

Sermon for Yom Kippur
September 18-19, 2018 – 10 Tishri, 5779
Temple Beth El of Boca Raton
By Rabbi Daniel Levin

It was Valentine's Day. I had started my day early – I wanted to take my daughter Ellie for breakfast before school so we could share a heart-shaped bagel at Einstein's. In the afternoon I was signing the card I had bought for my wife Aimee when our youth director came into my office: "There's been a shooting at Stoneman-Douglas."

I felt the blood drain from my face as I became awash in fear. The sense of dread compounded as the news reports came in. First three, then more, then the fateful number 17. Seventeen fatalities – with so many more injured. Fourteen students and three faculty.

The agony of the funerals was beyond description. The lament for young life lost – homes shattered, dreams pulverized. Day after day, thousands poured into churches and synagogues to honor the lives that were robbed, to imagine what these children and servants of children might have accomplished, contributed, shared and experienced in their lives.

The next day, David Hogg, who spent hours locked in a closet interviewing his fellow students, said in an interview: "We're children. You guys are the adults," he said. "You need to take some action and play a role. Work together, come over your politics and get something done."

A group of seventeen of our high school students asked that we take them to Tallahassee to meet with their elected representatives. Carly Schwamm, our former BOFTY president and regional NFTY-STR president spent her eighteenth birthday on the eight-hour bus ride to Tallahassee. They met with Florida Senate President Joe Negron, and asked why Florida could not ban assault weapons. When he told them he thought the issue was more about the assailant than the weapon, they politely asked: "Well isn't it both? Florida already bans certain kinds of guns. Why not ban the AR-15 too?" Could we change the law to allow police to confiscate weapons from people deemed to be a danger to themselves or others?

Within seven weeks of the massacre, the Florida legislature passed the first gun safety legislation in more than two decades, and the student-organized March For Our Lives gathered more than 1 million people in 800 cities in America and around the world, including over 200,000 people who braved the cold in Washington, DC.

Again and again, I heard the same sentiments from my friends and peers. "Thank God for those young people." "They are going to change the world."

And I was ashamed. Deeply, deeply ashamed. And I am still ashamed. How dare we! How dare we turn to our children and ask them to repair the world for us! It is not their responsibility – it is ours. It was our job to give them a world in which we protect the vulnerable and the weak and guarantee safety, security and peace for all, a world in which

we treat each other with kindness, compassion, and respect, a world in which we ensure justice and fairness and dignity no matter who you are or where you came from, a world in which together we grow in knowledge and wisdom, a world that is laden with opportunities to rise as high as you might dare. And we are failing.

In our Torah portion for tomorrow/today, we begin at the end of the book of Deuteronomy: “*Atem Nitzavim Hayom Kulchem Lifnei Adonai Eloheichem* – you are standing here today – all of you – before Adonai your God – your tribal heads, officials and elders, all the men of Israel, your children, your women, your stranger in your settlements, from the one who chops your wood to the one who draws your water.” (Deuteronomy 29:9-10) All are gathered as one to enter into an eternal covenant with God.

A covenant is a statement of mutual commitment. The text reads: your officials, your elders, your children” because they belong to us: we are mutually responsible for each other. I for you and you for me. God is responsible for guiding us along life’s journey and to show us the way to holiness. We are responsible for following that guidance in accord with God’s commandments, and so to fashion a world and ourselves as holy.

But then Moses tells us something peculiar. “I make this covenant ... not with you alone, with those who are standing here with us this day before the Eternal our God, but also with those who are NOT with us here this day. (Deuteronomy 29:13-14). Who were those who were not standing there? Ibn Ezra teaches it was those who will “one day follow after us.”

We who live today are part of that eternal agreement between us and God, but that circle of responsibility extends beyond to our immediate selves to those who will come after us. It is our responsibility not simply to create the world in which we want to live, but it is our responsibility to fashion the world we ought to give to our children.

