

# The Mitzvot of Post-Charlottesville America

## Rosh Hashanah Morning, Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim

Someday, some year, I'm going to get to deliver a High Holy Day sermon I begin writing over the summer. It's a modest dream. Not quite as lofty as that of another preacher who dreamt that one day his "four little children ... [would] not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." But it's my iteration. For I dream of a time when gunshots will no longer be fired in the hallowed sanctuaries of churches or schools; when ever-intensifying hurricanes will not bring loss and destruction; when hate will find no avenue to march openly through the streets, and past the synagogues, of America. I dream of a time when the world will not change in a day, and a preacher of any faith can sit and study sacred text; compose words in quiet reflection; and three months, two months, even one month later they'll still feel relevant, important, and true.

But this is not such a time. For we now live in a post-Charlottesville America.

As we gather on this sacred day, we welcome the New Year with previously unthinkable images seared into our conscience. The flames of torches marching through what should have otherwise been a sleepy night in northeastern Virginia. The stern faces of clean-shaven young, white men chanting, among other things: "Jews will not replace us!" Yells of "Sieg Heil!" as they pass the local synagogue; arms raised in the Nazi salute. Groups of worshippers – it was Shabbat, after all – leaving, as inconspicuously as possible, out the back of the synagogue, as armed Nazis loitered undisturbed in front. Frantic scrambling to remove the Torah scrolls for safe-keeping. And then Heather Heyer killed, many others injured, in picturesque downtown. I have beautiful photos of that pedestrian mall on my phone. Aaron, Eli and I were there this summer. But that was in *pre*-Charlottesville America.

As Rabbi David Saperstein notes, this is believed to be the first time armed Nazis marched outside a synagogue in the United States of America. The sight left us shocked, deeply unsettled, frightened. And all of it was quickly compounded by disappointment in our leaders. Our President's initial response was slow to come and failed to provide the unequivocal condemnation we expected; that such bald-

faced hatred and violence on display in American streets deserved. Perhaps the only thing more disappointing was that Israel's Prime Minister took even one day longer to respond, and then only with a terse text. And when, four days after his initial response, President Trump astonishingly doubled down on blaming "both sides;" insisting on the presence of "good people" on "all sides" – about this, Prime Minister Netanyahu remained silent.

We now live in a post-Charlottesville America, in a post-Charlottesville world. We can't get over what we've seen, what we've heard, and what we haven't heard – and we can't be expected to. All we can do is learn from it.

Nearly two thousand years before the events of Charlottesville, sages all too familiar with their underlying hatred and antisemitism, taught in Pirkei Avot (2:3): "Be wary of the authorities, as they approach a person only when they're needed. They seem like good friends in good times, but they don't stand up for a person in their time of trouble." We can't count on others, Rabbi Richard Levy explains and our ancient rabbis have always taught. Even heads of a community cannot be trusted to ward off prejudice, to root out injustice. WE must do it. We must be vigilant all the time. [\[1\]](#) Of course, we should never cease to hold our leaders accountable. But we can do two things at once; we're accustomed to it. "Pray as if everything depends upon God," we're instructed; "act as if everything depends upon you." So even as we continue to call upon our leaders to denounce injustice and prejudice in no uncertain terms, we can't stop there. WE need to do this work; we need to heed the teaching of Rabbi Hillel: "*Im ein ani li, mi li?* If I am not for myself, who will be for me? *Uch-sh'ani l'atzmi, mah ani?* And if I am only for myself, what am I? *V'im lo achshav, emaitai?* And if not now, when?" [\[2\]](#) Hillel's first question, Rabbi Rachel Sabath Beit-Halachmi explains, is an ancient call to affirm our identities. How can we expect others to stand up and assert our right to be, to risk their lives at times to do so, if we are not willing to do it ourselves? Hillel's second question highlights the ethics of being for the other, of having a responsibility to assert and defend and protect the dignity and value of every human life. But the last question, "the question of enormous urgency," calls to us particularly loudly in these times. If not *now*, when? If we are not ready to stand up and [advocate] both for ourselves and for others *now*, then ... when will we *ever* be?" [\[3\]](#)

The challenge we face these High Holy Days in post-Charlottesville America is what are WE going to do to declare unequivocally, as proud Jews *and* proud Americans: Every Jew, every Muslim, every gay, transgender, disabled, black, brown, white, man, woman, and child is inherently beloved and precious in the sight of the Holy One?

Let's begin with what we might do as individuals, recognizing that our responses are going to differ.

