

White Supremacy
Rosh Hashanah Morning 5780
Rabbi Deborah A. Hirsch

“Life can turn on a dime” (Huffpost, 2/12/15, Jeffrey Shaw), so the saying goes. Indeed these High Holy Days underscore this theme in bright red. We pray to enter through the gates of life for the New Year. The *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer, pronounces what we all know, some of us, some of our loved ones, will live and some will die before the Gates of Life open again in 5781. Some will be tormented and some content. The urgency of life is personified in both, the *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur* morning *Torah* portions. On *Yom Kippur*, Moses and God plead with the Israelites poised to cross over into the new land, to choose life by following God’s *mitzvot*. The *Torah* portion this morning is more challenging, as we only read one part of the Isaac narrative--his near-sacrifice ordeal on Mount Moriah. Our *Torah* chanters this morning chanted Genesis, chapter 22. But, just one chapter prior, in Chapter 21, we read of Isaac’s birth. With Isaac’s first cry, God solidified the Divine promise, to make Avram a great and mighty nation. And then, life turned on a dime, and Abraham, Sarah and Isaac’s lives were forever changed. If it wasn’t for the ram caught in the thicket, The Jewish people’s lifespan could have been enshrined in 2 chapters--58 verses of *Torah*. The *Torah* portion and these Days of Awe reminds us of God’s eternity and our infinitesimal human footprint on earth. As I mentioned last night, all time exists within God. But, Is there a middle ground here--something between our narrow lens on life and God’s infinite expanse? If so, for whom?

History is replete with seemingly invincible nations and empires: Babylonia, Greece, The Holy Roman Empire, The Ottomans. And then, their dominant star faded or they were conquered by enemy nations. One or two hundred years as a world power, is a drop in history’s bucket.

In 1919, Adolph Hitler joined the German Workers’ Party, and by 1920, he was its premiere propaganda spokesperson. Between 1919 and 1945--26 short years- the world experienced the Rise and Fall of Adolph Hitler and the Third Reich. For those who were exterminated--26 years was sufficient to squash the dreams of millions of families. In 1945, many assumed that White Nationalism, personified by Hitler, had been obliterated. Western Democracy soon positioned itself against the expansion of the Soviet Union’s Communist Block. The Berlin Wall was as much a psychological barrier as it was a physical one. After World War II, it was no surprise that a fledgling Civil Rights Movement emerged to address racism and persecution on American soil.

In 2019, the dime is spinning once again. The hate and vitriol emblematic of Hitler’s White Nationalism-White Supremacy, are again alive and well across Europe and in the United States. This morning I would like to look at the stormy winds blowing across Europe. As George Santayana taught, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” Can, or will Europe fight and defeat the stirring demonic forces of its white supremacist past, that are gaining alarming traction, or will Jews and other minorities once again become victims of state sponsored hate?

In July, Carole and I ventured on our first river cruise that sailed down the Danube from Prague to Budapest. We spent extra days in both cities, hired private Jewish guides in advance to show us the Jewish sites in Prague & Budapest and they did not disappoint. Both guides left us with the strongest impression that Hitler’s war machine did not utterly destroy *B’nai Yisrael*--

but the children who wrestled with God and Nazis, defied annihilation and did not abandon their Jewish heritage or faith.

Truth be told, I had some apprehension booking a Danube Cruise. My parents instilled in me from a young age, an anti-Germany bias. Born less than a decade after World War II, I like so many other baby boomers grew up being taught, never to buy a German car, let alone visit Germany. During my early teenage years I consumed every book written by Eli Weisel--*Night, The Accident, Jews of Silence...etc.* Germany was the epicenter for 20th century Jewish destruction. Hearing German spoken in a restaurant or at a hotel swimming pool caused a palpable dis-ease in me. The Valley of Destroyed Communities memorial at *Yad Vashem* provides a haunting visual of Hitler's impact. It is an outdoor memorial comprised of pillars, resembling a map of World War II Europe. Inscribed on the concrete pillars are the names of the more than 5000 Jewish communities destroyed during the *Shoah*. A majority of my paternal grandfather's relatives were the sad statistics embedded between the letters of towns I couldn't identify. For me, Bavaria, is the home of Oberammergau--the town where an annual, disturbing, unrelenting, antisemitic Passion Play of Jesus--always with grotesque Jewish stereotypes, is held.

