

If Not Now, When

Message from Rabbi Michael L. Feshbach

Can this really be happening? We must be imagining it.

But the dreams of leaders past have changed into the nightmares we see today. A spirit alien to our highest values has taken over... our televisions, our devices, our civic life.

A message and a plea, to live up to what we should be, at a time of trial and terror.

So often in our lives the issues are cloudy and complex. Disagreements can be deep and honest at the same time. So often, yes, there are “many sides.”

But not always. Sometimes the call of the day is clear. That we should be judged not by the color of our skin but by the content of our character. That, despite all of its flaws, we “brought forth on this continent” something noble and something new. And that certain truths of our democracy are, indeed, “self-evident.”

Separation by the most superficial of traits. Drinking fountains and seating in the back of the bus. Lynching and bombings. Anger...and death. Who would dare question who was right and who was wrong?

But some dare indeed. Nooses left at the National Museum of African American History and Culture are not a practical joke, they are a reminder, and a threat.

And now Virginia. And a gilded tower in a city that never sleeps.

That “white power” rally spent a lot of time raging against... well, us. “Fine people” there? Once again Jews are united with African Americans. All who are “other” are targets together. We must become allies anew.

My friends, this is not what I want to be writing about. I am new here. I have not yet even met most of you. Certainly I have not yet mastered the nuance of place and the ways in which national fissures reverberate through a local lens.

And yet, with the prophet Amos: “a lion has roared; who can but fear? The Eternal God calls out to us; who can but prophesy?”

Malcolm Gladwell speaks of a “tipping point.” Hillel asks us: if we do not take a stand now, when will we? And we have a word, and a song we sing at Passover. “Dayyeinu! Enough!” Enough already.

Maybe we are far away and maybe “our” Charlotte Amalie is not their Charlottesville and maybe there is actually less of a history of antisemitism here than in other places. But the very sand on our floor is a reminder of hatred and persecution and fear. The stories of the scrolls in our ark tell their own tales of relocation and dispersion.

And over the centuries and decades we have our own history of tension and strife. “Emancipation” Garden is not originally about all the food festivals held there. And not all the labor that went into the construction of our own building was... freely given.

But the moment that is upon us now... This poison knows no boundaries of state or shore. This venom taints us, it threatens us, even here.

I remember. I remember that it was the religious vision of a reverend, Dr. King, who called us to live up to the promise of our premise. I remember that at a time when civic strife broke into civil war, we had to be called to “better angels.”

And I know that even in a country with a separation of church and state, even in a world in which religion has, indeed, sown seeds of division and hatred, nevertheless at its core, seen the way it should be, the entire enterprise of the spiritual is a vision of unity and equality. Done right, religion can be a force to bring us together. Our faith can help, and heal, and lift us towards the holy.

At the heart of our tradition is this core teaching: that every human being — every one of us, man and woman, Jew and gentile, gay and straight, tall and short, thin and... less thin, black and brown and yellow and white, every one of us is made in the image of the highest we can imagine. We are made in the image of God. And we are all, then, infinitely worthy, deserving of dignity, and integrity, and honesty, and respect. And love.

This is so far beyond politics that it approached the dictionary definition of morality. To defend each other, to stand up for each other, to reach out, to support, to lift up and not tear down, this is a core mission of who we are, what we stand for, why we are here.

There are, I am sure, more shocks and trials to unfold in the days to come. And, along with, I would imagine, every other Reform and Conservative rabbi on the planet, and many Orthodox ones as well, I will address the congregation about these unfolding events this coming Shabbat. For us, that will be at services on Friday, August 18, at 6:30 PM.

For now, though, I say this: let us treat every encounter, and every interaction, as an opportunity to be who we know we should be. Let us look each other in the eye and see our own reflection. Let us remember the reality of goodness, and greatness and grace.

We know what is right and what is wrong, what is holy and what is obscene. We deserve better than this. We *are* better than this. Let us act that way, today, and every day.

With shock but also resolve, with horror but also with hope,

L’shalom (In Peace),

Michael L. Feshbach
Rabbi