I was born in 1969 – and when I think of what was given to me I am in awe. I had the privilege of attending outstanding public schools where I was offered the opportunity to play sports, to learn a musical instrument, and to pursue nearly any interest I could imagine. I grew up in a place where my parents could choose from a variety of vibrant synagogues with a dynamic Jewish Community Center a short bike-ride from the house. I grew up in a neighborhood where my parents never installed a dead-bolt on the door, where we biked and wandered all over the place, in which new immigrants and old Americans, blacks and whites, Jews and gentiles ate at the same lunch tables, played on the same teams and in the same bands, and enjoyed close and meaningful friendships. I grew up with the freedom to say what I wanted to say, to print what I wanted to print, to practice my religion as my family and I chose, and with opportunity to work to become anything I might have wanted to be.

The life I inherited was given to me by the conscious sacrifice of generations before me. In Tom Brokaw’s famous book *The Greatest Generation*, he reflects with awe on what they accomplished. Collectively as a generation, having weathered the economic despair of the Great Depression, they left “to help save the world from the two most powerful and ruthless military machines ever assembled.”

“When the war was over they transformed industry, science, art, public policy ... and built the most powerful peacetime economy in history. They helped their former enemies rebuild and they stood fast against the totalitarianism of their former allies. Having strayed into McCarthyism and xenophobia, they turned toward decency and realized that America had to live up to its ideals that all are created equal, black and white, man or woman, Jew or gentile.¹

Twenty years ago, I attended a talk by Israeli thinker Jonny Ariel. In the aftermath of the Second World War, he said, the Jewish people faced four extraordinary challenges. First, they had to secure the newly born State of Israel. Second, they had to memorialize the Holocaust. Third, they had to free those Jews trapped in exile in dangerous foreign lands. And fourth, they had to marginalize the pernicious evil of anti-Semitism. Had they accomplished one of these challenges it would have been incredible. Two, extraordinary. Three, unbelievable. Four, impossible. But what is so amazing is ... they did all four.

The State of Israel today is a marvel of what can be achieved in a developing country. From the fragile state born from war into war, the State of Israel now boasts the most powerful military in the Middle East. From a state which only knew light manufacturing and farming has grown a technological marvel toward which the world looks for advances in high-tech engineering, science, agriculture, architecture, and medicine.

Today, nearly every major university in the United States and Europe offers courses in studies of the Holocaust, and hundreds of museums and memorials to preserve the memory of the Shoah can be found in thirty-six different countries around the world.

The millions of Jews who were trapped in the former Soviet Union are free to live where they choose, in Israel, America, and throughout the world. Israel has embraced Jews exiled from North Africa, Iraq, Iran, South Asia, Europe, Arabia, and Ethiopia. And despite the recent surge in anti-Semitism, it has never been safer to be a Jew in the world than it is today.

And then he looked at us and took a moment of silence. And then he asked, “So what’s your generation going to do?”

It is the question that pierces us this day. Given the precious and holy gifts that so many sacrificed so much to give us, what are we going to do? What will they say of our generation? When our children and grandchildren write the history of our time, what will they write about what we chose to accomplish? What do you want to give them? What do you want them to say?

We can choose how we want to answer this question. We stand here this day – all of us – before Adonai our God. God places us before us this day a choice – life and death, blessing and curse. By what each of us individually and collectively chooses to write in the Book of Life, we choose, in turn, what they will write about us.

¹ Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation*. New York: Random House, 1998, pp. xxvii-xxix.

When they write the story of our generation, I want them to say that we built for our children a world where we turned away from cynicism and greed and instead championed decency and the common good. I want to build for our children a world where we recognize the truth in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's admonition that "silence in the face of evil is itself evil. God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act." I want to build for our children a sense of inner strength borne from knowing what they know to be morally right and good, and from that strength not to be afraid to listen to someone who might beg to disagree.

