

## If Ever We Needed a Day of Remembrance

Rosh Hashanah 5778

Rabbi Barry H. Block

“Jews will not replace us!”

The vile anti-Semitic slur was chanted on the streets of Charlottesville, Virginia. Gun-toting, tiki-torch-bearing white supremacists repeated a lie that we remember well. Jews control the world, or may soon.

The accusation is Pharaoh’s, who says ““Look, the Israelite people are much too numerous for us. Let us deal shrewdly with them, so that they may not increase; otherwise in the event of war they may join our enemies in fighting against us and rise up from the ground.””<sup>i</sup>

“Jews,” Pharaoh exclaims, “will not replace us.”

The allegation is repeated in the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. ADL explains: “Since its contrivance around the turn of the century by the . . . Czarist secret police, *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion* has taken root in bigoted, frightened minds around the world. The booklet . . . spell[s] out the alleged secret plans of Jewish leaders seeking to attain world domination. They represent the most notorious political forgery of modern times. Although thoroughly discredited, the document is still being used to stir up anti-Semitic hatred.”<sup>ii</sup>

By no accident, the century that fabricated these *Protocols* also produced the Holocaust. Nazis made sure: “Jews will not replace us.”

Jews remember. Perhaps memory is what we do best” *Zachor!* “Remember! Never again!” We recall that we were slaves in Egypt. We retell a near-death experience every year on Purim, recounting Haman’s intention to wipe our people off the face of the Earth. We remember the Holocaust. We know that anti-Semitism could rear its ugly, violent head once again.

On the other hand, most of us do not remember that Rosh Hashanah is called *Yom HaZikaron*, Day of Remembrance. A day for us to recall our misdeeds of the last year, so that we may repent as Yom Kippur approaches. A day for God to remember the righteousness of our ancestors, to prepare to forgive us on their account. A day when we pray that God remembers us. A day for us to remember God.

Perhaps we don't need a day to remember anti-Semitism. How far is the Holocaust from our minds? Ever.

Yet our lives often deceive us. We live in America, where Jews enjoy freedom and security never previously known as our people wandered through history. And we comfort ourselves: If life somehow became untenable here, Israel and its military might are there. We remember anti-Semitism, but we relegate it to another era and an ocean away. We imagine ourselves untouchable.

Then, suddenly, remembrance is thrust upon us: "Jews will not replace us!"

We, of course, weren't the main target of that malevolent march. Even the anti-Semitic chant began its life as, "You will not replace us!" "You" did not refer to Jews. But to people of color. To immigrants. To LGBTQ Americans. To Muslims. To women with the temerity to seek power or authority. To anybody who isn't white, Christian, and native born. And that does include us. "Jews will not replace us" is a natural segue from "You will not replace us."

On this Day of Remembrance, let us affirm the greatest commandment of Torah, so significant that it is repeated thirty-six times: "Remember the heart of the stranger, for you were strangers in the Land of Egypt." If Charlottesville taught us anything, it is to remember: When any group is attacked as "strangers," we, the Jewish people, are under attack. To the tiki-torch marchers, we Jews are strangers in the Land of America. "You will not replace us" and "Jews will not replace us" are one and the same: A battle cry against people of color is a call to war on us. An attack on immigrants is an assault upon the Jewish people.

We Jewish people are not, of course, alone in our claim on memory.

The Charlottesville uprising began as an alleged act of remembrance. The protestors faced a threat: The glorious history of the Confederacy might be erased. A monument to Robert E. Lee might be removed from a town square.

And yet, as Rabbi David Stern teaches, Confederate monuments are not about remembering. They are about forgetting. Forgetting that slavery was the reason for secession. Forgetting that slavery was the justification for the Confederacy, the cause of the lost cause that wreaked death and destruction upon this nation.

Instead of recording the ignominious history of African American slavery, these monuments create a myth of southern white heroism. No teachers of real

history, these memorials distort history. Erected in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, they are shrines to Jim Crow.

