

## Rabbi Shinder Erev Rosh Ha Shana 5780/2019

### Part 1- start of service

This past Shabbat, I shared with the congregation that I felt the need to set aside my previously prepared sermons for Rosh HaShanah and address the political elephant that is now in every room in America. I have not tossed aside my previously prepared remarks, but I will, however, share with you an image that has stayed with me in these past days leading up to this the holiest time of our year. I have no *nechemta* for it, meaning a concluding teaching to say “therefore this” “or consequently that,” yet it is an image from which we all can learn.

The voice of the whistleblower is like the cry of the shofar. According to the Hebrew Bible, the primitive ram’s horn was not just a ritual object to be sounded in order to announce the arrival of the New Year. It also was used during times of battle, it rang from a thick cloud upon Sinai when Moses, “brought forth the people to meet God,” and its very sound brought down the fabled walls of Jericho. Moreover, during this time of year, it is an oratory mnemonic device to remind us to reflect, to consider, to evaluate, and to adjudicate; and this is why I say once again that the voice of the whistleblower is like the cry of the shofar.

We do not know the identity of this person, but one thing is clear: just because he or she reported a complaint that something was rotten in DC, does not mean that he or she is a spy or a traitor. Moreover, bringing forth these allegations does not make this whistleblower an enemy of our Republic, and certainly does not, as what was tweeted, make him or her a savage. It does, however, mean that he or she is courageous and deserves to receive the proper protection guaranteed by the whistleblower law. Our government was established with a system of checks and balances in order to insure that if our leadership misses the mark with an unprecedented pattern of behavior, that something must be done in order to evaluate it. Demanding inquiry and transparency regarding possible foreign entanglements is not the same as rendering a conviction. No one is gathering at rallies in order to shout, “Lock him up!” However, providing the platform for a formal inquisition as to what exactly happened is what our founders did to make sure that no American is above the law.

In addition to our system of government, checks and balances can also refer to the work that is Cheshbon Hanefesh, the accounting of the soul that we Jews are to do in these next ten days of awe. We cannot know how this impeachment inquiry will play itself out. I said on Shabbat that I didn’t know if we would have any answers by Rosh HaShana or Yom Kippur, and even joked that I hoped that we’d know something by Hanukkah. I actually heard that the holiday of Thanksgiving could be a likely attainable goal. No matter that timing, I now pray that the voice of the whistleblower and the cry of the shofar both be heeded. In the words of our prophet, Amos, in this time of both political and legal uncertainty and our own religious reflection, “let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.”

And together let us say: Amen

## Part 2 - Sermon later in the same service

Whereas I would like to think that we at TBS are the sole keepers of the key to creative summer Shabbat experiences, alas we are not. Many communities have created Shabbos events that take congregants out of the pews and bring Jews to various settings such as the Shabbat UnderThe Stars program offered here in Orange County for the past several years. Upon my travels this summer, I participated in programs with catchy titles such as “Prayers on the Palisades” and “Shabbat on the Rocks.” The former is how the congregation of my youth, Temple Beth El, worships while overlooking the Hudson from a vantage point on the Palisade Mountains. The latter, Shabbat on the Rocks, is conducted at the temple where I was named, Congregation Rodef Shalom in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. This erev Shabbat service takes place in their Biblical garden which is surrounded by horticulture that appears in our sacred texts, coupled with a fenced-in view of what was the actual location of Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood.

*Mah nishtana ha-lailah hazeh?* Instead of an oneg following the service, “Shabbat on the Rocks” begins with a cocktail hour and segues into an informal and *freylach*, or joyous, song session led by a band dressed in Hawaiian shirts. Besides the casual and very fun feel, this night was even more different, because the Reform Rodef was conducting a joint service with the Conservative Tree of Life Synagogue, the community that, since last fall’s tragic and graphic shooting, has been meeting in Rodef’s chapel for their own worship. I have visited Tree of Life many times this past year, bringing my children with flowers, bringing Jewish stars with hearts made by some of your children, and of course, bringing prayers and taking pictures outside what still remains a crime scene. Those pilgrimages were somber and mournful and blood still stains the *bimah* where my uncle became a Bar Mitzvah, but - thankfully, this Shabbat was musical and joyful, and the very large garden was standing-room-only full with families, college kids, a couple celebrating their sixtieth wedding anniversary, visiting rabbis such as myself, and so many more.

