakes up G!d. (Thanks, Rabbi Graff)

The shofar is a cry. It calls out with its staccato blasts, punctuating the air, “I am utterly broken.” Our anger and frustration combine with our losses of loved ones over the past year, illnesses, loss of relationship. It’s understandable to be heartbroken right now. But what do we do with that pain? What do we do now that we are, however unhappily, awake? What does “showing up” look like?

Let’s return to Stanford United: a clear demonstration of the value of **showing up**. Not to pick a fight, but to stand side by side. We have been debating in recent days against the backdrop of hate speech and violence on a much grander scale whether it’s always best to show up. Or if “showing up” can be just as powerful if we show up on the other side of town, or maybe it’s even better to show up with your pen instead (or on your computer signing petitions, writing letters, giving from your pocketbook, getting other people to open *their* pocketbooks, or fighting for justice in myriad other ways).

There is a word for **showing up** that arises throughout our tradition that speaks to these complexities. We are asked at this time of year, “**Ayeka?**” Where are you? On this test, there *is* one correct answer! It is: Hineni. Hineni is literally, “hinei ani”—Here, I! the ultimate existential statement. “I am wide awake and ready for whatever the world throws my way. I am showing up. Presente!”

-G!d calls out in our Friday Rosh Hashanah reading: Abraham, Abraham! Abraham answers, “hineni!”

-G!d calls to Moses from the burning bush, and Moses answers, “Hineni!”

-Noah hears the horror that G!d is about to deal upon the earth with the great flood, and *G!d* here, says, “hine-ni.”

-G!d calls to Adam in the Garden of Eden after he eats some fruit, a perfect set up for an answer of “Hineni.” But Adam fails the test. He is explicitly “not” present. Adam says, “I heard you in the garden, and was afraid because I was naked, so I hid.” At least he was honest.

Since most of us don’t carry around a shofar, how do we make sure we are Moses and not Adam? *How* do we wake up and show up?

We wake up and show up...by doing *something*. When we get overwhelmed with the enormity of the task, we often do nothing. A Jewish text, Pirkei Avot, teaches that, “it is not up to us to finish the job, but we aren’t free to run away from it either.” Each of us has a unique role to play in the repair of the world, and we are better at showing up if we choose *one* thing – you decide what. Early on after the election, a group of parents and grandparents from our predominantly Latino elementary school were overwhelmed with worry for the undocumented families at our school, so we organized legal workshops, educated people on their rights when ICE comes to their door, and helped families with limited English fill out passport paperwork for their American-born kids. Sunday, we are running a DACA renewal workshop. We chose *one* thing, and it helped us let go of the notion that it’s up to us to finish *every* job. But we have to do *something*. **Hineni.**

We can wake up and show up by recognizing with compassion, with rachamim, the internal and external battles we are all fighting. The level of unrest and instability, anti-semitism, racial injustice, threats to religious freedom, religious intolerance in the form of a Muslim travel ban, threats to women’s and LGBT rights including the transgender military ban, and healthcare are weights on many of our souls. The 13 attributes we sing at the High Holydays ask us to emulate G!d’s compassion. We also need to practice *self* compassion and show up for ourselves, taking care of our souls. We need to play and sing and waste time without feeling guilty about it. It is going to be a long haul, and we need to pace ourselves. **Hineni.**

Waking up and showing up can look different for different people. There are infinite ways to show someone that your liberation is bound up with theirs. While many of us listened to hours of speeches at Harvey Milk Plaza a few weeks ago in response to the planned alt-right rallies, thousands were dancing down the road at Dolores Park as an expression of *their* activism. And showing up is not only about assembling with the masses. For some, gatherings make us feel like our legs are praying. For others, our legs are aching. Our local Faith in Action community organizing leaders wrote recently:

“...faith doesn’t **only** take place when we gather for worship—the life of faith takes place every day, in the ordinary moments of our lives. Our politics are strengthened when we gather for rallies... but our political lives also continue at home, at work, on the streets, in phone calls and meetings, and whenever we speak the truth aloud to a neighbor.”

**Hineni.**

We can show up for someone who can’t do it for themselves. I attended a Faith in Action/PICO meeting of SF clergy people in the days before the planned alt-right rallies in the Bay Area and many of us couldn’t decide whether we should go right to the heart of the planned activity to “show up” against hatred. Some of our white, Protestant fellow clergy people said to the rabbis and Christian clergy of color at the table, “It’s not safe for you. You don’t have to show up. This time, let us show up *for* you.” **Hineni.**

We can wake up and show up by doing this work together rather than alone at home, and face-to-face in addition to online. I especially want to make a plea for us to engage in this work as a Sha’ar Zahav community. As religion in this country is increasingly defined by one set of beliefs and interests, we need to recognize the power we have when we speak out of *our* deeply held *progressive religious* beliefs, *as a religious* community. There is an extra bang to our buck when we speak out not only as SZ, but also with our community of multifaith friends from all over the Bay. How can we emulate that communal high we get when we’re at a rally, when we are calling our representatives, signing petitions, educating, reaching out to neighbors, organizing, and continuing to do our jobs that bring peace into the world – so we don’t feel alone? If the Jewish mandate to repair the world moves you, I invite you to join me and our social action team on the evening of October 2nd.

We will learn together. We will share ideas. We will make calls to our representatives. We will plan for the future – together. **Hineni.**

We can wake up and show up by bringing our whole selves, all the disparate pieces of our lives, together. On that day of Stanford United, the intersection of identities Westboro chose to attack highlighted for some of us who stood in that crowd that we often feel doubly othered; we are not only Jewish, but gay, lesbian, bisexual, intersex or transgender. That small band of haters made it clear that day that Judaism and the struggle for LGBT equal rights are linked. One student’s sign made this point as it exclaimed: “The first friend I came out to was a lesbian Jew!” Westboro may have hoped I’d feel “twice cursed,” but I felt “twice blessed,” to quote the title of a book on being queer and Jewish that guided me through coming out Jewishly decades ago. That

assembled crowd of 1,000+ was **not** largely queer *or* Jewish, and certainly only a few were both queer *and* Jewish, but they understood the magnitude of the moment for everyone in that community. The plight of one person or group is never theirs to bear alone. When we are part of a community, we feel the pain of hateful words on a placard even when they aren't directed at us.

Here at SZ, **many** do not fall into those overlapping categories of queer and Jewish either, but we share a common understanding of what it means to be a stranger, and we appreciate each soul, in all its complexities and intersectionalities, as a unique expression of the Divine. Rooted in our Jewish and LGBT history, that consciousness, that sense of rising out of otherness, becomes our strength. **Hineni**.

Think about how you're going to show up this year as I blast the shofar...

PAUSE...

Please give me a tekiah!

Note: Jews typically do not spell out the name of the Divine to respect the power of names, especially holy names. I use a "!" instead of the traditional "-" to connote the awe – the radical amazement – we hope to feel in our lives no matter what we name it.