**Striving to Be Human**

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The people of the little village of Chelm needed a better system to fight fires. So they sent Shloime to Warsaw to learn the latest big-city methods. He found that a person was stationed in a high tower to look for fires. Shloime climbed up and asked the man what he did when he saw a fire.

“I blow on this bugle very loudly,” the Warsaw man said.

“And then what happens?” asked Shloime.

Deciding to have a little fun with the yokel, the Warsaw man answered, “And then the fire is out.”

Shloime rushed back to Chelm. Everyone was excited, but someone pointed out that they didn’t have a bugle.

This put a damper on the mood. But then Berl said, “No, but we do have shofars.”

So that settled it. They built a big tower and set a watchman in it armed with a shofar.

Sure enough, the next week, a fire broke out. She blew and blew on the shofar. Everyone heard it. And the house burned down.

Someone from Warsaw happened to be passing through Chelm at the time. After the fire had burned itself out, he explained, “The horn is only a warning. You actually have to do something to prevent a catastrophe.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

T’kiah, sh’varim, t’ruah, t’kiah g’dolah. The shofar blasts are too strident for us to ignore. They call us to wake up, before it is too late. They have been likened to the voice of the prophets, who insisted that the truth be told. But they solve nothing. They call us to do something before it’s too late.

Today, on this *yom t’ruah,* the day of the sounding of the shofar, I have no choice to speak anything but the truth, the truth about what is happening in America. And the truth is that something ugly and dangerous has been unleashed in our country.

Nicholas Kristof is a Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist for the *New York Times.* He grew up on a farm in western Oregon. Near that farm is a town named Forest Grove. As Kristof writes, it “has historically been a charming, friendly and welcoming community.” This spring, however, in the middle of a physics class, he reports that “a group of white students suddenly began jeering at their Latino classmates and chanting: ‘Build a wall! Build a wall!’

“The same white students had earlier chanted ‘Trump! Trump! Trump!’ Soon afterward, a student hung a homemade banner in the school reading, ‘Build a Wall,’ prompting Latinos at area schools to stage a walkout.”

Kristof argues that this incident is far from isolated. He places part of the blame for it and others squarely on Donald Trump. According to Kristof, his “harsh rhetoric tears away the veneer of civility and betrays our national motto of ‘e pluribus unum.’ He has unleashed a beast and fed its hunger, and long after this campaign is over we will be struggling to corral it again.” He then quotes Maureen Costello of the Southern Poverty Law Center, who said, “We’ve been spending the last 15 years fighting bullying in schools, and the example set by the Trump campaign has broken down the doors, and a tidal wave of bullying has come through.”

As Jews, we have particular reasons to be concerned about the trends that Kristof identifies. We have all heard of the Mexican rapists who are flooding across our border – although, in fact, there is no flood and no more rapists than in the general population. We have all heard that Muslim immigrants cannot be allowed into our country because some might become terrorists, conveniently overlooking both the millions of decent Muslims and the homegrown terrorists of various backgrounds. We need to filter such charges through our own historical experiences, because anti-immigrant campaigners levied similar accusations against foreign-born Jews a century ago.

But in addition, we should know that the beast that has been unleashed today has anti-Semitic claws. Kristof himself writes that a previous column about whether Trump was a racist provoked, in his word, “anti-Semitic vitriol from Trump followers, one of whom suggested I should be sent to the ovens for writing ‘a typically Jewish hit piece.’” Kristof goes on, “In fact, I’m Armenian and Christian, not Jewish, but the responses underscored that the Trump campaign is enveloped by a cloud of racial, ethnic and religious animosity – much of it poorly informed.” [[2]](#footnote-2)

