



Telephone Terrorism

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Delivered Sisterhood Shabbat, February 4, 2017 (8 Sh'vat 5777)

This summer our Temple Emanuel community went to the JCC to do “shul at the pool.” It was sunny and soulful, relaxing and renewing. What I remember most about being at the JCC are the smiles.

Think of the last time you were at the JCC. What did you see? Families swimming, kids running and playing, adults learning together, workouts, perhaps a play? It’s hard to imagine a place more wholesome than a JCC.

This past Tuesday, 17 bomb threats were called in to JCCs around the country. This was the third such rash of threats in the month of January alone. On January 9th, 16 JCCs were targeted. On January 18th, 28 JCCs in 17 states, including right here in Newton at our own Leventhal-Sidman JCC.

JTA released the audio of one of those calls warning that, “In a short time, a large number of Jews are going to be slaughtered.” What do we do with that? This isn’t Anatevka. This isn’t Nazi Germany. This is America, 2017.

While thankfully there was no actual bomb in any of these cases, this is not a crime without cost. These threats are meant to disrupt, to sow fear in the Jewish community.

Many Jews, and indeed the entire JCC system, have responded with a powerful reply: “We will not allow you to make us afraid!” As mother Jordana Horn wrote after the first series of threats, “The whole world is full of ... violence – shall I not choose to live in it? ...I will do my best to live as a light and to fight the darkness!”

Returning quickly to business as usual, the JCCs are a powerful example of a quintessentially important Jewish approach to terror: “You will not scare us away from rejoicing in life!”

After the most recent calls, I asked Samantha Levine-Neudel, a member here at Temple Emanuel, who works at the JCC and whose son, Coby, attends preschool there, what was it like to be there on January 18th?

She told me, “The JCC was prepared...Coby’s teachers were able to get 19 4- and 5-year-olds, jackets on, in line and out the door faster than I was able to grab my coat and walk out of my office.” She said that the teachers had done such an amazing job keeping the children calm that, “after school Coby told us about the ‘special fire drill adventure’ his class took.”

But Samantha also said, “It’s a balancing act as a parent to help your child feel safe and protected while hiding your worry that something could happen.”

That worry that something could happen does not go away just because these threats, thank God, proved to be baseless. We remember all too well the Overland Park JCC in Kansas in 2014 where a neo-Nazi, intending to kill Jews, shot and killed three people. We remember all too well 1999’s Los Angeles JCC shooting when a white supremacist shot children and teachers. As Jews, as a community, we must, and DO take these threats seriously.

And yet, I have noticed a disturbing trend. In the broader community, the recent bomb threats have made barely a ripple in the news cycle. In a time of resurgence of social activism, the threats that Jews are facing in America today seem to have hardly touched the popular conscience.

I’ve always been perplexed by those who respond to activism by Jews on behalf of other peoples by saying, “what about the Jews” as if it is a zero-sum game. We can BOTH support the stranger as the Torah commands AND stand up for the Jewish people. Which is why I worry

when, in those popular lists of threatened groups whom we stand for at rallies and in social media, Jews seem to be absent.

A few weeks ago a video went viral of a young boy, Royce Mann, who passionately recited an inspiring poem he had written at a large MLK Day memorial at the Ebenezer Baptist Church where the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King Jr. was once the pastor.

“Let’s rise up!” Mann called out. “Let’s rise up with ... the black man who walks down the street on the way to his job...only to pass a woman clutching her purse a little too tightly...Let’s rise up with the Muslim woman who works with the Justice Department only to experience injustice [herself]...Let’s rise up with the woman who was born in the US – why is she repeatedly told to go back to Mexico?...Let’s rise up with the young Native American poet. She speaks wisdom but no one listens...Let’s even rise up with the poor white boy...who is told he’s privileged but doesn’t feel that way...Now is the time...to rise up together as one.”

Although antisemitic violence has seen the steepest rise in recent history, there’s no, “Let’s rise up for the student in Lexington who says that swastikas are a regular sight in his school, and that jokes about the size of his nose or his greed are common.” Or, “Let’s rise up with the teacher in Stoughton whose student not only made a swastika but followed it up with an antisemitic curse in class, and yet when she responded to hate by withdrawing her college recommendation, she was suspended for 20 days without pay.” Who is rising up with them?

As one friend of mine said, “I could use a little intersectional love directed at the Jews right around now.”

It’s not just on the left that we are seeming to not quite make the list of minorities to rise up for; last week in the Presidential statement remembering the Holocaust, Jews were curiously absent. When asked why a statement about the Holocaust did not include Jews – the explicit targets and main victims of that atrocity – Press Secretary Sean Spicer replied that critics of the statement were “pathetic” and “nitpicking.”

In a time of great division and dissension between the right and the left, it is troubling to think that the one thing both sides may be united on is a creeping acceptance of antisemitism.

Today is Sisterhood Shabbat, and this was originally intended to be a sermon about women's roles and how far we have come at shul. We certainly have. From Hadassah Blocker paving the way, to this morning's participation of so many women in Torah reading. From baking kugels for kiddush to five women presidents, and not one but two female rabbis. When our congregation was founded, we could never have imagined this day. That fact is so important now.

You see, most of the time, in the Torah and in our lives, we are working our way *toward* redemption. This week, our people actually achieve redemption. We go free from Egypt. That redemption from Egypt becomes not just a one-time event but a template for all future redemptions.

Michael Walzer of Harvard writes that throughout Western history, our Exodus has been a template for social movements. A template for those who fled and fought England in Colonial times in search of the new Jerusalem here in America. A template for the African-American community fighting for civil rights. A template for those who fight for social justice today.

He writes, "We still believe...what the Exodus first taught," that "there is a better place, a world more attractive, a promised land; and... that 'the way to that land is through the wilderness' there is no way to get from here to there except by joining together and marching."

This is the great gift and great reminder of our Exodus story this morning – its promise that we CAN do better, and its challenge that it is up to us to find our way to march to the promised land together.

As impossible as it may seem today to fight the rising hatred and antisemitism in our world, we are reminded in our *parasha* today that we did the impossible. Our people went out from Egypt. Today at Sisterhood Shabbat, we are reminded that we at Temple Emanuel have

done our own *Yetziyat Mitzrayim*, from a beginning where women were bystanders in ritual life, to Rabbi Chiel's innovations towards women's equality, to full equality today. Within the walls of this synagogue, we truly have made incredible progress in not just participation, but leadership, of women.

Now it is time to remember that redemption is not "one and done." It is a continuing process, a template. Now it is time to turn that leadership toward the issues of our time.

After the recent bomb threat against the Albany JCC, Shelly Shapiro, the director of community relations for the Jewish Federation there, got a call from a local rabbi that she wanted to organize a vigil. "I have eight or ten people who want to stand up at the JCC," Rabbi Gordon said, "But I figured I'd call you."

Shelly Shapiro got to work. She reached out not only to Jewish congregations but the local Sikh community, to Christian congregations and to local community leaders. Last Wednesday, over 350 people showed up to stand with the Jewish community.

If we want to change this world, if we want to create a world where Jews, together with all people, are safe to gather, to swim, to go to school, to live, and to rejoice, we too must "rise up." The world is waiting again for redemption. The world is waiting for you.