In Prague, Carole and I went on a cruise-sponsored tour to *Terezin*, the former military fortress transformed into a combination of Jewish ghetto and concentration camp. Though not an extermination camp, 33,000 people died due to the subhuman conditions and another 80,000 were sent to extermination camps, particularly to Auschwitz. Two-thirds of Prague's Jewish community, 73,000 souls, was slaughter in the Shoah. It was my second time at *Terezin*, and each step was painful even as it touched holy time that I spoke of last night.

The day after *Terezin*, we found ourselves in Nuremberg. Suffice it to say our emotions were still raw from the previous day when we opted for an excursion to the Nazi Rally Grounds in Nuremberg. How many here have visited those demonic ruins? Many of us know of the 1945-46 trials of the Nazi war criminals held at Nuremberg, made famous by the film, starring Spencer Tracy and Burt Lancaster. Having now visited Nuremberg I better understand the poignancy in those trials being held in that particular city. Twelve years prior to the trials, from 1933-1938, when Hitler and his Aryian, White Supremacist nation was on an unstoppable path to absolute power, Nuremberg was the host "City of Nazi Party Rallies." Brigit Katz from the *Smithsonian* gives this description: "Designed by Albert Speer, Hitler's chief architect, the complex boasted sprawling tent encampment and barracks where visitors could stay during the weeklong rallies, a grande parade street that spanned more than one mile, a Congress Hall that could seat 50,000 people, a stadium where tens of thousands of German youths displayed their vigor before the Fuhrer, and the so-called 'Zeppelinfeld,' a fortification-like arena where Hitler surveyed his adoring supporters from a large grandstand." (Smart New, *Smithsonian.Com*, Brigit Katz, May 21, 2019).

The site spanned the size of more than 12 football stadiums. A woman from the cruise told us of a Jewish woman who lived in Nuremberg at the time, who lamented not being able to attend the rallies because she was Jewish. She was drawn to the pomp and excitement she witnessed from a distance. The Rallies were symbolic of a new Germany, they exuded a nationalistic fervor that lifted a World War I, snapped, German spirit. Standing at the rally-ground site was chilling...much of it has fallen into disrepair. But it did not take much imagination to create in my mind's eye the sheer frenzy of those rallies. Hitler's voice bellowing across a microphone...the blond Aryian youth with broad smiles...all taking place years before the first German soldier marched into Poland.

Indeed Hitler's Germany in the 1930s oozed with white, nationalistic pride--eugenics on steroids-- as white Aryian populists--defenders of the Folk Parties-- quickly absorbed Hitler's poisonous rhetoric decrying the Jews as subhuman.... The brown shirts inflicted the physical bite that spewed Hitler's verbal antisemitic venom. Fourteen words from Hitler's Mein Kampf became their mantra. "We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children." For them, Germany's glowing future could only be secured by annihilating its Jewish citizens.

Eighty years have passed since the start of World War II--eighty years--the bible's definition of one's lifespan. Throughout my life, I thought I grew up knowing who the good guys were--which countries upheld the tenets of freedom and democracy that underpin our country's DNA. By the 1960s, England, France, Germany, Italy, Japan...were our allies. There was electricity in the air when the Berlin Wall was torn down and the Soviet Union crumbled into separate, democratic countries. The Czeck Republic, Slovakia...Hungary...all adopted a swath of western values. And then, the European Union emerged...tearing down the borders that defined European countries' individuality. Surely democracy was on a clear trajectory for the foreseeable future.

Jonathan Weisman in his book, (((Semitism))), cautions, "Jews flourish when walls and borders come down." Not just physical borders, but barriers of status, education, and economic opportunity. Yet today, we read of calls for concrete borders, strangling immigration restrictions, zero-sympathy for those seeking asylum..xenophobia. Historically, Jews have always suffered when restrictions were imposed. And now, Europe is experiencing a White Nationalist Renaissance--its democratic foundations are cracking. And though there are similarities between what is transpiring in the United States and in Europe, there are clear-cut distinctions that separate America's racism from that of Europe. On *Yom Kippur*, when we perform *cheshbon hanefesh*, and accounting of our souls, we will examine how far our country has strayed from the American ideals of truth, justice and the American way.

