

Shanah Tovah.

There once was a royal queen who was an astrologer. Looking up at the stars, she said, “I see terrible news in the stars. The new harvest is coming, but those who eat of the grain of this harvest, will go mad.”

She asks for help and her advisor says, “Queen, you and I shall eat only last year’s harvest, which is untainted. And we shall remain sane.”

The queen replies, “How can we separate ourselves from our people and remain sane, among those who are mad? They will think we are the ones who are mad. Instead, you and I will eat of the tainted grain, and enter into madness with our people. “

But, the queen said, “You and I must, at least, recognize our madness. We will mark each other’s foreheads with a sign. And every time we look at each other, we will remember that we are mad.”

What do we make of this story from Rebbe Nahman of Bratslav? Why did the queen join a world gone mad, a world filled with distorted ways of looking at things? By joining the madness, could she help? But if she isn’t sane, how can she help? Like doctors and nurses exposed to an epidemic, if she becomes infected, she can’t help.

The astrologer/queen does not look turn away from this madness. There’s an array of poor options, and she bears witness to the madness.

We too, may feel like we live in a world gone mad. We see it in our own backyard and around the world. Elie Wiesel*, a towering presence, tells a story about a rabbi who came to a city, to preach to people to change their evil ways. “Stop your cruelty, stop your inhumanity. Be kind to the stranger. “He went on for days, but no one listened. He didn’t give up. Finally, someone passed by saying, “Rabbi, why do you do this? Nobody is listening to you.” The rabbi said, “I know, but I cannot stop. At first, I

thought I had to preach to change them. I continue to speak, but it is not to change the world. It is so that they do not change me.”

Elie Wiesel* studied and taught about madness in order to come to sanity. Through recognizing madness, we become sane. This is the role of the witness.

In a class he taught at Boston University, a student tells of witnessing such madness. In Zimbabwe, during the reign of Robert Mugabe, many fell victim to HIV, inadequate health care, unemployment, food shortages. People protested: Mugabe’s thugs murdered them. Mugabe was eventually overthrown, but not before many of those who witnessed this madness, lost people they loved.

And yet, many in Zimbabwe and elsewhere, tell their stories and bear witness. Elie Wiesel* tells us that even if one person learns how to be more human from hearing such a story, this is a blessing. He says, “**We must turn our suffering into a bridge so that others might suffer less.**”

We too can learn how to be more human by witnessing what others suffer. We are witness today to knowing that our bodies fail, we suffer from addiction or those we love do. There’s loneliness, estrangement from a loved one, financial challenges, the longing to have a child, or to find a life partner, or to keep the life partner we have. Our hearts ache. We may face racism, sexism, ageism. We struggle to find our place in the world.

And some of us say, that well. . . we are not suffering very much. Many in our community are economically well off, have a great education, supportive families, good health, and live in freedom in one of the most beautiful places in the world. Yet, we are still called to bear witness to the suffering of others.

On this Yom Kippur, on our day of atonement, our day of at-one-ment, we are to afflict our souls. What does this mean to afflict our souls? On this day, we fast, we abstain from sexual relations. We turn our focus from the outside of our bodies, to the inside, to our kishkes, to our souls. And yes, through this, our bodies can suffer on this day.

Today, we bear witness to all kinds of suffering. And we ask: How do we suffer as a Jewish community? What kind of madness swirls around being Jewish in the world?

We suffer from knowing, that soon, we observe the first yahrzeit, of the murder of eleven innocent victims of the attack on Pittsburgh's Tree of Life – Or L'Simha Synagogue. Passover brings yet another yahrzeit of Lori Gilbert Kaye of blessed memory, She jumped in front of her rabbi at Poway Chabad Center, taking a fatal bullet, sacrificing her life to save his.

What is this madness? How did the grain from this year's harvest become so tainted? That the freedom and the ease with which we have moved about in American society has been increasingly shaken by hate, antisemitism, fear and violent loss of life? That we worry increasingly about the safety of our children, for our own safety?

How do we bear witness to antisemitism? How do we live as Jews with joy during these times? And ultimately, in the words of Elie Wiesel*, **how do we turn our suffering into a bridge so that others might suffer less?**

This question was very much on my mind during an unexpected encounter I had in April. My husband Jeff and I were in Berlin. I was teaching rabbinical school students at a meditation retreat focused on spirituality and leadership. After the first day, Rabbi Gesa Ederberg, the head of the community, asked me to bring the students to meet the next day, with a Muslim Interfaith delegation from Christchurch, New Zealand. Heading the delegation was Imam Gamal Fouda, from the Al Noor Mosque: the same Imam Fouda, who less than three weeks before, suffered the brutal murder of more than fifty congregants at his mosque in Christchurch. We gathered and he began to speak. He bore witness to his own suffering and the suffering of his community. His eyes filled with tears as he told us about the shock, the mayhem, the terror and the loss. How was it that this man had the internal strength to share with us, to allow us to witness his pain, to allow us into his heart? But somehow, he did with tears, and grace and strength.

He spoke to us about the power of love to overcome the hate and violence. He told us that his wife didn't walk him to walk through the streets of Christchurch anymore. Why? Because she was concerned about how many people would come up to him and hug him, and tell him how much they loved him, even perfect strangers! Enough strangers for his wife to say, "Hmm. . . I am not so sure I like all these women offering my husband so much love!"

