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Beth David Reform Congregation  
Rosh Hashanah Morning 5778  
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If Not Now

Three years ago, Rabbi Francine Roston picked up and moved her family across the country in search of a quieter, more balanced life.<sup>i</sup> Life in suburban New Jersey was missing something, and her family found it, to their surprise, while they were on vacation: in the mountains, the rivers, and the friendliness of a small Montana town near Glacier National Park. Whitefish, Montana, is the kind of place where people don't just leave their doors unlocked, they brag about not even knowing where their house keys are.<sup>ii</sup> There are just a handful of Jewish families there, but Rabbi Roston became their rabbi, and they met for services in her living room.

It was only a few months after Rabbi Roston moved to Whitefish that she heard the name Richard Spencer for the first time. You might have heard his name, too, because he has been in the national news lately, although he was less notorious when Rabbi Roston first crossed paths with him. Spencer is the man who coined the term "alt-right," a White Nationalist who advocates for a white "ethno-state,"<sup>iii</sup> achieved through what he describes as a "peaceful ethnic cleansing."<sup>iv</sup> Like David Duke, the notorious Klu Klux Klan leader, he was among the marchers in Charlottesville last month. Richard Spencer doesn't live in Whitefish most of the time, but his mother, Sherry, does. Since Sherry Spencer had publicly disavowed her son's ideology, the Jews of Whitefish felt comfortable with her. So when Sherry called a Jewish realtor who was a member of Roston's congregation for advice about selling a building, worried about community pressure on her because of her son, the realtor took the call. Yes, she told Sherry, she could help her with the sale.

A phone call, a Facebook post, a conversation ... the next thing the tiny Jewish community knew, the phone call was suddenly being discussed in the local media, and soon, neo-Nazi websites were posting about it. "The Jews, a vicious, evil race of hate-filled psychopaths, have been attacking Richard Spencer's mother," one website claimed.<sup>v</sup> The website published a total of 30 articles about the issue, encouraging its readership to "take action" by harassing the realtor, Rabbi Roston, and another Whitefish Jewish family with hateful messages.<sup>vi</sup> Rabbi Roston and her congregant were flooded not only with vile emails and social media postings, but with hundreds of abusive phone calls, calling them racial epithets I won't say out loud in this sacred space and threatening to shoot them. Neo-Nazi websites found their phone numbers and home addresses and posted the information online. They found photographs of Rabbi Roston, and of the realtor's 12-year-old son, and created graphics with Nazi-era yellow stars plastered on them. The Neo-Nazis announced a rally in Whitefish, advertised with a graphic of Auschwitz. In the end, they canceled the rally only days before it was scheduled to take place. The local Whitefish community decided not to cancel its counter-protest, which they called a "Love Not Hate Block Party." On that frigid January day, they served over 350 bowls of matzah bowl soup to the Montanans who had come out in Negative 5 degree weather to show support for love, and for the Jews.

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*Im ein ani li, mi li?* If I am not for myself, the ancient sage Hillel taught, who will be for me?

Three years ago on Rosh Hashanah, I spoke about anti-Semitism. I focused mostly on Europe, the terrible violence and disturbing resurgence of hatred that had surfaced there. To be honest, I thought I was done for a little while giving High Holy Day sermons about anti-Semitism. Most American Jews of my generation grew up thinking that anti-Semitism was something that happened to other Jews – in other times, in other places.

Sadly, today, it is harder to be as naïve. My colleague Rabbi Robyn Frisch, who has taught at Beth David on several occasions, serves a congregation in northeast Philadelphia that had its stained glass windows broken three times last year by people throwing rocks.<sup>vii</sup> In January, one of the campuses of the seminary that Cantor Levy, Rabbi Cohen, and Cantor Kazansky and I attended was vandalized with a swastika.<sup>viii</sup> In February, our local Jewish Community Center here in Lower Merion was one of 100 JCCs across the country that received bomb threats in a wave of terrifying phone calls this winter. Mount Carmel Cemetery in Philadelphia, where members of this congregation have grandparents buried, was desecrated another night in February, with hundreds of graves vandalized. In June, three Jews holding LGBT Rainbow flags with Jewish stars were thrown out of the Chicago Dyke March because the parade's organizers deemed the Jewish stars on a flag to be an offensive symbol because of its association with Israel.<sup>ix</sup> Just this past week, after a Reform synagogue in St. Louis offered shelter to protesters who had been demonstrating against the acquittal of a police officer who killed a black man, a twitter storm erupted in response with the hashtag #GastheSynagogue.<sup>x</sup>

Those were just the smaller headlines. The larger one is the image that perhaps you, too, can't get out of your mind. In August, the bucolic college town of Charlottesville, Virginia became the site of the largest hate gathering in decades on American soil, as men marching with torches shouted: "Jews will not replace us."<sup>xi</sup> The Reform Jews inside Charlottesville's synagogue watched the Nazi parades go by, and the congregation's president instructed people leaving Shabbat services to go out the side door, not the front, and to please go in groups.<sup>xii</sup> The Torah scrolls had already been removed from the building, just in case.<sup>xiii</sup>

*Im ein ani li, mi li?* If I am not for myself, who will be for me?