In May, the BBC reported the following: "Nationalism has always been a feature across Europe's political spectrum but there has been a recent boom in voter support for right-wing and populist parties." The percentage of votes nationalists parties won in this year's elections included: Italy 17.4%, Sweden 17.6% Germany 12.6%, Austria 26% France 13% and Switzerland 29%. In 1928, The Social Democratic Party of Germany, Hitler's party won 153 of 491, just over 30 % of the vote. Germany's democratic government crumbled less than 2 years later. If, and it is a big if, the governments of these countries today adopt radical white nationalistic policies, then European Jewry and other minorities will be entering precarious and dangerous times.

The last stop on our cruise was Budapest. I fell in love with Budapest; however, there is a dark underbelly swallowing that country. In the election earlier this year, 68% of Hungary voted for parties with radical white nationalistic roots. (Fidesz 49% and Jobbik 19%). In May, our president praised Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orban, saying he was 'respected all over Europe and has 'kept Hungary safe,'(BBC, May 13) Orban, has been widely criticized for "overseeing a rollback of democracy in his country, used antisemitic and xenophobic tropes in his political messgaing and cozied up to Vladimir Putin and the Kremlin." (The Guardian, Julian Borger & Shaum Walker May 13, 2019).

In recent years, Hungary has even succeeded in rewriting history. In the middle of the night in 2014, a monument was erected in Budapest "to all the victims of Hungary's German occupation." The monument depicts a German Eagle swooping down on Hungary, symbolized

by St. Gabriel. The monument leaves the impression that Hungary was invaded--was a helpless victim of Nazi invasion. In Fact, Hungary welcomed Germany. Hungary was Hitler's ally. Because of that complicit relationship, Budapest's Jewish population avoided deportation until the last months of the war, until Hitler knew a surrender was inevitable. In January, 1945, just weeks before liberation, Hungary's fascist Arrow Cross militia shot nearly 20,000 Jews on the banks of the Danube and was responsible for killing more than 40,000 Jews within three months of liberation. The Freedom Square statue has drawn protest and criticism from within Hungary and beyond. In front of the statue, from end to end, protest pictures and statements have been attached to a low fence, each denouncing the monument as a lie. Indeed there are devastating winds of change blowing across Europe. Indeed, it is all-too-easy to experience an overwhelming sense of despair.

A question I believe many have asked, including myself, is, Is there a difference between Germany's White Nationalism of 1929 and White Nationalism in Europe today? Is European Jewry and other minorities, poised once again as scapegoats? We know that for the past 5 years, Jews are emigrating in large numbers from their once friendly European homes. "According to a 12-country survey conducted in 2018 by the EU's Fundamental Rights Agency, 89% of European Jews feel that antisemitism has increased in their countries in the last decade." And not just in Germany, or Hungary but even in Scandinavia where there are only 18,000 Jews--an ironic Chi statistic. (The Telegraph, Sept. 3, 2019 Luke Mintz "How a Battered Trunk Unlocked my Family's Holocaust Secrets") Is there a ram in the thicket, like the one that saved Isaac from the sacrificial altar? Are there voices of protest...voices for inclusion? When Hitler rose to power, he had garnered the overwhelming support of the German people. Opposition to Hitler and his policies were crushed by the Gestapo and SS. There were pockets of resistance, like the Munich students who in 1942 formed the White Rose--but, soon after its formation, its founders were arrested and killed.

Despite today's shifting European landscape...despite glaring yellow cautionary signals...there have pockets of positive forces. Time Magazine in June (June 20), sounded the alarm regarding rising antisemitism. And, it underscored a critical distinction between past and present, that gives hope. The article stated, "As antisemitism has risen, the fight against it has intensified, both among regular Europeans and their politicians." From President Macron to Prime Minister Merkel, European leaders have denounced this new wave of antisemitism, and the tsunami of hate it has unleashed. It is when government is mute...or when public officials condone or incite antisemitic violence...when white nationalists feel empowered to hate...the heart of democracy skips a beat. Despite the alarming growth, in fact, steps have been taken not only to preserve history, but to rectify it--moments when the voices of justice prevail...where truth leads to *Teshuvah*...where hope illumines the darkest skepticism.

