More Jewish, Not More Afraid

Anshe Emeth Memorial Temple

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Rosh Hashanah 5787

As I was walking into the doors of our Temple last night, I had a flashback to when I walked through those doors for the first time 14 Rosh Hashanahs ago. The scene was different back then. We weren't checking tickets the same way as a security precaution. There weren't armed guards. In fact, there was only one unarmed guard who we would refer to as "the silent sentry" because whenever you walked over to him to ask a question, he would walk away or just stare at you. We didn't have lockdown locks or alarms or a building that was hardened. All of this led me to have a certain question on my mind. A question that has followed the Jewish people for generations. A question I'm sure you have asked many times these past few years.

Sometimes it's spoken aloud. Sometimes it sits quietly beneath our conversations, beneath the security guards and locked doors, beneath the warnings we give our children and the calculations we make before wearing a Jewish star in public.

The question is: Why do they hate us? Why, after all these centuries, does antisemitism keep returning? Why are Jews blamed for capitalism and also communism, for being too powerful and too weak, too separated and too assimilated? Why can one of the world's oldest hatreds continually reinvent itself for each new generation?

These are important questions. We need historians, scholars and educators to help us understand the strange durability of antisemitism. We need law enforcement and public officials who take threats seriously. We need allies who recognize that antisemitism isn't merely a Jewish problem, but a warning sign of a society becoming vulnerable to conspiracy, authoritarianism, and violence.

But this morning, on Rosh Hashanah, I want to suggest that "Why do they hate us?" can't be the central question of Jewish life. Because when we make that our central question, we hand antisemites an extraordinary power. We allow them to decide what Judaism will mean to us. We allow those who hate Jews to become the organizers of Jewish identity. And there's something tragically backward about building Jewish life around the imaginations of people who want Jewish life to disappear.

So, I want to ask a different question: What do we love enough to keep alive? What's so beautiful, so wise, so sustaining about Jewish life that we would choose it even if no one hated us? What are we protecting Jewish life for?

Yesterday, on the 25th anniversary of September 11th, I asked us to consider what it might mean for Americans with many minds to recover a shared heart. This morning, the circle becomes

smaller and more intimate. What does it mean for us, as Jews, to share a heart when the world makes us afraid?

The fear is real. Over the past several years, antisemitism has become louder, more visible, and more socially acceptable in places where many of us once believed it had been pushed to the margins. It comes from the political right and the political left. It's carried by white supremacists and religious extremists. It appears in conspiracy theories, political rhetoric, vandalism, harassment, and violence. It sometimes hides behind criticism of Israel, and it's sometimes falsely alleged to silence legitimate criticism of Israel. Both distortions make it harder to name the real thing.

We've watched Jews assaulted for looking visibly Jewish. We've watched synagogues attacked. We've watched public figures invoke ancient stereotypes about Jewish money, power, loyalty, and manipulation. We've watched Jewish students asked to answer for every action of a foreign government before being permitted to enter spaces that claim to welcome everyone. Some of us have removed a mezuzah from a doorpost or tucked a Jewish star beneath a shirt. Some of us have wondered whether to tell a new colleague or acquaintance that we're Jewish. Some of us have had conversations with our children that our own parents hoped they would never need to have with us.

Fear is not irrational. But fear is also not neutral. Fear changes us. It narrows our field of vision. It tells us to look constantly for danger. It makes strangers appear threatening and uncertain situations feel intolerable. Fear can keep us alive, but when it becomes the foundation of identity, it can keep us from truly living.

The story we read this morning brings us directly into that struggle. The Akedah begins with a terrifying command. Abraham is told to take Isaac, sacrifice him upon a mountain. Abraham rises early. He takes Isaac and the wood for the offering, and for three days they walk toward a future Abraham can't bear to imagine. Isaac finally asks the question hanging over the entire journey: "Here is the firestone and the wood, but where is the lamb for the offering?" Abraham answers, "God will see to the lamb."

Then comes the moment we can barely stand to hear. Abraham binds Isaac, places him upon the wood, and raises the knife. Then suddenly an angel calls his name: "Abraham! Abraham!" And Abraham, somehow, remains capable of answering, "*Hineini,*" "Here I am." The angel says, "Don't raise your hand against the boy." Then the Torah tells us: "*Vayisa Avraham et einav vayar,"* "Abraham lifted his eyes and saw." Caught in the thicket was a ram that had been there the entire time. Fear had narrowed the story to one terrible ending. But fear had not told the whole truth. There was another voice to hear. There was another offering. There was still a future for Isaac.

Whatever else we believe the Akedah is meant to teach, it reminds us that faithfulness can't mean listening only to the first voice we hear, especially when that voice leads toward death. Abraham must remain open to the second call, the one that stops his hand and restores the future.

Jewish tradition never asks us to deny danger. The knife is real. The fear is real. The vulnerability is real. But the story doesn't end with the knife suspended in the air, there was another path. That's the spiritual challenge of responding to antisemitism. We must see the threat clearly. And we must also lift our eyes toward the future that fear cannot see.

