



It's Time to Take Back Authorship of Our Story

Rosh Hashanah 5780/2019 Rabbi Dara Frimmer

As many of you know, my family and I spent 4 weeks in Jerusalem this summer. And while the kids didn't come around to loving hummus and pita, it was hard for them to resist popsicles every day at 11AM. They also loved the silent streets on Shabbat, though they were very concerned about the people who couldn't get ice cream because all the vendors were home eating challah. Everywhere we went they saw the Israeli flag and they loved that, too. Even at 3 and a half, they owned it.

They were in summer camp from 8AM-4PM each day, which I'm pretty sure is where they learned Hebrew.

Let me explain.

When our trip ended, we travelled to Switzerland for vacation. On our first day there, we took a ferry boat and in the middle of Lake Zurich I heard them talk to each other in what people refer to as "twin-speak" -- a language only they understand. But this particular version had lots of guttural noises and clearing the throat and words ending in "ah".

There we were surrounded by Swiss-German and my children are yelling Hebrew at each other.

Then the girls got hold of a map and loudly started to ask, "Mama...is this Israel? Is that Israel?" And I find myself *shushing* them. "No! It's Zurich. We're on Lake Zurich."

Me. A rabbi. Trying to stuff back the joy that one day earlier had been a point of pride for all of us.

It took us 4 hours and 20 minutes to fly from Tel Aviv to Zurich. A tiny sliver of time. And yet, that is how quickly Jews can move from power to fear. From strength to vulnerability. From conviction to uncertainty.

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Over time, Jewish leaders have debated, what will best serve the Jews in a changing world of nation-states and nationalism? Can we live comfortably in a foreign nation and trust that our leaders will protect us? Or, are we safer living on our own, in Israel, where we face dangerous neighbors, but have the right to defend ourselves and fight back?

In the Jewish Journal last month, Gil Troy suggests we are now past the question: “Is antisemitism still present?” and moved on to “How bad is it? Who is most responsible for it? Can it ever be defeated or diminished?”

We live in challenging times: Parents are asking for advice on how to explain antisemitic vandalism to their children; 13-year-olds are writing bar mitzvah speeches that reference swastikas. For some of us here today, long time fears have been confirmed. We were never safe; it was only a matter of time. For others, long time assumptions about our safety have been reversed. We thought this hatred had been expunged.

We ask ourselves and each other, “What will keep Jews safe?” It’s a necessary question. But we must not let that be the only question to shape our Jewish identity. A Judaism that inspires and sustains itself must move beyond self-preservation - it must be more than a reaction to hatred.

We are living through a new chapter of antisemitism. So, I suggest we ask a new question: “What will keep us safe?” AND “What choices will we make in this moment that will allow us to teach and embody a Judaism filled with meaning and purpose?”

Who do we want to be?
What story do we want to tell?

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A side effect of our Jewish whiplash from power to vulnerability, is that even when we agree that antisemitic acts of violence are up, *we disagree on what we should do about it*. As a minority community, already under assault, it feels dangerous to be at odds with one another when it comes to protecting the health and well-being of our extended family. Why can’t *you* see what *I* see?

On October 27, 2018, a white nationalist massacred 11 Jews at Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh. In a state of shock and grief, some American Jews asked themselves: “Are we safe?” Maybe we were wrong about the American experiment?

And yet, 6 days later, the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette printed Kaddish on its front-page. On that day, every person who read the morning paper understood this was a *national* tragedy, not just a tragedy for the Jews. Our private pain became a shared, public story and we did not mourn alone.

This past May, Felix Klein, the German government's commissioner on antisemitism, told a German reporter that because of the increase in attacks on Jews, "I can no longer recommend Jews wear a kippah at every time and place in Germany." *What will keep the Jews safe?* Blend in. Keep quiet. Shush your children.

Two days after the interview, Germany's most popular daily published a cut-out kippah on its front page, urging readers to show their solidarity with the country's Jewish community. They even posted a video showing how to make it.

The Editor-in-Chief wrote: "If even one person in our country cannot wear the kippah without putting themselves in danger, then the only answer must be that we all wear the kippah." ¹

Felix Klein asked the question: Is this 1938 all over again?

The editor of the newspaper asked: "What choices will we make in this moment when faced with violence and fear?"

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Though we long for a simple story line, to be a Jew, is to embrace paradox: we are protected **and** vulnerable, we are confident **and** afraid, we are powerful **and** powerless, we are surrounded by allies, **and**, we are forever lonely.

And in what might be the greatest paradox, to be a Jew, is to seek the strength and wisdom that emerges from such an unusual and uncomfortable identity.

This feeling goes way back: 36 times in the Torah we are told to protect the stranger because WE were once strangers in the land of Egypt. *Another paradox:* Today, we are powerful enough to protect others, but the commandment is rooted in remembering our weakness. Who does that?!

You have to admire our ancestors for their masterful authorship: Rather than take the bricks and mortar of our suffering and build them into a bunker, rather than ask, "What will keep Jews safe?" *our ancestors asked*, "In the aftermath of fear, pain and loss, who do we want to be? What story do we want to tell?"