This past summer, my family and I visited the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C. – a remarkable experience; the highlight of which was, for me, a lunch counter, like those that featured so prominently during the sit-ins of the civil rights movement. But when you take your seat at this long counter, there's a touchscreen in front of you, designed to look like a big diner menu. A "Menu of Movements," it's called, and the options from which you can "order" include: Sit-Ins, Freedom Rides, Bus Boycotts, School Desegregation, Marches, Black Power, and Grassroots Leadership. So you click to make your choice and the screen tells you how many visitors made the same selection you did.

My first selection was "Freedom Rides," which prompted a screen that described the potential dangers we would face should I choose to continue. There could be beatings, arrests – it was entirely possible some could be killed. Once again, the percentage of people (now smaller) who nonetheless elected to participate was revealed, and the exercise continued. Another message came up on the screen: "Police have boarded the bus; everyone has been arrested. White protestors will be given the option to post bail this evening; black protestors will remain in jail for at least the next three days and nights. What will you do?" What *would* I have done then? I still wonder. What am I willing to do – and, in doing, to inherently risk – now? These are questions with which each of us must wrestle. They're far from straightforward, even when our values are clear.

But, as Rabbi David Stern writes, now that white supremacy has demonstrably linked itself to antisemitism, there is at least one response to intimidation and hate within reach for all of us: Choosing to lead a proud and vibrant Jewish life.

On February 27 of this year, a Monday morning, the Posnack Jewish Day School in Broward County had received a bomb threat. It came while the upper students were in their Monday morning prayer service. So they did what they were supposed to do – they evacuated to the parking lot. But on the way out, one kid grabbed the Torah scroll and took it outside with him. And once in the parking lot, another kid took his tallis and spread it on the hood of a car. And then the kid with the Torah unrolled the scroll on the tallis, and the students of the Posnack Jewish Day School continued with their service – with a Torah, on a tallis, on the hood of a car, in a parking lot, to which they had been evacuated because of an antisemitic bomb threat.

If you consider that the goal of the antisemites might not be an explosion, but the erosion of Jewish self-confidence and continuity, then *that* is the answer to antisemitism: Proud and vibrant Jewish life. No matter how else we might choose to step away from the sidelines and enter the fray, *this* we can all do. Living loudly and proudly and identifiably as Jews is a positive and essential mitzvah in post-Charlottesville America.

Even as we all do our part, the synagogue has a vital role to play, as well. Listen to this email, a true story, that came addressed to the KKBE community earlier this month:

“I live in Tacoma, Washington,” it said, “and I visited KKBE on September 1, 2016. I knew nothing about Judaism, but was visiting Charleston and heard that a visit to KKBE was a great tourist activity. The docent who conducted the tour was a very warm, kind woman who shared a wealth of information about the history of the congregation, and in the course of the tour I learned a lot about Reform Judaism. I flipped through the siddur in the sanctuary and was struck by the themes of hope and praise. I felt an unfamiliar sense of home and belonging at KKBE, a feeling that I had never really experienced at Christian churches.

“I left that tour eager to learn more about Judaism. There happened to be an Introduction class starting at my local temple a week after I returned home from the trip, so I registered right away. I read several books about Judaism, listened to podcasts, and started attending Shabbat services at temple. I realized very quickly that being part of a Jewish community and studying the Torah was enriching my life though I hadn’t realized that I was seeking spiritual fulfillment. I completed my classes and was blessed to have the support of my Rabbi for conversion.

“I converted to Judaism on August 31<sup>st</sup>, almost a year to the day after my tour at KKBE. When I emerged from the mikveh, I couldn’t help but think of the tour I took that day and how it changed my life. Thank you to the clergy, staff, docents, and congregation of KKBE for creating a welcoming environment for visitors like me.”

Incredible, right? Of course, not every tour will result in conversion (just imagine!). But, even as it might go against every genetic and historical instinct we have – when neo-Nazis march in Charlottesville, when the KKK threatens rallies here in Charleston, when protestors offered sanctuary in a Reform temple in St. Louis prompt a call to #gasthesynagogue – now especially it is incumbent upon us to remain as open, as inclusive, as engaged in the community as ever. Yes, we employ security. We take precautions and strive to be vigilant and smart. But we

will not contract nor retreat; far from it. Thanks to the efforts of our incredibly dedicated docents, thousands of visitors each year are not only educated in the history of KKBE and Reform Judaism, but embraced by the value of inclusivity for which we stand. With two rabbis – and the time generously volunteered by my husband, Rabbi Aaron Sherman, as well – we strive to say yes to nearly every request to teach about Judaism in churches, at the college, and in schools throughout the area. And KKBE continues to be a visible presence in the community – in Charleston Pride events; interfaith and interracial dialogue, study, and action; and numerous other efforts to increase freedom, equality, and justice in the Lowcountry.