I want to share words now that colleagues of mine across the country are also sharing with their communities this morning. We are speaking in one voice this Rosh Hashanah morning so that our message might be amplified.

As rabbis we are, from sea to shining sea, speaking to our congregations in every accent of America to declare in unison: acts of hatred, intimidation and divisiveness will not be tolerated in these United States. We stand upon the shoulders of the sages, poets and rabbis in every generation who fought for freedom. We speak in memory of every Jew and in memory of all people who tragically and senselessly lost their lives at the hands of evil oppressors. We call on our political leaders; progressives and conservatives alike, to rigorously uphold the values brilliantly articulated in the founding documents of our country, the "immortal declaration" that all men are created equal...

How much more vandalism, how many clashes, which other cities? We must not accept or become inured to some warped version of "normal," of racist and anti-Semitic acts or rallies popping in and out of breaking news cycles... Elie Wiesel, of blessed memory, possessed a rare understanding of unfathomable brokenness. His memorable words sound a warning to us today, "We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere."<sup>xiv</sup>

We will not accept a false equivalence between those who terrorize with hate and those who stand up to that terror, especially when issued from the highest office of this land, and we will not allow ourselves to be divided. America is one country, Republican and Democrat and Independent, Christian and Hindu and Buddhist and Muslim and Atheist and Jewish, straight and gay and transgender, black and brown and white and a rainbow of colors, -and we stand stronger when we stand together for this country's most deeply held values. This is not a partisan issue; this is not a question of identity politics. This is about what is right; this is about morality; this is about what God calls us to stand for.

Hate groups are, frighteningly, on the rise. Charlottesville did not come out of nowhere; white nationalism has been slowly growing for several years, awaiting its opportunity. And that opportunity has arrived. Southern Poverty Law Center called 2016 "an unprecedented year for hate."<sup>xv</sup> "After half a century of being increasingly relegated to the margins of society," the Center wrote, "the radical right entered the political mainstream last year in a way that had seemed virtually unimaginable."<sup>xvi</sup>

In order to stand up against hate, we need to learn more about who these groups are, and what they believe. As we learn more about them, two things become clear. First: their hatred is very much targeted at us, because we are Jewish. Second: their hatred is aimed at other Americans, too, and we are far from the most vulnerable targets.

*Im ein ani li, mi li?*

If I am not for myself, who will be for me?

*U-ch'she-ani l'atzmi, mah ani?*

But when I am only for myself, what am I?

A few weeks ago, a headline in the *Atlantic* sought to explain "Why the Charlottesville Marchers Were Obsessed With Jews."<sup>xvii</sup> After all, the author points out, the people attending the "Unite the Right" rally were ostensibly marching in protest of the removal of a Confederate statue, with rallying cries about the preservation of white identity. On the surface, it isn't about us: Jews fought on both sides of the Civil War, and most American Jews identify as white.

As Jonathan Greenblatt, the head of the Anti-Defamation League, or ADL, observed about the march in Charlottesville, "This is an agenda about celebrating the enslavement of Africans and their descendants, and celebrating those that then fought to preserve that terrible machine of white supremacy and human enslavement. And yet, somehow, they're all wearing shirts that talk about Adolf Hitler."<sup>xviii</sup> In White Nationalist understanding, we Jews are the invisible power that has allowed supposedly racially inferior African-Americans and other people of color to rise above their supposed natural place at the bottom of a white society. Only because we control the banks, the media, education, and government, they theorize, have white people been brainwashed against white supremacy.<sup>xix</sup> I know – it is as wacky as it is terrifying. But blond hair and all, I would be excluded from the white ethno-state toward which the White Nationalists are openly aspiring.

Again, I share words being preached by rabbis around the country today, all of us speaking in one voice:

The events of these simmering weeks are a wake-up call to our Jewish community.

