

Shanah Tovah - it's wonderful to see everyone gathered here today. . .

Every day, the world loses at least one of our blessed Holocaust survivors, the last remaining witnesses to the horrors that befell our people. .

In our Kol Shofar community, we are very fortunate to have Sonia Orbuch, a Holocaust survivor from Luboml - a Polish town, once home to 8000 Jews. Today she lives in Corte Madera and I visit her whenever I can.

In 1941, her town fell under German occupation. At age 16, she joined a partisan group in the freezing forest. She treated injured partisans, using makeshift supplies for sabotage and resistance missions. To avoid torture and interrogation, she had two hand grenades: one for the enemy and one for herself.

There were many, many, many Sonias - Jews, fleeing, fighting and dying. And we swore, we vowed from that day on, "Never Again, never again."

We live in very frightening times. A swastika at Novato High, Hall Middle School in Larkspur reports a series of anti-Semitic incidents, San Rafael High, Davidson Middle School, Mill Valley Middle School, more swastikas and anti-Semitic language, even right here in Tiburon. . . . Right here in our own county. Swastikas, anti-Semitic language and hate: unbelievable, inconceivable, right?

And then came Charlottesville. Americans, marching as Neo-Nazis, screaming, "Jews will not replace us." Torch-carrying mobs ignited by hate, shouted, "we will kill these people," yelling "Sieg Heil," "Burn the synagogues," - a Nazi salute. The courageous rabbi raced to hide all the Torahs.

Leviticus says, "We will not stand idly by the blood of our neighbor," because hate is evil and with evil, there is only one side. Every human being is a sacred light, not to be snuffed out by hate. There is only one side. And the president of the United States of America initially defended them, saying there were "some very fine people on both sides." A very fine

person, Mr. President, does not march under a Nazi flag. Anyone who defends this, has lost their moral compass.

I never thought I would have to talk about neo-Nazis to a congregation. But these are Nazis, neo or otherwise. They put our people in gas chambers. And people defended the silence of our president. And we swore, and we vowed, "Never Again, never Again."

It's Rosh Hashanah - our annual homecoming of our Jewish family: Jews, those who love Jews, those who are raising Jews, fill this beautiful space and the rabbi feels there's no choice but to speak about this. If not now, when? And If not among our Jewish family, among whom will we speak?

And so we do speak. We speak for all those who are victims and victimized by hate, anti-Semitism, racism, not just Jews.

Many of us would rather hear some words of Torah and something to feel good about - I feel the same way. I respect that deeply and I will do that today. I know that some of you do not wish to be reminded of it. But for many of us the fear is real. Our bodies are reacting. Things feel very different. Our psyches have been rattled by a reality we never imagined, not in America.

I have to admit that for the first time as a Jew, I felt afraid walking in Berkeley the week of the Bay Area protests, wearing my kippah, thinking some neo-Nazi was going to jump out at me and crack my head with a stick. Yes, I was afraid.

I am afraid that the efforts of the Alt-right movement have legitimized neo-Nazism. Will the rest of America look away? Or will they have the courage to call a spade, a spade, and to not remain silent. These people are not alt-right, they are neo-Nazis.

I am afraid.

Our brains, of course, in order to survive, are wired to respond to threatening stimuli, the fight or flight response. Our heart rate and blood pressure increase, pupils dilate, muscles contract. Our bodies prepare to react.

But fear also immobilizes us, destroys initiative, strangles effectiveness.

The Bible tells us that God specifically says, “Do not be afraid” to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses; Joshua has to be told by God four times! Fear is a powerful force. Psalm 27, which we are told by the rabbis to say every day throughout this season of teshuvah, ends with the admonition, “Be strong, take courage. Do not be afraid!”

Rabbi Harold Kushner calls “Do not be afraid,” the 11th commandment: Fear keeps us from seeing the blessings in life. It infects us. It constricts our souls. Fear prevents us from being happy, generous, and forgiving.

We mustn’t deny our fear. That is a sure-fire no-no. We must focus it, master it. We must refuse to let it keep us from living fully and happily.

And Charlottesville and the neo-Nazis in our midst, the threats to Jews - these are powerful reminders. For me, it takes me back to a fundamental awakening in my own life.

I was twenty-two years old, dating my now-husband Jeff. I wasn’t Jewish then, not yet, (yep, kinda hard to believe, I know). We went to see a Louis Malle film: Au Revoir Les Enfants - Goodbye to the Children. In 1943, Jewish boys evade capture by the Nazis, go into hiding in a boarding school, and eventually, hunted down by the Germans, taken away, and are never seen again.

I was shaken to my core. I was in love with someone who could have been one of those boys. Had it been 1943, Jeff could have been discovered and murdered, just because he was a Jew. In that moment, I don’t know why, but I knew that if they were going to take him, they would take me too. Nothing would separate us. Like the biblical Ruth, I said, “Where you go, I will go. . . . Your people will be my people. . . and your God my God.”

