

“Mer Zenen Du – We Are Still Here”
Rosh Hashanah 5769
Rabbi Jay M. Stein

My first real memories of school were of the grammar school I attended, Hillel Academy. I learned how to study Talmud and internalized almost every story in the Torah. Figures such as Rabbi Asher Steinberg and Rabbi Sanford Parsons were larger than life. I remember that Rabbi Steinberg could hit a softball for a mile. He also seemed to know the entire Torah by heart. I spent almost every morning with him from the time I was eight until I went off to high school. You see, there was no yeshiva high school where we lived and if I was going to go to yeshiva high school, I would have had to live away from home, and truthfully, that was never going to happen. I applied to the various nationally acclaimed high schools like yeshiva of Flatbush and Metropolitan Torah Academy, M.T.A., but I knew I was going to public high school. I just didn't want to let my teachers down. I was hoping I wouldn't get in and then I wouldn't have to make the choice, but I did. So I had to choose. My parents said they would be supportive of whatever I decided to do, though they thought it might be a little early to move out. I agreed and so did a few of my classmates. My graduating class from eighth grade was eight students. Three of us went on to public high school. Robert Chaifetz, Larry Abramson and I were going out into the world.

At this time, my father made it very clear that I was going to continue my Judaic studies and we would now be studying together. However, I still felt a little guilty that I wasn't going on to yeshiva high school, so I made a pact with myself. I was going to continue wearing my *kippah* even though I was now entering an entirely secular world. Robert Chaifetz and Larry Abramson both decided to shed their headgear, but I was going to keep wearing mine. I knew I was going to be the only one in a school of 1600 students wearing a yarmulke, even though the school may have been twenty per cent Jewish. As is the case with everything I do, once I start I never quit. I had an older brother who was already there and he didn't wear a *kippah* to school. I had younger brothers who would eventually make their way to our school and they too never wore a *kippah* to school. Once again, being different was no different than usual for me and I never thought, not even for a moment, that it would be an issue. I assumed for gym class that it would remain clipped to my mane of red hair and I assumed that it might draw a little attention but not much. Never in my wildest dreams did I think I'd become a victim of discrimination because it was 1980 and we live in a politically correct society. The language of America as a melting pot had been replaced by the analogy of the salad bowl. No longer was America trying to absorb every one in to one life style. It was the age of multi-culturalism and celebrating individual identity, and I assumed my *kippah* would be viewed precisely in that light. Oh, how wrong I was.

It turns out we hadn't progressed as far as we should have and anti-Semitism was alive and well in Fairfield CT. I knew it to be a historical phenomenon, something that existed in our past. I knew that in its extreme form it brought us the Chimileski massacres, the expulsion from Spain, the Blood Libel and ultimately the Holocaust. I knew that in parts of Bridgeport, a blue-collar area just one town over from where I lived, there was some anti-Semitism because we had a run in with some kids when I was younger. I didn't think that in my upper middle class public high school, known for its tennis and golf teams, that there were going to be problems. I also knew it existed in the Midwest where Jews were even scarcer, but I guess I just hadn't thought it through

enough. The problems started almost immediately. Within the first week, a number of children asked if I had horns under my little “beanie?” To this day “beanie” is a word that makes my skin crawl. I wrote it off to ignorance, not hatred. I could hear the sarcasm and ridicule in their voices, but I chose to ignore it, rather seeing this as an educational opportunity. However, then the problems escalated. One day I was walking down the hall and heard a coin whiz by me. It was a penny. They were actually throwing pennies at me. They were throwing pennies at me and without saying a word they were calling me every dirty name they could think of, every stereotype I had ever heard of.

I reached up to take my *kippah* off, trying to disappear. I remember exactly where I was standing when I raised my hand to my head to take hold of my *kippah* and slide it into my pocket without anyone even noticing and then I could fade into my locker. Then as my father had taught me, I said, “No.” No, I am a Jew - I am a child of God, I am Jew and I am not going away. I am a Jew and I am not embarrassed. I am a Jew and I am not afraid. I am a Jew and I am not going away. I am a Jew and this is the way I choose to express it and no one is going to stop me. So I turned and walked away that day, but I came back the next – and the next after that, and just as Barbara Shaiman taught us this past Yom Hashoah – *mer zenen du*. We are still here.