It has been noted that one of Mr. Trump’s daughters married a Jew and converted, and that her husband is heavily involved in his campaign. It has also been noted that Mr. Trump has made strong statements of his support of Israel, although he has also suggested that he would be “neutral” in disputes between Israel and the Palestinians.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Nevertheless, open anti-Semitism has shown itself in the wake of the Trump campaign in a way that not many people alive today can remember. There was the tweeted image of Hillary Clinton, a star of David, and a whole lot of greenbacks, an image that originated in an anti-Semitic, white supremacist message board. A campaign official said that he hadn’t been aware of its provenance.[[4]](#footnote-4) There was the recent action by Donald Trump, Jr., who retweeted an image that included his father’s face replaced by Pepe the Frog. For those who don’t know about Pepe, he is a cartoon figure that the racists of the so-called Alt Right have turned into a meme. As James Fallows of *The* *Atlantic* writes, among the variants he gets in his emails are “Pepe as a smiling gas chamber operator inviting Jews to take a ‘shower’; Pepe working the crematoria, after the gas chambers have done their job; Pepe at the glorious new southern Wall, grinning at the plight of the Mexicans trapped on the other side; Pepe as an Orthodox Jew, smirking (because of the ‘inside job’) as the World Trade Centers came down 15 years ago....”[[5]](#footnote-5) The younger Mr. Trump denies having any knowledge of what the meme meant.[[6]](#footnote-6)

And beyond the actual campaign, anti-Semitic backers of Donald Trump have not been quiet. This spring, Julia Ioffe, a Russian-American reporter, portrayed Donald Trump’s wife, Melania, in *GQ* Magazine. She received scads of viciously anti-Semitic responses. She said that it reminded her of what she had to endure when she still lived in Russia.[[7]](#footnote-7) Two of my rabbinic colleagues have reported vile anti-Semitic attacks when they tweeted about their disagreements with Mr. Trump.

Racism, anti-Semitism, bullying: all of these have appeared around the Trump campaign and sometimes at its heart. And we can, as Kristof does, legitimately connect their appearance to the way that Mr. Trump has spoken to the American people.

This past summer, George Saunders wrote a piece in the *New Yorker* Magazine about his travels with Trump rallies.[[8]](#footnote-8) He observed what those of us watching on television have seen: the bullying from the candidate has led to bullying from his supporters. It has taken its toll on those who come to demonstrate against Mr. Trump. Sandra Borchers was one of those. She said that there was calm along the protest line. She even had some “back and forth conversations” at a normal speaking voice. All this lasted, Saunders writes, “until Trump started speaking. Then,” Borchers told him, “things got ‘violent and aggressive.’ Someone threw a rock at her head. A female Trump supporter ... attacked a protester, kicking and punching him.” An African-American woman “was grabbed by the breast, thrown to the ground, slapped in the face,” and told to “go back on the boat,” an odd comment since she was born and raised in the town where the rally was taking place.

After another Trump rally people were bullied and spat on. Many were sucker punched. A woman of about sixty was being slapped around by younger women who were not of her race, and George Saunders had to rescue her from them.

In this case, however, the people doing the beating and sucker punching and slapping were the protesters, and the people on the receiving end were Trump supporters. I tell you this not to suggest that this lets Donald Trump off the hook. I agree with Saunders that there are people on all sides of all issues who are inclined toward the worst behavior. Every war and revolution in history reveals this. As Saunders writes, “This, Mr. Trump, is why we practice civility.” Once that is gone, our evil inclinations are unleashed. And the harm falls, not randomly and not justly, but usually on those least able to withstand it. And, as Saunders also writes, the rest of us are left to clean up the mess, if it can be cleaned up.

However, the rest of us often don’t see the mess, or, to be more precise, we only see the mess that affects our side. It is a truism that our politics are as divided as they have been in living memory, but it is no less true for being a truism. As Saunders points out, there have been times when people disagreed to the point that they were barely speaking with each other. I am old enough to remember how the Vietnam War divided families throughout this nation. But, as he also points out, everyone was dealing with essentially the same facts as presented by news organizations. Now we live in what he calls “Leftleft” land and “Rightright” land. Some of us hear from the evening MSNBC shows on one side and others from the daylong Fox News shows on the other. And I suspect that many of us just hear from our own Facebook feeds as we unfriend those who disagree with us. Both sides lambaste the mainstream news organizations for bias or laziness or both. And we certainly don’t take time to understand the people on the other side.