Now, let it be known: We have not gotten "past" our vulnerability. We are not "over" our grief. We have integrated it. We have given it meaning. We have turned it into a story of redemption.

If we remember THIS, then *we create the world in which we want to live...not the antisemites.*

We have a language to talk about our experience, not only through statistics, but through the surprising moments of solidarity and strength shown by friends and allies.

¹ <https://www.cnn.com/2019/05/27/europe/bild-kippah-anti-semitism-scli-intl-grm/index.html>

We can create stability in unstable times, not only by hiring armed guards, but by remembering we are a kingdom of priests and a holy nation commanded to protect the vulnerable, the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the stranger.

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The questions we ask today may feel particular to our experience as a minority and as an oppressed people, but these same questions about safety and identity are part of a national conversation.

The most powerful country in the world now claims to feel vulnerable as refugees and asylum seekers beg for entrance. And, like the Jewish people, Americans are not comfortable when we disagree on how to best protect the well-being of our nation.

Good news. Deep discomfort, internal conflict...*that's our sweet spot*. If anyone can teach America how to deal with it, it's us.

We know when Jews make a decision based on fear, we diminish who we are and who we can be. And we don't want to write that story. Neither for ourselves nor for our nation.

America is changing. Some say the country we hoped to pass on to our children may be gone forever. I do not believe that. I believe it is time to take back authorship of America's narrative.

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We are living through a new chapter of American history: It took a federal court panel to shame the government into providing migrant children with toothbrushes and sleeping mats.

In the past, we would have preached about immigration injustice through the familiar narrative of Ellis Island. The long-held belief was that if Jews could remember their parents' or grandparents' "Exodus" to America, they would turn with compassion to the immigrant from Mexico, Syria or Honduras.

Those efforts failed. The empathy we hoped would emerge from the pain of our immigrant-narrative never materialized. Instead, we hear:

"We got in legally...they're sneaking in."

"We weren't terrorists...they have ties to fundamentalism."

"We worked hard to learn the language, to get educated, to work...they drain our resources."

Perhaps it's time to retire the romanticized story of Ellis Island and open the Torah. Our ancestors have been wrestling with these questions of safety and courageous identity for thousands of years: It's not about shutting down borders but taking us into the Promised Land of dignity and opportunity for all human beings.

It is time for us to act on behalf of the stranger.

1. **SEND** a message to your Member of Congress, asking that they support higher refugee admissions. Last Thursday, President Trump slashed the American refugee program by almost half -- the bar had been set at 30,000, now it's 18,000. This is unacceptable.²
2. **DONATE** airline miles to help reunite families separated by persecution and conflict. United, AirCanada, AllItalia, Qantas...they all work.³
3. **FIGHT** against unjust deportation by partnering with One LA and Am Tzedek: Isaians Pursuing Justice to provide undocumented immigrants with legal counsel.⁴
4. **LEARN** with us on Yom Kippur Afternoon, at 2PM, as we welcome Joe Goldman, the Community Engagement Director for HIAS.⁵

THIS is what makes us Jews. NOT an identity built on others' hatred of us, but an identity based on our bold and surprising decision to turn our fears into compassion, and to allow that compassion to lead us towards action.

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This isn't going to be easy. Let's face it, it's been a rough year. For us to show up in force when we are feeling so vulnerable captures yet another paradox. It's like asking mourners to bury their loved ones. In a moment of heartbreak and weakness, we are asked to stand up and fulfill an ancient obligation, the highest display of *hesed*, loving kindness, towards the one who can never pay us back. Nothing feels as difficult in the moment - but these are the moments and the rituals that define who we are and the tradition we are proud to pass on to the next generation.

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A few months ago, on the tail end of our trip to Israel, I shushed my kids on a boat in Switzerland. I was wrong.

But the real test of *teshuvah* is not the acknowledgment of wrongdoing, nor the apology, nor even restitution...it's about repetition. The High Holiday final exam has only one question: When we find ourselves back in the same situation, will we make a different choice?

² SEND A MESSAGE: <https://act.hias.org/page/11946/action/1?fbclid=IwAR1k-rY4ISjniMWH9MTBFoBD0VwO7ap48ZmXZrHGugCjzxcLpbY02leqsc0>

³ DONATE MILES: https://www.miles4migrants.org/campaigns/donate.php?c=CAMP_ID_00006

⁴ FIGHT TOGETHER: Talk to Isaiah's VP of Social Justice, Janet Hirsch: janethirsch59@gmail.com

⁵ LEARN: <https://www.hias.org/>

I do not want to teach my children to hide their Jewish identity. I do not want any child to think that blending in is the answer. I want to raise a generation of Jews who leave room for surprises: For Germans to wear a paper kippah; for Pittsburgh to read the words of the Mourner's Kaddish.

We are not stuck in a story of hate. We are the authors of the most ancient and inspiring story of liberation. A story that reminds us that transformation is possible. That slaves can become liberators. That weakness is a touchpoint for strength.

This New Year is a new chapter. It demands a new question.

Who do we want to be? What story do we want to tell?

Shana Tova.