Barbara, the founder of *Champions of Caring*, made the statement that we are still here. That night she spoke of Ben Mead, President of the Holocaust Survivor Group, who was once asked to introduce Ronald Regan. He said, “No matter what history wanted to do to us, no matter what they tried to do to us, cattle cars, ghettos, we are the conscience of the world and we will not go away. Remember the history, about the miracles of our survivors – 60 years later they are still telling the story, no revisionism, we are still here.” He made the statement that in the face of devastating destruction, we choose not to run away, we choose to insure the correct historical record. We choose to survive. We won’t go away, we refuse to disappear.

I imagined, when those adolescent anti-Semites were testing out their expression of the toxic behavior they had learned, that I would beat them up. I imagined myself standing on top of a kid with me holding them by the collar making them apologize, but I didn’t, I just walked away. However, I did make a promise to myself. I promised I would not give in. I promised I would not remove my *kippah*. I promised that even though I was afraid I would behave as though I wasn’t. That is action and that is an important life lesson. It is about the commitments you make in those moments. It is about the promises you make in adversity. It is about the lessons you learn when you are sincerely challenged. It is about the guarantees you make to yourself and to your people.

The Torah reading for Rosh Hashanah must be read as a continuous narrative. Today we read the story of Abraham sending Hagar and Ishamel off. Hagar has provided Abraham with a son, something Sarah was unable to do. But the moment Sarah gives birth to a child she demands that her maidservant, Hagar, and her son be banished. We want someone to object, but no one does. As the story continues, we see Hagar lay her son down and utter the words, *Al Ar’eh b’mot hayeled*, I can’t bare to see my boy die. She just lays him down. Yet there is not a single objection by a single commentary. The passivity is extraordinary. It seems as though whatever happens, happens. This idea that Hagar must let whatever happens, happen, and that this is part of God’s plan, seems absurd and I reject it.

Tomorrow we will read a similar story. It is another story of a parent that lays a child down and let's life take its course. It is a story that has been held up for multi-millennia as the paradigm for belief and trust of the Almighty. When God calls out to Abraham and says, "Sacrifice your son, your only son, the son you love." Abraham says, "*hineni*" and we are impressed by his conviction. The problem is, his priorities are out of alignment, but this is nothing new. For two generations, since Franz Rozenzweig, we have questioned Abraham. For over 80 years we have been saying that Abraham failed the test. God wanted to see if Abraham got what God really wanted of him – and Abraham got it wrong. Rozenzweig remarks that God wanted Abraham to object and he did not, so God was forced to send an angel to save the boy from his father but that is nothing new. My question today is not about Abraham. My question today is about the boy. Today I ask about Isaac.

We focus on Abraham, master of faith, but what about Isaac? Master of what? Nothing. He is the skip generation. *K'sheba Avraham m'har ha'moriah nitbasar shenoldah rivka, v'yitzhak haya ben lamed zayin shanah* (Genesis 25:20) Rashi does the math for us and tells us that Isaac was 37 years old when his binding takes place – 37 years old. I know we each have the image in our minds of a small boy naively doing what his father says. Yet Rashi tells us no. Rashi begs us to not let him off the hook so easily. Writing in France during the mid eleventh century, Rashi seems to be yelling to Isaac, "Take charge, don't just lie there. For God's sake you're an adult." Chaim Pearl, in writing about Rashi's life, remarks that it was Rashi's good fortune, and the good fortune of the Jewish people, that he lived his life in a time when conditions for Jews in Franco-German lands were good. Some of the greatest and most creative masterpieces of Jewish literature were produced against the background of relative stability, by people who had the opportunity to live in comparative peace. For example, much of the Babylonian Talmud and the great philosophical works of medieval Spain during its so called Golden age (Rashi, Grove Press, NY 1988 page 3) were written at this time.