In June, Newspapers across the globe reported the bold steps taken by the Reimann Family, Germany's second richest family...owners of JAB Holding Company, whose companies include: Crispy Cream, Peet's Coffee, Panera, and Snapple. Peter Harf, whose own father was a Nazi, became chairman of JAB this year. He felt something amiss regarding the family's accounting for the war years. Applying the same tenacity as to fixing a corporate challenge, Harf dug deep into the Reimann family closet and outed a deeply guarded secret. The half-Jewish worker, Emilie Landecker fell in love with Albert Reimann Jr. who was 'an unconditional follower' of Hitler and a champion of forced labor camps. Emilie's father was deported and later killed by the Nazis. She was the mother of Reimann's only 3 children, whom Reimann adopted in the 1960s. They never spoke of their ironic dark past. When confronted with the truth, the

Reimann family did not shirk responsibility. Like individuals who discover an unknown sibling, thanks to 23 and Me, the Reimann family struggled not only with the impact of their Notorious father and half-Jewish mother, they were cognizant of the impact this closet skeleton would have on their multi-billion dollar empire. The decision was swift: \$11 million Euros was donated to institutions providing direct restitution to former forced labor families. The family foundation, renamed Alfred Landecker, will commit \$25 million euros, to projects, “that honor the memory of the victims of the Holocaust and of Nazi terror.” A university chair will be named in Landecker’s memory as well. As German white nationalists seek to cleanse their land of Jews and immigrants, we can not underestimate the significance and power of a university department chair, or foundation, being named for a Jewish victim of the Shoah.

L’shintantam L’vanecha--you shall teach your children-- lives in Nuremberg. Built on the northern site of the Rally Grounds’ lives the Documentation Centre Nazi Party Rally Grounds. It houses the permanent exhibition entitled “Fascination and Terror” which documents the rise and fall of the Third Reich. Students throughout Germany are required to visit the museum, and on the morning Carole and I were there, it was almost impossible to move because of the number of students filtering through each room. Despite the rise of nationalism and antisemitism in Germany, the government sponsored museum provides a reality check for truth and fact, not just today but for future generations. And the street at the intersection before the Documentation Centre is named for Yitzhak Rabin.

The third example and the most uplifting one for me, was in the town of Regensburg, in the heart of Bavaria--the oldest documented Jewish community in Germany, stemming back to the early 11th century. Jews thrived in Regensburg until they didn’t. Economic decline and religious persecution were again the culprits. On February 21, 1519, 500 Jews and 80 yeshiva students were expelled from the town. Jews returned to Regensburg in the late 17th century but enjoyed none of the freedoms they had prior to expulsion. In fact they were forced to wear the all too familiar yellow badge. Following Napoleon, Jews enjoyed more rights and freedoms and again the community thrived until Kristallnacht in 1938, where much of the synagogue was destroyed. On February 21st of this year, 500 years to the day, after the Jewish expulsion from Regensburg, a new synagogue was dedicated--attached to the Bet Midrash of the synagogue mostly destroyed on Kristallnacht. The sanctuary is made from beautiful, light wood. There is a part-time Orthodox rabbi who serves the 1000 Jews of Regensburg. As I stood in the sanctuary at the bimah, my heart was uplifted, and the pain I felt in Nuremberg began to subside. Indeed there is hope. Similar to the Jews in Prague and Budapest, this remnant, like the Jews who returned after the destruction of the first temple, are planting deep Jewish roots in Regensburg. I did not see a transcript of the words spoken at the dedication, but I would not be surprised if one of the inscriptions on our Blessings’ Canopy marked that moment of sacred dedication --*Zeh Hayom Asah Adonai Nagila v’Nishm’cha Vo*--This is a day that God has made let us rejoice and be glad in it.

On this dawn of a New Year, we pray that our brothers and sisters in Europe, like those in Prague, Budapest and Regensburg, stand strong and proud. May the leaders of the free world, continue to combat the populist forces of antisemitism that are sewing seeds of hate throughout their countries and may they never relent on providing government protection to all of their citizens. May they be girded with strength and justice and righteousness. *Keyn Yihi Ratzon.*