



***Parshat Re'eh***  
**August 19, 2017 / 27 Av 5777**  
**Ki Gamal Alai**  
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אשירה לה' כי גמל עלי

This song has been stuck in my head all week. Maybe because it's a song I first learned from Rabbi Ruhi Sophia Motzkin Rubenstein at a meditation circle in Jerusalem. I remember we sang this melody together slowly and with feeling, and then Rabbi Rubenstein pointed out that if you translate this prayer using only a Hebrew dictionary, you might read it as "I will sing to God because there is a camel on top of me." כי גמל עלי

This was a week when many of us felt ourselves squashed beneath the weight of our country's beastly burdens. This was the week that hundreds of Neo-Nazis, Ku Klux Klan, and other factions within the so-called alt-right movement descended to Charlottesville, Virginia ostensibly to protest the removal of a Robert E. Lee statue, but really to gather and show their growing power. Clothed in Klan robes, Nazi uniforms, and other historic costumes of bigotry and terrorism, they stormed the streets of Charlottesville chanting "Jews will not replace us," "Blood and soil," and slogans I will not repeat on this bimah. They brought AR 15 assault rifles, guns, balloons of urine, smoke bombs, pepper spray and other objects of intimidation to be used against counter-protestors. These groups claimed their actions were in service of free speech as guaranteed by the First Amendment.

How is it that in 2017, we have Nazis and Klan members marching in broad daylight? How is it that today, this holy day of Shabbat, there is a "Free Speech Rally" happening right now, here in Boston with two of the same speakers from the Charlottesville rally? How is it in

the summer of 2017 that the Boston Holocaust Memorial has been vandalized not once, but twice? That the Nazi flag is perversely being raised as a symbol of American Nationalism in 9 cities as we speak?

And why is it that in 2017, the only way to prevent hateful riots is to declare a state of emergency after things get out of hand? After a 20-year-old Ohio man drove his car into a group of counter-protestors—killing 32-year-old Heather Heyer and wounding another 19, after Dre Harris was beaten with metal poles in a parking garage so severely that he had to be hospitalized for broken facial bones and deep gashes, after a year with racist undertones and online threats, we are only now waking up to the vile extremist hatred in our midst?

This week, the president of Beth Israel, the Reform congregation in Charlottesville shared his community's experience during that rally. He wrote about what it was like to stand in their sanctuary watching armed, menacing men in army fatigues stalking back and forth with serious weapons across the street. What it was like to listen shouts of “there's the synagogue” and “seig heil” in the middle of morning prayers. What it was like to be told by the Charlottesville police that they could not provide the synagogue with a police guard. He wrote, “when services ended, my heart broke as I advised congregants that it would be safer to leave the temple through the back entrance rather than through the front, and to please go in groups. This is 2017 in the United States of America.”

As a new rabbi and cantor, the last thing I want to do is to stand on this bimah and talk about politics. But I cannot stand here with integrity and ignore our president's failure to take a stand against hate. As a Jew and a human being, I cannot ignore the fact that our president initially waited two days to condemn the white supremacists behind this rally, and that when he did, his condemnation was stilted and scripted, condemning “hatred, bigotry, and violence. On

many sides.” As if the people who put their bodies on the line to protect minorities and stand up for justice and equality were the same as the neo-Nazis and Klansmen propagating violence.

Trump’s response was so parve that alt-right pundits erupted with glee. The Daily Stormer, an alt-right website, posted “No condemnation at all. When asked to condemn, he just walked out of the room. Really, really good. God bless him.”

It’s not hard to see why the Daily Stormer was so happy—Trump’s condemnation of the Charlottesville protest was not only tepid, it occurred only after he had taken fierce aim with much more intensity and personal outrage at Kenneth Frazier, the Merck executive who resigned from a presidential advisory group in protest of the president’s silence.

And—as we all now know—it was only temporary.

By Tuesday, he had reverted to his initial rhetoric of “bad” and “violent” people on both sides. That’s something that Christopher Cantwell, an alt-right speaker from Charlottesville, said about the car ramming in an HBO interview. Cantwell claimed that the video clearly shows the driver being attacked by “animals,” that his only option for escape was to hit the gas. When our president claims there are bad people on both sides, he is reiterating this alt-right rhetoric, using his presidential platform to actively and underhandedly incite the very groups he claims to stand against.

What are we to do in the face of this hatred and violence? How do we respond when the president of the United States abdicates moral responsibility and actively empowers hate?

It is terrifying to live in a time when Nazis are literally walking the streets, shouting outside of synagogues, waving their flags. Terrifying to live in a time when our people are denied police protection. When bigots are permitted to shelter beneath the wings of our

Constitution, when people pretend hate is some sort of political affiliation. This week has been a week of fear and grief and pain and betrayal and anger. כי גמל עלי this week has weighed us down.

But this week has also taught us something important. This week has shown us that we are strong enough to stand up. We know that there is more to the world than this. Even when the world sinks to new lows, we can sing to the One on High. We can sing to the God who guided us through the turbulence of history, who gave us the strength, not only to survive, but to thrive. The God who taught us to stand up against hatred in every moment and in every time.

As my dear friend Lisa Zimmerman once said, “I don’t tell my God how big my problems are. I tell my problems how big my God is.”

That’s really what our liturgy teaches us. כי גמל עלי can mean I will sing to God because I feel like I am being crushed beneath the weight of the world, but it can also mean I will sing to God because God has redeemed me. כי גמל עלי. Because God has given me the strength to stand with courage, because God has shown me redemption is possible I will sing and we will sing together.

We will sing for the 12 thousand people who committed to stand against hate here in Boston right now. For the many thousands of people who have joined together across the country.

We will sing for John Aguilar, the 30-year old Navy veteran who, when police wouldn’t stand up, decided to go and guard the synagogue in Charlottesville last Friday and Saturday night on his own.

We will sing for Heather Heyer, who used to sit at her computer and cry about the injustices in the world because she felt things so deeply. But she didn't just cry. She went out to make the world a better place. Her final Facebook post read, "If you're not outraged, you're not paying attention."

We will sing for the more than six thousand people who donated to help Dre Harris pay his medical bills. For the people who continued to donate even after his GoFundMe page reached its goal.

We will sing for the families who are taking a stand against hate even when it means standing against their own children. Families like the Tefft family of Fargo, North Dakota, who this week wrote a letter to the community renouncing their son and expressing remorse for his vitriolic and hate-filled remarks and participation in the Charlottesville rally.

We will sing because we know that even though haters have dominated the news this week, they are not the majority. Hate will not win.

We will sing because, as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." It bends towards tolerance. It bends towards love.

This week we are reading from Parshat Re'eh. God says, "See, I am placing before you a blessing and a curse. A blessing if you walk in my ways and a curse if you do not." This is the moment we are living now.

If we choose to tuck into our shells and bow under the weight of bigotry and oppression, if we allow hate to win, we will forever be singing to God from underneath a weight, living in a curse. But, if we walk in God's ways, if we stand up, speak out for what is right, support

education, raise leaders who will fight hate and reach out with love, we will be able to sing from a place of miracles. The arc of the moral universe may be long, but the way it bends depends on us.

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