Imam Fouada came to Germany to turn his own suffering into a bridge, so that we could witness it. He helped an American rabbi, a German rabbi and six rabbinical students, learn to be more human from hearing his story. Elie Wiesel* tells says this is a blessing to **turn suffering into a bridge so that others might suffer less.**"

We are quick to recount the suffering of such horrors, but do we recount the joy and the goodness that follow in the wake of such horror? Can we, as Imam Fouada did, keep our humanity and even our sense of humor in the face of evil?

In 2014, at Emory University, shortly after Yom Kippur, large swastikas and overtly antisemitic slogans were painted on the Alpha Epsilon Pi (AEPi) fraternity house. That is the first chapter of this story, often cited to demonstrate how antisemitic Emory University is.

But what is the second chapter? Within twenty-four hours of the incident, tens of thousands of people with an emory.edu address received two emails: the first, the university president's passionate condemnation of the vandalization, and the second, the Student Council President's condemnation of the incident and an invitation: to wear blue the following day, in support of Emory's Jewish community and the rights of all people to live freely and safely.

The next day the campus was awash in blue. Some even hung blue bed sheets out their window. When asked, "Why are you wearing blue today?" the answers were clear: "We are showing the swastika-drawers that they don't speak for us." "We are not standing silently by." "The bad guys lost. The good guys won."

An entire campus stood up and said: not in our name. The perpetrators were punished, but the response of the Emory community should be given as much prominence as the initial incident of antisemitism.

In relating this incident of hate and antisemitism, Holocaust scholar Dr. Lipstadt**, urges us to include the telling of proper amends, since apologies as an essential part of this story. If we don't do this, we run the risk of casting ourselves perennial victims. As she says, the "oy," the pain and hate of antisemitism, must be balanced with the reminder that we do not stand alone. There is the "joy" of having allies who act with us in solidarity, allies who know that these incidents are assaults on the society of which they are a part.

Dr Lipstadt** says: antisemitism is not the greatest threat facing Jews today. If it becomes the sole focus of our concerns, we run the risk of seeing the entire Jewish experience through the eyes of those who hate us. Columbia University scholar Salo Wittmayer Baron, born in Poland at the turn of the century, lost his entire childhood community through the Holocaust. Yet he knew that to focus only on what had been lost, negates centuries of extraordinary economic, intellectual and communal achievements. It allows the "oy," rather than the "joy" to become the prism through which we view our Jewish past.

In a 1948 essay entitled, "Israel: The Every-Dying People," philosopher Simon Rawidowicz addresses Jewish pessimism. Israel views itself as "constantly on the verge of ceasing to be, of disappearing." Jews, with good reason, see that some catastrophe is just around the bend. For Rawidowicz, the Jewish view of itself as "ever-dying," is a psychological coping mechanism, a protective emotion. Anticipating the worst, we are always prepared. The good news is that we are on guard. The bad news is that becomes the sum of our identity. What happens to Jews becomes far more significant than what Jews do. We know what we are against, but we don't know what we are for.

What we need instead is realism. We do not dismiss as paranoid the concerns of those who react strongly to increased acts of antisemitism. But at the same time, if it becomes our organizing principle, it would be folly. We must not allow the grievous wrongs perpetrated against Jews throughout history to be the foundation of our Jewish identity.

When I came back from my sabbatical, after spending two months in Europe, I had seen and learned so much. In Europe, Jewish community building is a stimulating, inspiring and important endeavor. But boy, is it sad too. Because everywhere you turn, there is the history of destruction, of being driven out, of our systematic persecution, the residual trauma, all the way from the island of Crete, to the Warsaw Ghetto.

It was not until I returned home, that I truly grasped that you and I live in a time and place of the golden age of Judaism. We live on land where Jews have never been asked to leave, nor annihilated en masse and our lives have not been threatened in a systematic way. We have the great joy of building this community *under the best possible conditions in the history of our people*. We have the privilege of being our best Jewish selves in a place of freedom that is beyond what our people have ever known in its 5780 years. I have never been more excited, invigorated and grateful, than I am now, to serve in my capacity here at Kol Shofar. I hold the value of Judaism's teachings in one hand and I hold the grievous wrongs that have been perpetrated against Jews throughout history in the other.

The dichotomy between these two is illustrated through this story. A mother enters an American synagogue with her five-year old daughter in tow. The mom smiles at the security guard at the door and says to her daughter, "Say hi. Thank the security guard for keeping us safe." The little girl is puzzled: she knows about safe places and dangerous places. For her, the synagogue is not a dangerous place. It is a joyful place where she runs around with her friends, scoops up candy from the bimah on joyous occasions, plays on the playground and sings. Why would she need someone to keep her safe in such a place? Yet, we know she does need protection there.

My hope for this little girl is that as she grows up that her awareness of the dangers that may threaten her well-being never overcome her wellbeing and joy at the shul or another Jewish place. We will encounter antisemitism along the way, but we must not let this longest hatred become the foundation of our identity. Jewish tradition is so much more than that and far too valuable to be replaced by such a singular fight against hatred. Elie Wiesel* tells us we can bear witness, study madness to know what sanity is. Lipstadt** tells us to “balance the oy with the joy.” The Torah tells, “be strong and of good courage.” We never stop fighting the good fight, but we rejoice in who we are. *G'mar Hatimah Tovah.*