Naive? Of course. But I knew in my heart, in my very being, that my love for Jeff was a love for the Jewish people - an act that I now realize was my first refusal to succumb to the evil fear that Neo-Nazis, white supremacists and anti-Semites want us to feel.

Here in Marin, we are unabashedly Jewish, but not always so comfortable showing it in outward signs, appearance, clothes, accent, or religious observance. Our Gen Y generation would say, “If you are doing that, you’re being ‘Jewy,’” Or, showing your “Jewy” side.

It makes us laugh a bit, giggle or feel uncomfortable: “Jewy.” Comedian Louis C. K. once said, “‘Jew’ is a funny word,” “because ‘Jew’ is the only word, that is the polite thing to call a group of people, and the slur for the same group.” Anti-Semites feast on it: Jew! Jews!

But I strongly believe that it is time we reclaim the word as our own. NYTimes writer Mark Oppenheimer, urges us to think of Jew-ness, as **central** to our identity. So when someone asks us who we are, we should say, “I’m a Jew,” or “I’m married to a Jew,” or “My child is a Jew.” For most of us, that would be odd, or even scary. But it doesn’t have to be.

We should own the word “Jew,” and get “Jewy,” on our own terms. Since Charlottesville, I more often don one of my many Star of David necklaces that I haven’t been wearing in under-stated Marin. Or I reach for the full-on knit or cloth kippah, instead of the more under-the-radar, beaded ONE. Why? Because I want my kippah to be overtly Jewish and not just a stylish barrette. Even the rabbi, is coming out more, with being a Jew.

I am not suggesting that you necessarily always wear a kippah, (although that would be wonderful) or that you drive home with your tallit blowing in the wind. But show the world, (hey) this is what a Jew looks like. Yes, I’m a Jew.

Now you can say, these are just outward signs. Significant, but really, what long lasting effect does it have? But I say, whatever journey you are on, know that you are part of the warp and woof of this thing called Judaism. Commit to it publically and privately, externally and internally. However you express your Judaism, do it with full commitment to the Jewish people, to this endeavor that is entering its 5778th year. Live out this sacred tradition, ask deep questions about life, show up and commit.

And do it joyfully. The word, Jew, comes from the Hebrew, l'hodot, meaning to joyfully praise, joyfully praise. We are meant to be positive, joyful, praising people, Jews - People who rejoice. People who bring light into the world and we have!

But in these difficult times, our joyfulness has turned to caution. Harsh, cruel and evil events moving at lightning speed. Shocking reminders of how vulnerable we all are. I feel overwhelmed at times, exhausted with fear, information, 24 hours of constant reminders. You want to just go away, hide from it all. And I do, at times. And when I feel that way, I turn to one of the moral lights in our world today, Ruth Messinger, of American Jewish World Service who stresses, "We do not have the luxury of being overwhelmed." "We do not have the luxury of being overwhelmed." - If we are to meet the challenge. We must be efficient, strategic and calm.

Every Wednesday, I can be found meditating in the Beit Midrash, our Jewish library. I am sure that some people think, "Wow, the rabbi must have a lot of free time on her hands, if she can dedicate time to that." But I am reminded by the Zen proverb that says: "I am so busy today that I am going to meditate for two hours instead of one." The more I feel I have to do, the more centered, calm and focused I need to remain. This is one of the best ways to master our fear and to stop feeling overwhelmed. Many of you have ways both physical and spiritual, to help you stay centered. And in these difficult days, may we all find ways including prayer, study and meditation, whatever helps.

If you don't meditate, try it. And when you feel overwhelmed by something, turn your attention to something that doesn't overwhelm you, that gives you a sense of mastery. This will give you strength, to turn back to that which overwhelms you and to bring that sense of mastery to it, little by little.

The great Sufi poet Hafiz, of the medieval period, tells us: "Fear," he says, "is the cheapest room in the house." I am not suggesting that we all go out and re-do our homes. But I do think we need to find the room in our hearts, to be calm even as we speak out against evil and injustice in the world. This is how we can live out Rabbi Kushner's 11th commandment: Do not be afraid.

And so, Let us be strong. Let us feel the courage to not be afraid. This is what Sonia did in the freezing forest. This is what we, as Jews, have been doing for millenia. And this is what we all can do now, here in our lives and in the New Year.

Being Jewish is a gift, a magnificent guide on this journey called life. Whether you daven three times a day or aren't even certain what the word means, find comfort in Judaism and guidance from its wisdom. Whether you are studying Talmud or making kugel with your grandchildren for Shabbes, Judaism is a life-giving force. Use it. Draw from it. Taste its goodness, luxuriate in its teaching. Be strong, take courage, do not be afraid.

קוה אל ה' חזן ויאמץ לבך. . .

Be strong, take courage, do not be afraid.

Shanah Tovah.