But there is still more we can do, and this year we must. KKBE is the first Reform congregation in America, and a proud member of the Reform Movement. Today our Reform Movement comprises nearly 900 Reform congregations. More than 1 million members are affiliated with these congregations, making Reform Judaism the largest Jewish denomination in North America. As we tell our Confirmation students each year when we take them to the Religious Action Center in Washington, D.C., Judaism bestows upon them the responsibility to speak up and use their voice to fight for change; their involvement in the Reform Movement amplifies their voice and extends its influence.

So, just as individuals and synagogues must harness our power to fight bigotry and hate, the Reform Movement continues to leverage its power, as well. Our central organizations have partnered with those of other faiths and denominations to call for, and march for, the protection of civil rights. We continue to coordinate lobbying of our public officials and issue statements that clearly enumerate the values we hold most dear – not only as Jews, but as Americans. And this Rosh Hashanah, at the very start of a New Year in post-Charlottesville America, a number of Reform rabbis are using the power of our movement in a way we don't believe has ever been done before – sharing from the bimah a singular message; speaking collectively with One Voice.

Together we proclaim:[\[4\]](#)

Rosh Hashanah is *Yom T'ruah*, the Day of the Sounding of the Shofar. The piercing tones, as they have since ancient days, sound an alarm, give voice to our fears, compel us to respond with a resounding call for justice.

### ***T'kiah***

*T'kiah* – the sound of certainty. We stand upon the shoulders of those in every generation who fought for freedom. We invoke the memory of all who tragically and senselessly lost their lives at the hands of evil oppressors. And we call on

every elected leader to declare: Acts of hatred, intimidation, and divisiveness will not be tolerated in these United States of America. In the words of Leviticus (25:10), let us “proclaim liberty throughout the land.”

### ***Sh’varim***

*Sh’varim* – the sound of brokenness. Elie Wiesel, of blessed memory, experienced unfathomable brokenness. But he would not succumb to numbness, and his memorable words strengthen our resolve not to become indifferent to brokenness today. “We must take sides,” he said. “Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. [In the face of threats or discrimination of any kind] we must interfere.”

### ***T’ruah***

*T’ruah* – the sound of urgency. The events of these simmering weeks are a wake-up call to our Jewish community. Racism is wrong – when it seeps into explicit antisemitism, and when it does not. We must fight hatred in all its forms. The fiery torches of Charlottesville illuminated the fundamental truth that if one minority group’s rights are threatened, *we are all threatened*. In the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, “we are all tied together in a single garment of destiny.” And so, in this New Year, we make a pledge – and I’d like to ask you all to *PLEASE RISE...*

### ***T’kiah G’dolah***

*T’kiah G’dolah* – the endless, relentless pursuit of justice. *Tzedek, tzedek tirdof*, the Torah commands – “Justice, justice you shall pursue, so that you may live and inherit the land which I, God, give to you.” For a nation to truly inherit its place in the world, thoughtful leaders at every level must be dedicated to equality and justice. But we cannot rely upon our leaders alone. Every community depends upon passionate, engaged citizens; it relies on you and me to be relentless advocates for tolerance and freedom, equality and enduring kindness between all the diverse peoples of our nation. To pursue justice is to create a society that protects and enriches the life of every citizen.

In this time and this place – at the start of this New Year, 5778, in a post-Charlottesville America many of us never thought we’d live to see – may the Shofar waken us from numbness, strengthen us to move past anger and fear. May our Reform movement, may our cherished synagogue, may each and every one of us be relentless, tireless builders of the just and free society envisioned in both the Jewish and American Dream. And let us say: Amen.

[1] [https://collegecommons.hud.edu/bully\\_pulpit/charlottesville\\_huc/](https://collegecommons.hud.edu/bully_pulpit/charlottesville_huc/)

[2] Pirkei Avot 1:14.

[3] [https://collegecommons.hud.edu/bully\\_pulpit/charlottesville\\_huc/](https://collegecommons.hud.edu/bully_pulpit/charlottesville_huc/)

[4] Adapted from the work of Rabbis Elka Abramson, Judy Shanks, David Stern, and so many others.