Racism is wrong whether it seeps into explicit anti-Semitism or not. The Talmud teaches that God created us all from the first Adam so that no human being could ever say, "my lineage is greater than yours." But just in case we thought the white supremacists were after someone else, or that the Confederate flag has nothing to do with modern day Nazi sympathizers, or that we were somehow safe in the fact that most – but certainly not all - Jews in America are white, those fiery torches illuminated another truth, one we learn and forget only to learn again this day: if one minority group's rights are threatened, we are all threatened. As Martin Luther King taught us, "We are all tied together in a single garment of destiny," whether we are the least powerful or the most powerful person in our world.<sup>xx</sup>

If we want to fight anti-Semitism, we need to fight racism much more broadly.

I know that race can be a difficult issue for many of us to talk about. We may feel awkward, torn between our good intentions and our uncomfortable questions; between our understanding of our privilege and our history of being persecuted; between pride that Rabbi Heschel marched arm in arm with Martin Luther King, Jr. in Selma, and skepticism that the Black-Jewish bond has not remained as close in recent decades.

But it is time for us to stop seeing our fates as separate. Racism, like anti-Semitism, is an affront to the Torah's demand that we see the Image of God in each human being, and that we fight for the dignity of each human being as much as for our own dignity. This congregation has a proud history of Black-Jewish partnership from our days in Wynnefield under Rabbi Cohen's leadership, including his civil rights activism and the Black-Jewish preschool we hosted. And furthermore, to think of Jews and Blacks as two separate groups is outdated. The Jewish community today is much more diverse today than people often imagine, and our Beth David family includes Jews of color who were born Jewish, Jews of color who chose Judaism, and people of color who are part of Jewish families although they are not Jewish themselves. All of us are part of one family.

*Im ein ani li, mi li? U-ch'she-ani l'atzmi, mah ani? V'im lo achshav, eimatai?*

If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But when I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King wrote about the moment in history in which he lived: "We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history, there is such a thing as being too late."

Our moment, too, is no time to stand idly by. Luckily, Beth David isn't an idle kind of place.

So here is what we are going to do about it.

First, we are going to protect ourselves.

I want to share the good news that thanks to the hard work of our Executive Director, Jill Cooper, and several members of this congregation, Beth David has received a grant from the State of Pennsylvania to reimburse us for the significant funds we have spent tightening our security measures in consultation with experts, and to allow us to take additional measures as well. We do not want to make Beth David a fortress: this should be a home and an oasis, but your safety is our first priority. I am particularly grateful to the Lower Merion Police Department

for their ongoing partnership and support to keep our building safe. We will not be scared away from being proudly Jewish, and we will not internalize other people's hatred.

Second, we are going to educate ourselves.

After the holiday, I will send out an email with recommended reading and viewing to learn more about Charlottesville and the White Nationalist groups. I hope you will take the time to delve more deeply into these materials, so that we might better understand the nature and the danger of this evil.

As you can see in the adult education booklets you received when you came in, we have several adult education programs coming up this fall that I hope will allow us to move this conversation forward as a community, including programs with the Anti-Defamation League, with a local racial justice activist and educator, and because we know that Jews and blacks are only two of the groups targeted by hate groups, with a panel of transgender equality activists as well.

Third, we are going to build bridges and take action.

I'm proud to share that last week, Beth David's Board of Trustees approved a commitment to the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism's *Brit Olam*, a Covenant with the World. Our congregation joined other Reform synagogues across the country in pledging to build relationships across lines of difference in our local community; to act at the local, state and federal levels to address the root causes of injustice; and to foster a culture of sacred and civil dialogue in our congregation where all opinions are heard, an issue I will speak more about on Yom Kippur. Going forward, we will explore participation in the Reform Movement's national campaign for racial justice, which begins with an internal process of reflection, research, and relationship-building with our neighbors. I hope you'll consider joining us at at least one of the programs we've organized this fall to help us begin that process. If you're interested in getting involved in any of this work, the Social Action committee will be having an open meeting in early October, and we need all the help we can get!

Tomorrow night, as I hope you've already heard already, we will be welcoming clergy and congregants from four nearby churches, St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, Gladwyne Presbyterian Church, St. John Vianney Catholic Church, and St. Thomas Historic African Episcopal Church, for a special service to stand up against hate, followed by a shared Shabbat dinner. We have partnered with all of these churches on past programming, but tomorrow evening promises to be very special. After Charlottesville, I spoke with the pastors of these churches, and all of them wanted to support us as a Jewish community at this frightening moment in America, and to stand up together against hate, racism, and anti-Semitism. I know, I know, it's a lot of synagogue for one week. But there is sacred, urgent work to be done. If we care about it, we need to prioritize it. I hope you're as proud as I am that we're hosting this service. The churches have been busy organizing their members to come to an unfamiliar building on a day that isn't their regular time during the week for worship so they experience Shabbat for the first time. Let's make sure we have a warm Beth David community here to welcome them.