Instead of binding a society together with a shared heritage, these statues divide our communities, perpetuating the purpose for which they were erected. These monuments announce to Black southerners: You do not share “our” heritage. Our glorious history is founded upon your subjugation. You are a stranger here, properly feared and forced into slavery. These memorials insist that Pharaoh was right.

The remembrance of Rosh Hashanah points inexorably to the repentance of Yom Kippur. Recognition of evil must spur action to defeat it, in our hearts and in our world.

Where to begin? Ecclesiastes reminds us: “To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven . . . A time for slaying and a time for healing. A time for tearing down and a time for building up”<sup>iii</sup>

If we are to construct a community of love and equality, then we must first tear down the infrastructure of hate and injustice. Confederate monuments must go. Slay, then heal. Tear down, then build up.

And where shall those monuments go? Torah offers one option. The Children of Israel, too, erected a shrine to a distortion of history. They built a golden calf, proclaiming, “This is thy god, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt.”<sup>iv</sup> When Moses saw it, he “burnt it with fire, and ground it to powder, and strewed it upon the water, and made the children of Israel drink it.”<sup>v</sup>

Perhaps that’s not what we should do.

Still, the parallels are remarkable. The Israelites build that idol of gold while Moses is atop Mount Sinai, learning that they are to build a golden *mishkan*, a gold Tabernacle, like the prayer books we hold today, a sacred vessel where the people meet God. After the golden calf is destroyed, the people construct what God did command. By no coincidence, they used the same materials.

Let our Confederate monuments be placed in a museum of slavery and Jim Crow. We do not seek to tear down history but to build an accurate historical record.

And let us build new monuments of the same cast stone and bronze. Memorials to martyrs, not of a cause that deserved to lose, but to the men,

women, and children who lost their lives to cruel slavery. Let our shrines honor real heroes – champions who stood up to oppression and segregation. Rabbi Sanders, of blessed memory, argued many a lost cause in the halls of Arkansas’ Capitol. Imagine his likeness on the Capitol grounds where a Confederate monument once stood. And next to Rabbi Sanders, let us honor civil rights leaders whose race disqualified them from speaking in those chambers at the rabbi’s side.

History is important, and monuments matter, defining and shaping our society. A state that honors Confederate traitors as heroes is one that will replace a Black-majority school board with one white man. States across a region replete with Confederate monuments will enact laws that suppress minority voting in the name of addressing the nonexistent problem of voter fraud. A nation whose parks are filled with shrines to oppressors will incarcerate an unconscionable percentage of young Black men.

Removing statues will be empty symbolism if we do not root out racism deep in our own hearts and transform our society. Let us tear down shrines as a step toward healing our nation. Let us transform Charlottesville’s tiki-torches into a flame of American passion for educational opportunity, voting rights, criminal justice, residential desegregation, and so much more, burning down slavery’s legacy once and for all and reconstructing a nation of righteousness.

On this Day of Remembrance, let us pray that God forgets our nation’s sins, remembering America for good. Here, too, the golden calf offers precedent. When God promises to remember the children of Israel forever, they are afraid: “Since there is no forgetfulness before the Throne of Your Glory, perhaps you will not forget our sin of the golden calf?”<sup>vi</sup> God promises not to remember sins which the people have repented, changing their ways.

On this Day, when we need remembrance more than ever, let us resolve to blot out the sins of Charlottesville, and all that they represent. Let us remember those sins, let us learn from them and act upon them, so that God may forgive and even forget.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Exodus 1:9-10.

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.adl.org/education/resources/backgrounders/a-hoax-of-hate-the-protocols-of-the-learned-elders-of-zion#introduction>. Accessed September 7, 2017.

<sup>iii</sup> Ecclesiastes 3:1, 3. Text suggested in this context by Rabbi David Stern.

<sup>iv</sup> Exodus 32:4.

<sup>v</sup> Exodus 32:20.

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<sup>vi</sup> Babylonian Talmud, *Brachot* 32b. Text suggested by Rabbi David Stern.