

David Berez
HighHolidays 2017

Its been a sobering several months.

Like many of you I'm sure, I read Nathan Englander's essay in the NY Times the day after Charlottesville with a despairing, resigned recognition. And . . like Englander, I worried about the lessons that my children would draw from the scenes on television. But unlike Englander, I wasn't convinced that anything was lost that day. Hatefulness, scapegoating and prejudice have always been with us and I for one, was thankful to see such an aberrant display on television and splashed across the front pages rather than the "proper" quiet prejudices in the country clubs, the white citizens councils or Cable News.

Although my kids can hardly believe it when I tell them, when I was a kid, public school was closed on the High Holidays, an enduring gift to gentile kids everywhere for which we jewish kids have never gotten enough credit. Our Shul, Ahavath Achim in Fairfield Ct. was located directly across the parking lot from sandlot football field, a few short swing passes away from the pews where my friends and I chafed in new shoes and our dad's ties.

Every Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur we walked down Stratfield Rd, picking up stragglers and young Jewish families at each intersection, the more observant among us eschewing leather shoes for sneakers. The older kids in their too long ties, pulling off the clip on ties of our younger siblings while the sharply dressed moms reprimanded us and told us to stay out of street.

Past the corner grocery store, Sunshine Market, closed for the holidays, owned and run by Mr Abromowitz . . . where each year the newly minted 16 year olds in our neighborhood would shuffle into Sunshine and ask for a job. "Mr A." as we called him, then administered the dreaded test. If bananas were a buck twenty a pound, how much were a a half pound? If you flunked, you ended up in the grocery aisles. cutting knife in hand, stocking canned goods. Me? I was in grocery and I can tell you that I and my the math challenged companions forever held a grudge against the shiny smartypants in produce.

The year was 1976, the year of the bicentennial and the first Rocky movie. The grocery boys would sneak off to the meat locker during our breaks, wrap our hands in butcher tape and wail away at the sides of beef, just like our hero Rocky Balboa.

That was also the year that a visiting Rabbi came to our shul to teach Hebrew School. Rabbi Zapatinsky was a mountain of a man, a black clad orthodox giant. Nine Jewish boys looked up at the rebbe filling the doorway to our classroom with awe. We had never ever seen a rabbi like that. We didn't even know Rabbis could be so . . so big. And so wonderful.

That year in Hebrew school was totally unlike anything we had ever experienced. Rabbi Z regaled us with stories of playing Division III football at Lehigh while teaching us trope. His thunderous laugh echoed down the grim cinder block hallways of our Hebrew school. We were a ragtag collection of misfits, scholars and one leather jacketed ruffian, but he loved us equally. During recess, he would take off his great black jacket, carefully roll up the sleeves of his rumpled white shirt and toss us long arcing passes in the parking lot outside our classroom. “Further, he would thunder as he waved his pie sized hands and we’d race under his rainbows to gather them in.

I’ve been thinking a lot about Rabbi Zapatinsky the past few weeks.

There is something oddly biblical about the events of 5776. A possible despot surrounded by a few “court jews” as Dana Milbank called them . . . , a torchlit march of armed racists seeking to marginalize us and the vexing questions of who belongs, what is an American and what are our obligations to each other. . . . Frankly, its frustrating and disheartening . . . and reminds me of the plea at the heart of Fiddler on the Roof, “Rabbi, we’ve been waiting for the Messiah all our lives, wouldn’t now be a good time for him to come?”

Maybe Englander was right, maybe what we lost in Charlottesville is what Jewish children always seem to lose . . . the comfort of being fully American or fully French or fully Russian . . . the security of knowing that America and its dreams are your birthright, that the fruits of America are yours whether you arrived on the Mayflower or in the hold of a steamship or shackled in chains . . the naive assumption that “we’re all the same, we’re all immigrants.

Today, during the quiet prayers, what I will choose to remember is the thoroughly American sounds of schoolyard chatter on that synagogue parking lot, the laughter of a joyful Rebbe tossing a football to his students running post patterns between the Pacers and Pontiacs and Pintos. “Rabbi, Rabbi, over here, I’m open, throw it to me” “Rebbe, over here . . . I’m open . . I am an American.”

L'shanah Tova