

**“One Light”**

November 8th, 2016: a hopeful and excited nation went to the polls to cast its votes for the next president of the United States.

November 9th, 2016: family members stopped talking to one another and Thanksgiving plans were called off!

This happened. It happened in my own family, as extended family members went on radio silence with each other for about two weeks. And I know it happen to many of you – because you told me about it. As we say our *Al Chet's* this Yom Kippur, surely in retrospect shunning those closest to us for voting their conscience has to be near the top of the list. “*Al Chet sh'chatanu*, for the sin we have committed before You in passing judgment.”

Still, there's no question that our country woke up with a post-election realization that there are divides, I should say *chasms* between us that a lot of us didn't know existed. A major slice of America feels that it's been written out of the American story and abandoned. They are seeing their jobs disappear, the browning of America with an influx of immigrants, the declining influence of their Christian values, and the *rising* influence of what they view as a liberal elite.

And now, here we are ten months later, it seems that America is at war with itself in a way that we have not experienced since the 1960's. Alienation between left and right is palpable and growing. Demonstrations are turning into armed confrontations. Free speech is crossing over to hate speech, while Twitter feeds are broadcasting personal attacks and character assassination to millions of followers. “*Al Chet sh'chatanu lifanecha*, for the sin we have committed against You by baseless hatred.”

The complexion of our country is really changing. Here's a statistic for you: White Christians today make up only 43% of our population. The fact is that America is no longer a majority white Christian nation. And many Christians now fear that their values are under assault. So, they're rising up and waging what they call the fight for “religious freedom” – which can mean the freedom to refuse business services to gays and lesbians, or to limit access to women's health services, or to fight back against what they call the “War on Christmas,” which Jews and non-Christians have allegedly championed against America.

For us, this is obviously very challenging. And last month in Charlottesville, Virginia our alarm bells reached a crescendo. Never before have neo-Nazis and white supremacists, armed with semi-automatic rifles, torches, and Nazi flags,

threatened an American synagogue during Shabbat services, shouting over and over again “Sieg Heil, blood and soil, Jews will not replace us.” Never before in America have Jews so feared for their lives in a house of worship that they were forced to flee out the back door and secret away their Torah scrolls, including one Holocaust scroll. This doesn’t happen in 2017, but it did.

And things are not getting better, they’re getting worse. Anti-Semitism is up 86% in just the first quarter of this year. We are experiencing bomb threats, vandalism, desecration of Jewish cemeteries. And last year, there were 382,000 anti-Semitic posts on social media, some 10% of those calling for violence against Jews.

Here’s just one threatening message that a random Jewish resident of Elkins Park, Pennsylvania received: “...God, I hope for a second Holocaust. You people never learn, of course, but it’ll be fun to watch it happen to trash like you...” And this little eloquent epithet was etched not once, but twice into the same middle school bathroom wall in Boston: “Burn the Jews.”

By the way, guess which state in the country has the highest number of anti-Semitic incidents this year? You may not believe it, but California tops the list. So, it’s not just Charlottesville.

Of course, we are no strangers to anti-Semitism in America. There was the famous Leo Frank affair in 1913, in which a Jewish, Cornell educated superintendent of a pencil factory in Atlanta was convicted of murder in a farcical trial tainted and rigged by anti-Semitism. After the U.S. Supreme Court finally stayed his execution in 1915 because of it, he was then kidnapped from his prison cell, and hung by a waiting lynch mob – consisting of no less than the former governor of Georgia, the mayor of Marietta, and many other distinguished dignitaries.

Father Coughlin, a Catholic priest in the 1930’s, used his popular radio show as a forum for anti-Semitic screeds. He famously declared at a rally: "When we get through with the Jews in America, they'll think the treatment they received in Germany was nothing."

Up through the 1960’s, Jews were rejected from many universities as both students and faculty. We hit a glass ceiling in business, where it was made clear that Jews could not advance into executive ranks. And we were legally restricted by covenants from buying homes in certain neighborhoods, like Rancho Santa Fe and La Jolla.

But, in recent years, we thought all of this was largely behind us. It seemed to us that George Washington’s letter to the Jews of Newport Rhode Island back in

1790, had finally taken hold:

“May the Children of the Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other Inhabitants; while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and figtree, and there shall be none to make him afraid.”

But, I am afraid, not for my personal safety or yours, but for the future of our country. The pain is deep, and so are the divisions between us. And the question is, what are we supposed to do?

I think the first thing we have to do as Jews, is speak out forcefully and publicly against anti-Semitism. We have to name it when we see it, and condemn those who perpetrate it. When crowds are marching with torches, Nazi flags, and shouting anti-Semitic slogans, it is incumbent upon good people to leave that march, even those who came to protest something else. Good people do not march with neo-Nazis and white supremacists, period. We all have to call that out and flush out anti-Semites from the darkness of their basements and subversive websites. We have to shine a light on them, and expose them, and not equivocate in our words or deeds.

At the same time, we also have to denounce the violent tactics of Antifa on the left. Like the radical Weathermen in the 1960's, they came to Charlottesville armed and looking for a street brawl. This undermines the righteousness of any cause, and is also to be unequivocally condemned.

Elie Wiesel once said that the “opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference.” “Al chet sh'chatanu l'fanecha, for the sin we have committed before you intentionally or unintentionally.” There is no excuse for not speaking out forcefully and unconditionally.

This leads to the second thing we have to do – which is to realize that Charlottesville was not only about us. White supremacists and neo-Nazis were equally directing their vile racism at Blacks, at Muslims, at immigrants, and all others of color and difference in this country.

