

Dear haverim,

I just returned from delivering the following words at the Dallas Holocaust Museum. Marking today as International Holocaust Remembrance Day, I was asked to share some thoughts on this auspicious day. Especially in light of the illuminating weekend we just concluded with our guest scholar, Rabbi Naomi Levy, whose recent book, *Einstein and the Rabbi*, touched upon the extraordinary life of Rabbi Robert Marcus and the concentration camp, Buchenwald, I invite you to read the following text of my remarks.

Shalom,

Stefan

INTERNATIONAL HOLOCAUST REMEMBRANCE DAY- January 27, 2019

74 years ago, today, the largest Nazi concentration and death camp was liberated by the Red Army. Auschwitz-Birkenau- that ghastly location in the serene countryside of Poland- marks one of humanity's grossest expressions of what it means to be a human being.

Just this past October- a few short months ago- I stood on that hallowed ground with a group of congregants, including some of my family members. I led us in the recitation of the Mourners Kaddish and El Malei Rachamim, as I had done throughout our trip, attempting to recapture a glimpse of the life that was across Central Europe. The scenes from that trip will never be forgotten.

To walk through the gates of Auschwitz and Birkenau is simply unforgettable. I couldn't appreciate the extent of the camp from a movie, book, or a documentary. To stand on the railroad tracks, to wander through the reconstructed barracks, to stand before the crematoria, to view the lonely smokestacks- seeming to extend beyond the horizon- representing the many barracks that housed men, women and children, to walk through the beautiful surrounding forest where our family members contemplated their last thoughts on this earth will haunt me for the remainder of my life.

My mother's home was located in Frankfurt am Main, Germany. My grandfather was a WWI decorated officer in the German army- they couldn't really turn on us Jews, could they? We had proven our loyalty. What more could the Germans want from us? Such was the thinking of my grandfather but not my grandmother. She saw what he didn't want to see or couldn't see. The arguments were non-stop. My immediate family escaped, fleeing to the mountains- the Pyrenees- but the scars remain embedded in our souls, generations later.

Today, we gather to mark the moment of liberation at one camp, symbolizing the defeat of an appalling and horrific system of annihilation. Ordained by the United Nations as International Holocaust Remembrance Day, we gather so as not to forget. We convene to remind ourselves how we human beings, the pinnacle of God's creation, lost our minds and sought the eradication of a complete group of people. Commonly known as genocide, we Jewish people were the target of Adolf Hitler's Third Reich- but we weren't alone. Six million of our Jewish family members were murdered; one and a half million children amongst that unfathomable number, five million additional Slavs, three million ethnic Poles, two hundred thousand Romani people, two hundred fifty thousand mentally and physically disabled individuals, and nine thousand homosexual men. Millions of additional Allied holy souls perished while striving to stop Hitler's maniacal quest to rid the world of anything lacking the purity of the Germanic stock.

We have all read and studied the psychological construct utilized by the Nazis. Reducing their prisoners to tattooed numbers, stripping them of their dignity, removing every semblance of humanity- the ability to disregard the holiness of the human spirit became so palatable for the guards. Today, as we sling disgusting comments about immigrants, homosexuals, blacks, browns, and whites it seems as though we are mimicking another period of time that led to unimaginable results- all because we are incapable of accepting our differences.

Anti-Semitism has never left our side. Dating back over two thousand years, we have consistently been everyone's scapegoat. Why should someone take responsibility for their own deeds or misfortune if it can be blamed on someone else? We find ourselves, today entrenched in a morass of indecency. Incidents of Anti-Semitism skyrocketed over the course of the past two years to unprecedented levels in this country. The civil discourse in our country, let alone the remainder of the world has shocked us time and again. The coarseness with which we choose to interface with each other has led us down a path that has brought tears to the eyes of many, but not nearly enough.

The former Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, Dr. Ismar Schorsch once stated, "Judaism is, above all a life of dialogue." Yesterday's Torah portion, Parashat Yitro, captured the most significant moment in the entire Bible when it described God's revelation of His will to mankind, in the person of Moses. Standing on Mt. Sinai, Moshe Rabbeinu received the template bearing God's will for mankind. And, with that moment began an extraordinary dialogue between God and the Jewish people.

Today, we are obliged to continue that dialogue. You and I are the inheritors of that template. Every generation of our people has engaged in the practice of dialogue, contemplating what it means to be "Shutafe Elohim," partners of God, struggling to find our way on this planet Earth. Challenging ourselves on a weekly basis, through the study and teaching of the Torah we question our decisions, we probe our souls, we strive to ennoble ourselves, to pursue the best, most meaningful and fulfilling path through life.

The **giving** of the Ten Commandments, the "the Aseret HaDibrot," was symbolically re-enacted in our synagogues throughout the world yesterday morning. The challenge for each of us is to **accept** the eternal words of that template- to live with purpose, dignity and honor. May this day of memory become a day of action, compelling us to live as the Prophet Micah articulated in such beautiful language, (heeged l'cha adam mah tov umah Adonai doraysh mim'cha, ki im asot mishpat, v'a'ha'vat chesed, v'hatznayah lechet im Elohecha- What does the Lord require of you? To act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God." Indeed, may we all learn to become Upstanders!