Rashi can't imagine just laying down to die, or worse, sacrificing a child. Rashi didn't live during the Chimileski massacres. Rashi didn't live during the Spanish inquisition and Rashi certainly did not live during the Holocaust. I hold the Warsaw Ghetto uprising as my role model. I look to the modern Israeli Army for my inspiration. So, he can't imagine laying a child down and letting life take its course, and neither can I. Isaac just lets life happen to him and we should be outraged. Our Torah begs us to yell out to Isaac, "What are you doing? We don't lie down to die." Isaac should not have done it and we certainly will not. Each time an angel appears to save the day and, in the final hour, an angel swoops down to rescue the child. Maybe one will again, but I'm not waiting any longer. I refuse to live my life in the shadow of the destruction that has been the hallmark of our history. I am a child of the most high. I am God's chosen, and so are you.

My theology won't permit it. My cosmology won't stand for it. My sociology discards it. I am a child of the most high, I am God's chosen and so are you. These ten days are about taking hold of our lives. These ten days are about taking control and doing something different. Today is about rejecting a destiny that seems obvious. Today is about asserting your life, living your finest life now.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of the British Empire, was here last year. He came through the efforts of the A.D.L., one of the greatest Jewish organizations responsible for and dedicated

to, the protection of our people. He shared the following story of a rabbi who moved to a small village in Poland. When he arrived, the townspeople taunted him all day long by yelling, “G’id.” He had no idea what to do, so he decided he would give them each five rubels. This stopped them almost immediately. However, the next day they were back. Once again, they surrounded his house and started yelling, “G’id, g’id.” This time he was only able to give them two rubels each and again this satisfied them so they went on their way. The next day they were back again yelling “G’id.” Now, he only had only a few copeks left and as they started yelling, “G’id, g’id” again, he emerged from his home and said, “I am sorry but all I have is a few copeks to give you.” To which one of the townspeople stepped forward and said, “Do you really think we’re going to yell “G’id g’id” for just a few copeks?”

It’s a funny story, one with a powerful message. We can employ different methods to combat anti-Semitism. We can try and blend in and we can assert our independence. However, no matter, we are Jews and we are here and we are not going any where. Ours is a history filled with persecution. Ours is a history filled with stories of expulsion and tragedy, but we are still here and we are not going anywhere. Today, as a child born after the establishment of the State of Israel, I say with out fear and unabashedly, “I am a Jew – *mir zenin du.*” We have so many resources available to us. You can see our new logo on the cover of our new program catalogue and it reads: “Tradition is our bedrock, Family is our shelter, Community is our garden, Learning is our light.” We have so much that supports us and our tradition, family and community propel us. We have a contribution to make to this world. We are the moral compass, we have a purpose, and we are not going anywhere. As my colleague, Rabbi Vernon Kurtz, reminded me, when Russia invaded Georgia it was Israel that sent aid. We are the moral compass, we have a purpose, and *mir zenen du* – we are not going anywhere.

I remember the day those pennies were thrown at me like it was yesterday. I remember looking back for a split-second and seeing a very tough looking biker dude, with his wallet attached to his belt loop by a chain. He was wearing a black leather jacket and gloves that were missing the fingers. He had a dew rag on and was wearing heavy boots. I remember thinking that wasn’t the type of guy I could take. It was another reason why I walked away that day. But that day, right after school, this guy met me outside. I thought maybe I hadn’t given him the satisfaction he was looking for and now I was going to get pummeled. Then he gave me the nod. You know the nod. It is a subtle acknowledgement that we have taken note of another Jew. It is like a secret handshake. It is a special nod that one Jew gives another when they see each other in a place filled with non-Jews. It happens most often when two Jews enter a public area and notice the other is wearing a *kippah*. It usually happens at a huge sports event. Two Jews see each other at a baseball game or at the theatre and they give each other the nod. He gave me the nod and I knew immediately he was M.O.T., a member of the tribe. He then went on to say, if I have any other trouble to let him know and he would take care of it. I don’t know who he was, I don’t even know his name, but he gave me a wonderful gift, he gave me a sense of safety and a sense of confidence and today I give it to you. He reminded me I am not alone and that I am part of a proud people and today I remind you. *Mer Zenen Du*, we are still here. *Mer* is plural it is not *ich*, singular. We are in this together. We are all still here. We are identified and confident Jews. *Mer zenen Du* and we are not going anywhere. *Shana Tova!*