Rabbi Hillel once asked: “If I am only for myself, what am I?” We Jews have to face this question today.

The Rev. Al Sharpton, with whom many in the Jewish community have disagreements, recently wrote an editorial in the Israeli Haaretz Newspaper, of all places. This was certainly intentional, because he knew he could reach a large audience of American Jews. He wrote about the “One Thousand Ministers March for Justice” that he recently organized on the 54<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Rev.

Martin Luther King's original March on Washington. He said: "We as faith leaders joined in unison because we know that an attack on one group or an injustice against one group is an injustice against us all."

And that's why the leaders of our Reform Movement were in the forefront of that march, just as we were with Dr. King in 1963.

This is not an easy thing. In my own interfaith and social justice work, I have learned a new term. Intersectionality. Intersectionality means that sometimes Justice for Palestine is part of the African American narrative. It means that someone wrapped in an Israeli Flag is thrown out of a Gay Pride march in Chicago. It means that we work with Evangelical Christians and Catholics on aiding immigrants, even though we may disagree on gay rights or birth control.

Intersectionality is messy. It challenges us to find our common ground, even when it's uncomfortable.

First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—  
Because I was not a Socialist.

Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—  
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—  
Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

So famously wrote Rev. Martin Niemöller, words now etched on the walls of the U.S. Holocaust Museum. "Al Chet shechatanu, for the sin we have committed before You by a confused heart." Intersectionality cannot be an excuse to avoid working with others, even and especially when we disagree.

Still, I don't think even this will be enough. We can call out anti-Semitism and racism when we see it. We can join arms with coalition partners and champion each other's causes. But, in my view, this alone will not eradicate hate.

So, here's what I've been thinking about. As we watched the utter devastation of Hurricanes Harvey, and Irma, and Maria – homes, streets, neighborhoods flooding, power grids and water shutting down, people stranded, elderly desperate, and rescues coming from all quarters, from the redneck Cajun navy to human chains of black and white and brown pulling people to safety – do you think that anybody asked the victims how they voted before pulling them into their boats? Did they refuse to take the hand of an undocumented immigrant

to form those human chains? Did it matter who was Jewish or Christian, gay or straight?

This time of insanity caused by chaotic hurricanes, seems to me like one of *sanest* moments our country has experienced since the election. And actually, it gives me hope. Hope that, at the root of it all, there is a great spirit of humanity we all share. An instinct, if you will, to forget about our differences and band together in the face of greater threats.

We have seen it time and time again – not only in the selfless rescuers who ran into the towers on 9/11, but in the Evangelical Christians who sponsor diverse immigrant families in San Diego, in our Jewish Family Service that serves Jews and non-Jews alike, in the massive mobilization of Stand Down San Diego that supports our homeless veterans, in our own Interfaith Shelter hosts and our volunteers who prepare and serve meals at Haven House for Solel Serves.

Voter preferences are left at the door. Political and social disagreements don't even come up. There is something larger and more important operating – our common humanity.

Eleanor Roosevelt once said: "it is better to light a candle than curse the darkness."

This is the third thing we need to do. It's not enough to curse the darkness of racism and anti-Semitism; it's not even enough join in coalition with our partners for social justice, though these are important. "Al chet sh'chatanu lifenechu, for the sin we have committed before You by hard heartedness." I believe that the only way we are going to truly lift up our country and get past our differences is by caring for one another as human beings and working together in common cause.

On Yom Kippur we declare, "The great Shofar is sounded, a still small voice is heard." That still small voice is Elijah's prophetic call to justice. Only through our acts of lovingkindness will this world be redeemed and our divisions healed. Instead of shouting at the darkness, alienating our family and friends, we need to light a candle.

In addition to condemning neo-Nazis, we have to lift up those who are disenfranchised in America – black, brown, and white.

In addition to marching with our coalition partners and raising our voices against racism, we have to feed the hungry, care for homeless veterans, embrace the new immigrant, help under-served kids get a head start in school.

In our age of high decibel political noise, we need to listen for the still small voice. This is the voice that calls us together, bridges our divides, and lifts us up to service. It is the voice of the Cajun Navy and heroes of Hurricanes Harvey, and Irma, and Maria. It's the voice that will ultimately lead us, if we heed it, to heal this divided country and celebrate what unites us.

Al chet sh'chatanu lifanecha:

For the sin we have committed before You in passing judgment on our friends and family members.

For the sin of baseless hatred of left against right, and right against left.

For the sin we have committed intentionally or unintentionally, by failing to take a moral stand when it is called for.

For the sin we have committed by a confused heart that keeps us from making messy alliances with those with whom we have other disagreements.

For the sin we have committed before You by hard heartedness, ignoring human suffering in any and all political camps, races, or national origins.

In his book "The Open Heart," Elie Wiesel could have been speaking to this exact moment when he wrote:

We must choose between the violence of adults and the smiles of children, between the ugliness of hate and the will to oppose it. Between inflicting suffering and humiliation on our fellow man and offering him the solidarity and hope he deserves. I know - I speak from experience - that even in darkness it is possible to create light and encourage compassion.

This, more than ever, is our challenge: to refuse surrender to dark cynicism.

Our rabbis taught: "ner l'echad, ner l'meah - one person's lamp is a light unto many!" This is precisely the power we have to overcome our divisions, to heal our national wounds, to combat anti-Semitism and racism – the power of one light.

As we try to regain our personal bearings during this time of national discord, let us kindle our lamp and *be* the light for others.

Let us show that, "it is better to light a candle than curse the darkness."