

Vayechi 2018/5779

50 years ago, our country seemed in turmoil: 1968 witnessed the assassinations of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Bobby Kennedy, the Tet Offensive in Vietnam that devastated American and Allied forces, massive anti-war protests on college campuses and actual riots at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, the Prague Spring drive for democracy in Czechoslovakia that was violently put down by the Soviet Union, an unprovoked seizure of the US Naval ship Pueblo by North Korea that threatened to rekindle war in the Korean peninsula. The downtowns of many U.S. cities burned in race riots; our world, over government, the fabric of what makes us a nation was at the verge of tearing apart.

And yet, on Dec. 24, 1968, the world was fixated on three earthlings, Frank Borman, Jim Lovell and Bill Anders, as for the first time in history angled their Apollo 8 module in a trajectory that would either swing them around the moon back to earth, or if calculations were off by a meter or two, hurl them out towards Saturn, or worse, crash them into the moon's surface. For a scary 30 min period as they whipped around the darkside of the moon, they would be in communication blackout. At precisely 11AM EST, the voice of Mission Commander Borman came online, and as their capsule aimed back towards the earth, the crew witnessed a first for mankind, the view of the earth rising over the moon's horizon. Bill Anders grabbed a 70mm Hasselblad camera and shot what has become one of the most iconic images of man's space travels, *Earthrise*. Later that day, as the crew marveled how the earth's blue hue made it so different from that of all other planets in our system, they took turns reading the first 10 verses of Genesis. William Anders started off:

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.

And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep.

And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.

And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.

And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness

For a brief moment, there were no nations, no tribes, no hate, no intolerance, no cities burning, no assassinations, because for that brief moment, we were all earthlings, all equally awed by the splendor of the heavens, all linked by a common spark of wonder, all children of a Divine creator.

In my lifetime, there have been only several such moments when I felt that I was truly connected by a common thread, a common ethos by being a citizen of earth. Some were positive public events like the Apollo 11 moon landing by Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin, the moments rescuers pulled out people who had been trapped in mines or caves; some were private events like witnessing the birth of my daughters. And some were negative, such as how I witnessed people come together to help and protect each other right after the 9/11 attacks or the tsunamis that hit Thailand, Banda Aceh or Japan.

And most recently, the murder of 11 worshippers in the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh.

The one thing all these events have in common is that they serve to connect each and every one of us, no matter what religion, ethnicity, color, sexuality or political affiliation. At these moments, what matters is our humanity, our common sense of love and caring, the fact that we share 99.9% of our DNA. At these moments, it could have been anyone of us, worshipping in our holy places, celebrating an event with our family, our community.

Deborah Lipstadt, the Dorot Professor Modern Jewish History and Holocaust Studies at Emory University, wrote a very telling essay in the November issue of the Forward entitled, "In the Wake of Pittsburgh, We Can't Let Anti-Semitism Define Us". In it, she argues that: "It is not about what the anti-Semites might do to us. It is about what we might do to ourselves because of anti-Semitism", that "we cannot let anti-Semitism become the building block and the foundation stone of our Jewish identity. Doing that, hands our enemies a victory", and that "what is regrettable, however, is that for some Jews, the fight against anti-Semitism becomes the sum total of their Jewish identity."

Although Lipstadt has fought hard to address current strains of anti-Semitism, including the Holocaust denial by David Irving that was part of the recent movie, literally called, "Denial", her lament is that we should be teaching our children that their vibrant Jewish heritage is based on beautiful traditions, rituals, ethical belief systems, and wonderfully insightful texts starting with the Torah, and yes, we should be also teaching them about anti-Semitism and the Holocaust. But in her words, "it would be folly to make [anti-Semitism] the organizing principle of their lives." I must admit that as I read more of her article, I agreed more with this principle, and that is because that although the Pittsburgh shooting targeted Jews, our grief

should be universal; it should be the same grief that a fellow Christian or Muslim or Asian or lesbian should have- the grief that if Jews are not safe in their houses of worship, then none of us is safe. What makes the Pittsburgh shooting different from, say, Kristallnacht, is that in every major city including ours people of every religion, color, political affiliation, sexual orientation, everyone came out to protest the shooting. They did it in silent candle-led vigils, in tear-filled memorial services, by wearing football cleats that added the Star of David to the triple star logo of the Pittsburgh Steelers. They did it by raising money for local security, they did it by offering to take some shifts of the Pittsburgh JCC community relief workers. Unlike 1938, when regular Germans did not flock to help their co-citizens, the response nationwide to Pittsburgh was “we are family”, “we got your back.”

The tragedy of the lack of community response by Germans to Kristallnacht meant that vandalizations and burning of Jewish institutions was a “Jewish problem”, not a universal one. In the same way, if we as Jews only define our Jewishness relative to the threat of anti-Semitism, whatever tragedies befall are just Jewish problems. This, I think, is the crux of Lipstadt’s argument- that anti-Semitic acts are not just Jewish issues or Jewish concerns, but societal ones. And it was in this vein that I was so proud that our community’s memorial service that next day at Temple Beth Tzedek involved clergy from many faiths and politicians from all parties. We all understood the irony that a killer targeted Jews because a vestigial Jewish immigration organization, HIAS, had for years been resettling Muslims and people of color, that Jews were killed because the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society looked past its name and helped non-Hebrews. It was a truly Jewish value to remember that the word, *ger*, stranger, is mentioned 36 times in the Torah, admonishing us to treat the *ger* with kindness “because you were once a stranger in the land of Egypt.” It was a Jewish value that when the Tree of Life shooter, Robert Gregory Bowers, arrived at a local hospital, Jewish doctors and nurses helped to treat his wounds and save his life.

Whether intended or not, the Trump presidency has unleashed haters from all corners who see the America First doctrine as validation of their greater American-ness over others, and for their tribal notions that “others”, those who are somehow different, are not welcome, and perhaps, do not even deserve to live. Ironically, even though some justify this belief with a religious or political basis, no major organized religion or major political party gives countenance to this notion. I am angry at them, and feel strongly that all of us need to fight them at every junction, every time. But I also feel

sad for them because just like Dr. Lipstadt wars us not to define ourselves solely through the lens of anti-Semitism, they have defined themselves through a lens of hate.

As their Apollo 8 capsule headed back to earth, Frank Borman finished the verses from Genesis:

And God said, Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together unto one place, and let the dry land appear: and it was so.

And God called the dry land Earth; and the gathering together of the waters called He, Seas: and God saw that it was good.

And after wishing everyone a good night, good luck and a Merry Christmas, Borman concluded, "God bless all of you, all of you on the good Earth."

One notion gives me solace in these trying times: I imagine that if Robert Gregory Bowers was the fourth man in that Apollo 8 command module, that just seeing that blue earth rise over the moonscape, that shared, fragile home to all of us, that somehow the humanity buried deep inside of him would have burst out as he said, "God bless all of you, all of you on the good Earth."

Shabbat shalom.