We must protect Jewish life. And we must remember why Jewish life is worth protecting. Too much Jewish education has begun with the people who tried to kill us. Pharaoh. The Amalekites. Haman. Antiochus. The Romans. The Crusaders. The Inquisition. The pogroms. The Nazis. Hamas. Hezbollah. Iran. These stories matter. We owe memory to those who suffered. We need to understand where hatred leads when societies allow it to grow. But if the Jewish story becomes only a catalog of persecution, what exactly are we asking the next generation to inherit? An endless emergency? A burden of vigilance? A promise that everyone will eventually turn against them? That isn't the whole Jewish story.

Our story is also Abraham arguing with God because justice matters. It's Miriam taking a timbrel to the edge of the sea because she believed liberation would require music. It's rabbis arguing across centuries because no one voice could contain the whole Torah. It's Shabbat candles reflected in a window. It's the smell of challah, the melody of Kol Nidre, the ridiculous joy of Purim, the questions of the seder, and the quiet power of standing beside another person at a grave. It's a tradition that sanctifies time, honors learning, insists on human dignity, makes room for grief, and commands joy.

We aren't Jews because people hate Jews. We are Jews because Jewish life offers a way of becoming fully human. The Book of Esther describes the moment when Haman's decree is overturned. The text says: *"LaYehudim haytah orah v'simchah v'sason vikar."* "The Jews had light and gladness, joy and honor." The verse doesn't say only that the Jews survived. Survival was essential. But survival was not the destination. The destination was light. The destination was joy. The destination was a life in which Jews could be seen, celebrated, and honored.

That's a more positive response to antisemitism. Not positive in the sense of naïve or cheerful, but positive in the literal sense of creating something. Antisemitism destroys. Our response must build. Antisemitism isolates. Our response must deepen relationship. Antisemitism turns Jews into symbols and stereotypes. Our response must reveal the fullness, variety, and humanity of actual Jewish lives. Antisemitism says, "Hide." Judaism says, "Kindle light."

And how do we get there? We light those candles. We learn Torah. We show up for one another. We bring our children and grandchildren into a tradition that's alive, curious, joyful, and honest. We wear the Jewish star not as a provocation, but as a declaration of belonging. We push back against those who wish to tear down the democratic institutions that protect us all. We push back

against the desire to isolate in fear rather than build relations with others and share our Judaism with them. We create Jewish homes that are more than places where we worry about Jewish survival. We make them places of blessing.

There is a story told about a Jewish community that was forced by a hostile ruler to stop studying Torah. The people gathered anyway. When asked why they were risking their lives, Rabbi Akiva offered a parable.

A fox saw fish swimming desperately from place to place, trying to escape the fishermen's nets. The fox invited them onto dry land, where they would supposedly be safe. The fish replied: "If we are in danger in the water, which is the source of our life, how much more so would we be in danger if we abandoned it?"

Torah is our water. It is the source from which we Jews draw our strength to face risk. I worry that sometimes, in our understandable desire to keep young Jews safe, we present Judaism as the dangerous thing. Don't wear that. Don't say that. Don't let people know. Be careful where you go. Some of those warnings are necessary. But if caution becomes the only inheritance we offer, we may protect a Jewish identity that no longer feels like a source of life.

Our children need more than reasons to defend Judaism. They need reasons to love it. They need to know that Judaism can hold their questions, their doubts, their moral outrage, their creativity, and their longing for community. They need to experience Jewish life not only at a rally, but in people's living rooms. Not only as memory, but as possibility. Not only as we gather after tragedy, but also when we celebrate life's joys. Not only as a people others have tried to destroy, but as a people who have created extraordinary ways of living.

This is the work of Rosh Hashanah. The shofar is often described as an alarm. It wakes us from complacency. But the shofar is also a sound of coronation, a sound of freedom, and a sound that accompanied revelation. It doesn't only warn us about danger. It calls us toward life. It says: Wake up to the world that hatred cannot see. Wake up to the blessing of being part of an ancient and still-evolving people. Wake up to the responsibility of carrying that people forward. Wake up to the future that fear has hidden from view. There will be moments when we're afraid. There will be moments when we need guards at the doors, careful plans, difficult conversations, and the courage to confront hatred directly. But the guards protect the doorway. They aren't what waits for us inside.

Inside are prayer and music. Inside are friendship and memory. Inside are people who will sit beside us in grief and dance beside us in joy. Inside is Torah, still asking questions no generation has fully answered. Inside is a community that needs what each of us uniquely brings. That is what we are protecting. Antisemitism may force us to defend Jewish life, but it must never be permitted to define Jewish life.

So in this new year, let us be vigilant, but not consumed. Let us be honest, but not hopeless. Let us build alliances without surrendering our particular story. Let us refuse to let those who hate us

become the authors of who we are. And let us answer every attempt to diminish Jewish life by living it more deeply: with more Torah, more community, more courage, more light, more gladness, more joy, and more honor. May 5787 be the year in which we become not more afraid, but more fully, purposefully, and joyfully Jewish.

Amen.