George Saunders writes, “The Trump supporters I spoke with were friendly, generous with their time, flattered to be asked their opinion, willing to give it, even when they knew I was a liberal writer likely to throw them under the bus. They loved their country, seemed panicked at its perceived demise, felt urgently that we were, right now, in the process of losing something precious.” As J.D. Vance, another thoughtful observer who himself comes from the white working class notes, “[O]ne of the biggest predictors of whether someone will support Donald Trump – it may be the biggest predictor – is the belief that America is headed in the wrong direction, the belief that your kids are not going to have a better life than you did.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

Sometimes, Saunders would tell them about a young woman who had been brought illegally to America at the age of three, not done anything wrong, and yet because of American immigration policy now faced a life almost devoid of hope. Should she be deported to a Mexico that had never been her home? Faced with this specificity, Saunders writes, “my interviewees began trying, really trying, to think of what would be fairest and most humane for this real person we had imaginatively conjured up. It wasn’t that we suddenly agreed, but the tone changed. We popped briefly out of zinger mode and began to have some faith in one another.”

The problem was, it didn’t last. He had been having such a conversation with a former railroad worker named Danny, now on disability. A few minutes later, he saw Danny shouting at the nearby Clinton supporters that Hillary was going to jail, not to the White House. Saunders writes, “I waved at him, but he didn’t seem to see me, hidden there in the crowd of his adversaries.”

This is where we are on this first of Tishrei, 5777, on October 3, 2016, in the United States of America. We are in the midst of the most consequential election in our lifetime. At our best, we can find ways to speak across our divides. But most of the time, we don’t see each other, just a crowd of our adversaries.

Hillel lived two thousand years ago. He said two things I’d like to share with you that span the millennia. First, he said, *im lo achshav, eimatai?* “If not now, when?”[[10]](#footnote-10) If you care about your country, I urge you to get involved. Fight for what you believe in. Your children, your grandchildren will ask, “What did you do in 2016 to shape the world we inherited?” If not now, when?

From Hillel, I want to move to a sage of more recent vintage, David Ben-Gurion. Ben-Gurion was the first Prime Minister of the State of Israel, but even before that he led the Jewish community in Palestine. The British controlled Palestine under a mandate from the League of Nations. In 1939, the British Government issued a White Paper that basically prevented Jews from entering the country. A few months later, Britain declared war on Germany. Ben-Gurion was confronted with an apparent dilemma. Should he stand by the British against the Nazis, which would leave the White Paper in place and close off Palestine as a refuge? Or should he continue his opposition to the British policy and thereby risk aiding the Nazis? Faced with making an unpalatable choice, he didn’t. Instead, he said, “We must assist the British in the war as if there were no White Paper and we must resist the White Paper as if there were no war.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

Like Ben-Gurion, we must refuse to choose between two things that we need. In our case, it isn’t immigration and war; it’s our future and our humanity. We need to get involved in this election. But we should also fight another battle at the same time. And again, Hillel has told us what that battle is: *Bamakom she’ein anashim, hishtadel l’hiyot ish,* “In a place where no one is human, strive to be a human being.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Or, as we would say, in a place where no one is being civil, be a mentsh. We can fight for a country that respects all humans without forgetting that this includes the people with whom we very strongly disagree.

Today is Rosh Hashanah, *Yom HaDin,* the day of judgment. Our shofar calls us to that judgment. It calls us with the voice of the prophets, demanding that we fight to repair this very broken world. But it calls us with other voices as well.