I want to give our children a government that is focused on serving the common interest and not wringing from it every ounce of partisan advantage or personal gain. I want our generation to render fact-checkers irrelevant because we championed journalistic integrity and because we elected leaders who unfailingly and without exception, simply told the truth.

I want our generation to be the one that ensured the excellence of our public schools, where children don't have to fear for their safety, where their teachers are paid a living wage, and where they don't have to graduate from college with thousands of dollars in high-interest debt. I want it said of our generation that we offered safe harbor and refuge to men, women, and children fleeing the most desperate plights on the planet, and that everyone for whom America is the only home they have ever known will never need to wonder if they will have to find another.

We have been given an incredible gift – a religious tradition of extraordinary richness and depth, of text and law and lore – a ritual framework for constructing a life of meaning and which commands us to build a society that is based on the pursuit of the moral good. The wisdom to be found in the practice of Jewish life and in the study of Torah and tradition is overwhelming in its power to make for a better life for us and a better world for our children.

I want to give our children a world where we as Jews embrace a passion for Jewish life. I want ours to be the generation that teaches our children to treasure the gift of Torah and to harness its profound spiritual and ethical wisdom so that we, and they, will be experts in moral decision-making. I want to give our children a world where we model a commitment to community and peoplehood – where we join synagogues, give enough tzedakah that we need to budget for it, where we support and visit the State of Israel, where we push ourselves to grow in Jewish learning and spirituality, and where we insist on Jewish education for years and years after the last Bar/Bat Mitzvah thank-you note has been written.

This is what I want our generation to be. This is what collectively we should be fighting for. This is what our covenant demands we build for ourselves and pass on to our children. The world we inherited was constructed by the choices of those who built it. And all their sacrifice will be for naught if we do not fight to secure what they have given us, and if we do not build on the foundation they laid.

Conservative commentator Jonah Goldberg writes that “the only victory worth fighting for – because it is the only victory that is achievable – is to hand off this civilization to the next generation and to equip that generation to carry on the fight ...”

“When the gravitational hand of nature reclaims objects from the heavens, the term for that in physics is ‘orbital decay’. So it is with our civilization. Give up fighting for it, ... abandon our principles for any reason – selfishness, sloth, forgetfulness, ambition, ingratitude, whatever – and you choose to give in to decay. Decline is a choice.”² And that is a choice each of us, no matter our age, must never be willing to make.

Sometimes the task seems overwhelming. But one person can make a difference. The Talmud teaches us: *Lo Alecha HaMelacha Ligmor V’Lo Ata Ben Chorin L’Hibatel Mimena* – you are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are we free to desist from it.³

Rabbi Israel Salanter wrote: “When I was a young man, I wanted to change the world. But I found it was difficult to change the world, so I tried to change my country. When I found I couldn’t change my country, I began to focus on my town. However, I discovered that I couldn’t change the town, and so as I grew older, I tried to change my family. Now as an old man, I realize the only thing I can change is myself ... But I’ve come to recognize that if long ago I had started with myself, then I could have made an impact on my family. And, my family and I could have made an impact on our town. And that, in turn, could have changed the country, and we could all indeed have changed the world.”

Emma Gonzalez, the outspoken young woman who, as a senior at Marjorie Stoneman Douglas helped galvanize support for the March For Our Lives looked at our generation and said: “It’s like they’re saying, I’m sorry I made this mess while continuing to spill soda on the floor.”

To Emma and her generation, my children, and to the families of those massacred and maimed at Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School, on this Day of Atonement, I say: I have sinned against you. I admit my failure. I ask your forgiveness. I promise to do what I can to stop adding to the mess we are giving you and to work as hard as I can to clean it up. And while today I cannot give you the world we ought to be giving you, I can promise that I will never stop fighting with you so that the world you give your children is the world they deserve, a world that is true to the covenant we share with each other, and is true to the covenant we all share with God.

² Jonah Goldberg, *Suicide of the West*. New York: Crown Forum, 2018, pp. 350-351.

³ Pirke Avot 2:16