Let the joy, the compassion, the generosity, and the love that shine out of this community be our torches in the night, so that we will not be frightened of any others.

*Im ein ani li, mi li? U-ch'she-ani l'atzmi, mah ani? V'im lo achshav, eimatai?*

If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But when I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?

Hillel spoke these words 2000 years ago, and still they seem to have been written for the new year dawning today, 5778.

May it be a new year of courage.

May it be a new year of love.

If not this year, then when?

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<sup>i</sup> Presentation by Rabbi Francine Roston and Deborah Lauter, T'ruah Convening, February 6,, 2017, New York City.

<sup>ii</sup> Debra Nussbaum Cohen, "Whitefish Rabbi Breaks Silence With a Warning to Jews: Nazism Is Alive and Well in America," *Haaretz*, February 10, 2017, <http://www.haaretz.com/us-news/.premium-1.770475>.

<sup>iii</sup> Southern Poverty Law Center, "Richard Bertrand Spencer," <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/individual/richard-bertrand-spencer-0>.

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>v</sup> Nussbaum Cohen, *ibid.*

<sup>vi</sup> <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/individual/richard-bertrand-spencer-0>

<sup>vii</sup> Chris Palmer, "Boy Charged as Synagogue Vandal," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 30 2017, [http://www.philly.com/philly/news/20170330\\_Boy\\_charged\\_as\\_synagogue\\_vandal.html](http://www.philly.com/philly/news/20170330_Boy_charged_as_synagogue_vandal.html).

<sup>viii</sup> Cameron Knight, "Support Pours into Hebrew Union College after Swastika Graffiti," January 3, 2017, <http://www.cincinnati.com/story/news/crime/2017/01/03/hebrew-union-college-sign-painted-swastika/96116230/>.

<sup>ix</sup> Daniel Politi, "Gay Pride Marchers Carrying Star of David Flags Kicked Out of Chicago Parade," *Slate*, June 25, 2017, [http://www.slate.com/blogs/the\\_slatest/2017/06/25/demonstrators\\_carrying\\_star\\_of\\_david\\_flags\\_kicked\\_out\\_of\\_chicago\\_dyke\\_march.html](http://www.slate.com/blogs/the_slatest/2017/06/25/demonstrators_carrying_star_of_david_flags_kicked_out_of_chicago_dyke_march.html)

<sup>x</sup> Danielle Ziri, "Anti-Semitic Twitter Storm Erupts After St. Louis Synagogue Shelters Protesters," *Jerusalem Post*, September 18, 2017, <http://www.jpost.com/Diaspora/Antisemitic-Twitter-storm-erupts-after-St-Louis-synagogue-shelters-protesters-505363>

<sup>xi</sup> Emma Green, "Why the Charlottesville Marchers Were Obsessed with Jews," *The Atlantic*, August 15, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/08/nazis-racism-charlottesville/536928/>.

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<sup>xii</sup> Dahlia Lithwick, “Drowning Out the Hate,” *Slate*, August 17, 2017, [http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/jurisprudence/2017/08/how\\_the\\_local\\_rabbi\\_deals\\_when\\_the\\_neo\\_nazis\\_come\\_to\\_town.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/jurisprudence/2017/08/how_the_local_rabbi_deals_when_the_neo_nazis_come_to_town.html).

<sup>xiii</sup> Alan Zimmerman, “In Charlottesville, the Local Jewish Community Presses On,” August 14, 2017, <https://reformjudaism.org/blog/2017/08/14/charlottesville-local-jewish-community-presses>.

<sup>xiv</sup> Elka Abrahamson and Judy Shanks, “One Voice for the New Year 2017,” Central Conference of American Rabbis.

<sup>xv</sup> Southern Poverty Law Center, “Hate groups increase for second consecutive year as Trump electrifies radical right,” February 15, 2017, <https://www.splcenter.org/news/2017/02/15/hate-groups-increase-second-consecutive-year-trump-electrifies-radical-right>.

<sup>xvi</sup> <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2017/year-hate-and-extremism>

<sup>xvii</sup> Green *ibid*.

<sup>xviii</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>xix</sup> Eric K. Ward, “How Anti-Semitism Animates White Nationalism,” *Political Research Associates*, June 29, 2017, <http://www.politicalresearch.org/2017/06/29/skin-in-the-game-how-antisemitism-animates-white-nationalism/>.

<sup>xx</sup> Abrahamson and Shanks, *Ibid*.