There was a sense of excitement in the place, and I wasn’t paying too much attention to the band as I found my seat. I had people to greet such as Rabbi Walter Jakob, my father’s once Senior Rabbi at Rodef, a man who, in the past 25 years or so, has also become a mentor to me, even before I began rabbinical school. After wishing Shabbat Shalom to various other people, I finally had time to focus on the service leaders. The stately and serious Rabbi was off to the side, neither playing an instrument, nor wearing a wacky shirt under his *tallis*. I then recognized that Rodef’s cantorial soloist was trading verses with another Cantor who was not only wearing a Hawaiian shirt under his *tallis*, but was also sporting a straw hat over his *yalmulke*. He was an older gentleman who was smiling while strumming his six string. After further examination, I realized that this musical man was Rabbi Jeffrey Meyers, the spiritual leader of Tree of Life.

Once I recognized him, I felt a jarring disconnect. Afterall, I had seen image after image in print media and on my TV and computer screens of this man in shock his *tallis* dangling off his slumped shoulders. He who was a witness to the slaughter and now on this Shabbat, not quite a year later, was leading his congregation in worship, in celebration and Praise of God. At that moment, I was reminded of a passage from Elie Wiesel’s “Night” in which, although he himself could not and would not praise God on that particular erev Rosh HaShana, Wiesel, there in the largest Auschwitz sub-camp called Buna, witnessed some ten thousand men come together for a solemn service in which to say, “*Baruch Adonai*, Blessed Be the Eternal.”

Friends, this is the ever evolving story of the Jewish people. From biblical tales ranging from the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden, to the Flood of Noah's generation, to the fire that rained down on Sodom, from bondage in Egypt, we have been taught through these countless parables, as well as from personal narratives that our inheritance, our legacy, our gift is that, when faced with great tragedy, we have time and time reemerged and resolved to, in spite of it all, join together and continue.

*Baruch HaShem*, Blessed be God's Name, *Hodu L'Adonai*, Thank God that we here in this sacred space do not personally know the horror that was Wiesel's Night, nor were there on that tragic Shabbat morning in Pittsburgh, and yet and yet many of us have had difficulties and challenges in this past year. We can, on this Erev Rosh Hashana, look back at 5779 and acknowledge that even though we have faced challenges and disappointments of our own, we can re-emerge and, in spite of it all, resolve to do the best we can do to make 5780 a Shana Tova, A GOOD Year. At the conclusion of Shabbat on The Rocks service, Rabbi Meyers announced that his congregation was invited to a local Baptist Church for an orientation of the building in advance of their High Holiday worship there. There will be no room for them at Rodef, and, of course, they cannot be in their own space for Yontif. I don't think that the congregants of Tree of Life will wholeheartedly enjoy their services this year, and have a completely Happy New Year, after all the congregant who normally blows the shofar... is gone, the man who chants Haftorah... is gone, BUT they will conduct their services, in spite of it all, they will join to say "*Baruch Adonai*, Blessed be God." This now historic family of families will resolve to remember...to recreate...and sustain their new normal, both their communal and AND personal identities.

Friends, if they can do that, then so can we. In this past year, some of us have had to sell beloved homes, others needed to close family businesses, marriages have dissolved, chronic illnesses have been diagnosed, siblings have been buried, and those ARE painful realities, BUT...we all have the choice and ability to do what our people have done for millennia, we can adapt and adopt to new normal for ourselves. Each of us, in our own way, can follow symbolically in the footsteps of Rabbi Jeffrey Meyers. We can put down our burdens - not forget them entirely - but, in spite of it all, continue. Just like his celebratory Shabbat on the Rocks band, we can find our own music to remember, to celebrate, to bless, and to do what we each must do in order to make this New Year of 5780 a Shana Tova. A very good year.

***Let us pray and let us ACT in order for this to be our blessing ..... Amen***