One of my teachers is Rabbi Nehemiah Polen. I heard him elucidate a Hasidic text from two centuries ago. In Hasidic thought, the universe is deeply interconnected, and what we do can influence all existence. The teaching that Rabbi Polen shared reminds us that on this day of judgment, once we ourselves come down on the side of judgment, we can sometimes go too far. We want to show tough love, but we can put too much weight on the “tough” part. This is especially true when we’re talking about emotions. It’s easy to become righteously indignant, and then to become virtuously passionate in our judgments. But if we do so, coarseness will envelop the universe.

So, we can temper our passions. We can decide not to let our anger control us. Our compassion can bring forth compassion in the universe. We may not see it in the next debate, but we cannot give up on the obligation to shower the world with compassion.

And that is the other way the shofar calls to us today. It calls on us to sweeten our judgments. It makes a sound without words, a sound that is above the conflict and the hate, the bullying and the divisiveness.[[13]](#footnote-13)

We have to fight to make this a better world. We have to fight the forces of hatred and bigotry. We have to answer the shofar of the prophets. And we have to make another seemingly incompatible fight at the same time, just as Ben-Gurion told us to do. We have to listen to the sweet sounds of the shofar, the sounds above words, the sounds of compassion even for those we disagree with. As we fight for righteousness, we have to fight against self-righteousness.

The house is on fire: the house of understanding, of openness, of civility. The shofar calls us in its two voices, its voice of prophecy and its voice of sweetness, to put out the fire. Let us resolve to hear both of its voices today.

*Kein y’hi ratzon,* be this God’s will.

1. Based on “Candles radishes and garlic,” in Solomon Simon, *The Wise Men of Helm and their Merry Tales* (West Orange, NJ: Behrman House, 1945), trans. Ben Bengal and David Simon, pp. 103-118 (originally published in Yiddish as *Die Helden fun Chelm*, 1942). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Nicholas Kristof, “Donald Trump Is Making America Meaner,” *New York Times,* Aug. 13, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/14/opinion/sunday/donald-trump-is-making-america-meaner.html?_r=0>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Brian Schaefer, “Where Does Donald Trump Stand on Israel?” *Ha’aretz,* May 24, 2016, <http://www.haaretz.com/world-news/u-s-election-2016/.premium-1.720213>. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Jeremy Diamond, “Donald Trump’s ‘Star of David’ tweet controversy, explained,” *CNN,* July 5, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/07/04/politics/donald-trump-star-of-david-tweet-explained/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. James Fallows, “Trump Time Capsule #101: Pepe the Frog,” Notes, *The Atlantic,* Sept. 12, 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/notes/2016/09/trump-time-capsule-101-pepe-the-frog/499688/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Nick Gass, “Trump Jr.: I’ve never even heard of Pepe the Frog,” *Politico,* Sept. 16, 2016, <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/09/donald-trump-jr-pepe-the-frog-228268>. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Laura Gambino, “Journalist who profiled Melania Trump hit with barrage of antimsemitic abuse,” *The Guardian,* Apr. 28, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/apr/28/julia-ioffe-journalist-melania-trump-antisemitic-abuse>. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. George Saunders, “Who Are All These Trump Supporters?” *New Yorker,* June 11 and 18, 2016, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/07/11/george-saunders-goes-to-trump-rallies>. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. J.D. Vance, interview on NPR, *Fresh Air,* Aug. 17, 2016, <http://www.npr.org/2016/08/17/490328484/hillbilly-elegy-recalls-a-childhood-where-poverty-was-the-family-tradition>. For more on Vance, see his book *Hillbilly Elegy* (New York: HarperCollins, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. M. Avot 1:14. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Encyclopædia Judaica,* 1st ed., *s.v.* “David Ben-Gurion” (by Yehudah Slutsky). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. M. Avot 2:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Lecture by Nehemiah Polen referencing Kalonymus Kalman Epstein, *Ma’or vaShemesh* (Breslau, 1842). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)