



Parshat Bechukotai
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Linden Tree
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The story is told of the time that the Pope and the Prime Minister of Israel decided to deepen the relationship between the Vatican and the Jewish state by co-cohosting a friendly golf game that would be played by premier Catholic and Jewish golfers. The Pope invited Jack Nicklaus to be the Vatican representative. Jack Nicklaus is a devout Catholic and a great golfer.

After the golf game, Jack Nicklaus goes to the Vatican to report.

Your Holiness, I have good news and bad news. The good news is that I played the best golf I have ever played. God was with me like never before. My play was inspired from above.

Then what is the bad news?

The bad news is that I lost by three strokes to Rabbi Tiger Woods.

Unfortunately, today, relations between Jews and the non-Jewish world are no laughing matter. Take Germany as a case in point.

After the Shoah, Germany became a model for teshuvah and for reconciliation with the Jewish world. There are powerful and poignant museums in Germany that tell the story of the Holocaust, but more than museums. Germany uses public art to continually remind its citizenry of its past and work on a future that would be free of hate. For example, stepping-stones contain the names of Jews who were murdered that German citizens see when they walk down the street. For years, Israel has had no stronger ally in Europe than Germany. So much so that Germany became a magnet for young Israeli Jews. Over 13,000 Israelis have moved to Berlin, the former capital of Nazi Germany, choosing to make a home where their grandparents once fled.

But Germany as a model for reconciliation with its Jewish community feels very dated today. As has been widely reported, Germany's 200,000 Jews are feeling old hatreds and old fears with new urgency. Last year there was a 20% increase in anti-Semitic violence. Recently, a video went viral showing a Muslim immigrant whipping with his belt an Israeli who was wearing a kippah while shouting Jew in Arabic. The Jews in Germany now face violence not only from Neo Nazis but also from Muslim immigrants.

There is a German official named Felix Klein whose job is to protect Jews from anti-Semitism. This week Mr. Klein advised Jews not to wear kippot in public on the grounds that it was not safe to do so.

To be fair, this admonition has engendered substantial backlash. Many writers and thinkers in Germany and beyond have been highly critical of this no public kippah admonition. Germany's main newspaper published what appears to be a paper kippah, with instructions for how to cut it out of the newspaper and wear it on your head. The German daily's posture was that if Jews face hatred, we are all Jews. We all wear kippot.

And yet, Commissioner Klein's words reflect a somber new reality that, with anti-Semitism flaring anew both on the right and on the left, 74 years after the Shoah, it may well *not* be safe to wear a kippah in public in Germany today.

I was in a very dark place about resurgent anti-Semitism in Germany. And then I attended the Commencement exercises on Thursday at Harvard and encountered three sources of inspiration that can guide us to a strong and hopeful response.

The first came from a prayer by Jonathan Walton, the Minister of Memorial Church. He was offering a closing prayer to graduates of all the various schools at Harvard who are leaving

the world they know to face a new world. But his words transcend his context and apply with equal force to our conundrum of Germany today.

His prayer was: *God, free us, fill us, use us.*

Free us from fear, doubt, insecurity. Free us from hatred and bigotry. Free us from the sense that the problems of the world are too big and we are too small to do anything about them.

Fill us with compassion and the courage to take action.

Use us to make a positive difference in the world.

How can this prayer—free us, fill us, use us—inspire us when it comes to the intractable problem of anti-Semitism? That leads to the second source of inspiration—a plaque in Harvard Yard that tells a remarkable story.

In the wake of Kristallnacht, on November 16, 1938, 500 Harvard and Radcliffe students came together both to protest the hatred of Jews in Germany, and to do something about it. The leaders of the Harvard Student Union at the time were acting not because of tribal loyalties—most were not Jewish—but because saving the lives of innocents was the right thing to do.

Here is what they did. They reached out to the President of the United States, the President of Harvard, and the Harvard Corporation. They raised money from fellow students and from faculty, staff and alumni for their audacious plan. The plan was to get admitted to the United States, and then to Harvard, 16 refugees from Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia. Their plan worked, and 16 people who would have been slaughtered by the Nazis were educated at Harvard. They would go on to lead rich and full lives, getting married, having children and grandchildren and great grandchildren, and being leaders in education, medicine, business, law and government.

Harvard marked this response to the brokenness of Kristallnacht in two ways. It planted a Linden tree in Harvard Yard. Linden trees are the national symbol of the Czech Republic and are known in Germanic culture as being a symbol of life, love, healing and grace. And it laid a plaque down near the Linden tree which read:

To Harvard University Students—Faculty—Staff—Alumni—whose generosity fifty years ago opened doors to Student Refugees from Nazi Persecution. May this tree express in grace and beauty the abiding and heartfelt gratitude of the recipients.

We need to plant Linden trees. Aviad's Bar Mitzvah this morning, 80 years after the Nazis destroyed a shul that the Posnansky family had built in Poland, is a Linden tree. Sending a delegation of 23 members of Temple Emanuel from Auschwitz to Israel on March of the Living is a Linden tree. Sending our teens to Israel every year so that they get why Israel matters is a Linden tree. Fighting injustice anywhere, coming to the aid of refugees and immigrants stuck in prisons and trapped in church basements seeking sanctuary, is a Linden tree.

Which leads to the third source of inspiration. In this week of heightened concern about anti-Semitism in Germany, who was receiving an honorary degree at Harvard, and who was giving the commencement speech at Harvard, but Angela Merkel, the Chancellor of Germany. Add to the mix that the President of Harvard is Larry Bacow, whose mother Ruth Bacow was born in Germany and survived Auschwitz.

At one of the commencement dinners, Larry and Adele are hosting the Chancellor of Germany. During the course of the evening, Chancellor Merkel puts her hand on Larry's shoulder and says to him: "Tell me about your mother." The question itself revealed humanity and decency. The question itself, the interest taken by the leader of Germany, was an act of healing.

The Chancellor asked Larry if he had ever visited the town in Germany from which his mother had come, a farming village of 900 people known as Londorf, Germany. Larry said yes. A few weeks after his mother had passed away, he and his family went to his mother's hometown, to Londorf. and there they met the neighbor of his mother, a man named Otto, who had been good to Ruth when she lived there. And Otto was warm and welcoming to Larry and his family now all these years later. Otto lived next door to the home of Ruth's childhood. He offered to knock on the door and speak to the person who lives there now so that Larry and family could see the home where his mother had lived in her childhood.

Otto does so, and Otto and Larry and his family walk into his mother's childhood home. There is an elderly woman living there who had lived there since his mother was kicked out of their home. Larry shared with Chancellor Merkel that it was awkward. It was uncomfortable. She had been given the home by the Nazis. She benefitted from the transport of Ruth Bacow's family to a concentration camp. Their loss was her gain. The whole situation was fraught and uncomfortable, filled with awkward silence.

As Larry relates this story, the Chancellor asked Larry a question that took him aback and made him think. She asked him: *Is there any other way the conversation could have gone?* She saw him. She listened. She cared. She left him with a question that he is still pondering.

There are haters, it is true. But there are also decent people with whom we can build caring relationships.

Anti-Semitism is real. But so is the power of our prayer and our action. God, free us. Fill us. Use us. There are Linden trees waiting to be planted. There are Linden trees waiting for you. Shabbat shalom.