

Shabbat Shalom!

I am from the state of Virginia, born and raised. I remember as a kid on several occasions visiting Charlottesville, and I remember how beautiful I thought that city was. It is a sad time to be a Virginian. The events of this past week, especially what happened in Charlottesville have struck me to the core. There are so many emotions that people across the country are experiencing, with respect to the fact that last weekend we as a nation witnessed the largest gathering of white supremacists and hate groups that our country has seen in at least two decades. It is also impossible to ignore the morally repugnant and equivocating rhetoric from the white house.

The truth is, as a Virginian and as an American, I have been sad, and angry. But specifically as a Virginian, an emotion I have not felt this past week is surprise. I grew up in a state where, from the year of my birth until I was in high school, the government of Virginia didn't seem to see a problem celebrating a holiday called, Lee, Jackson, King day; a day to simultaneously memorialize Generals Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson, along with Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. It wasn't until the year 2000 when people in the state's government acknowledged that the celebration of this

particular grouping of historical figures was to say the least, incongruous.

Nevertheless, I found myself this past week diving into the sea of responses to the events in Charlottesville. I of course watched the president's remarks. I read the letter written by Alan Zimmerman, the president of Congregation Beth Israel in Charlottesville. I watched the bone chilling Vice documentary. I read article, after article, after article. It was beyond overwhelming, but through all the noise, one piece kept returning to my mind.

On Sunday evening on the campus of the University of Virginia, a local activist named Tanesha Hudson spoke to a group of people who came together to mourn [the death of Heather Heyer and in general the events of the weekend]. After addressing the crowd, Tanesha spoke with the same Vice reporter who just the day before was interviewing Neo-Nazis, members of the KKK and other white supremacist groups. Tanesha said,

“All the chaos that you've seen today has been brewing for quite some time. And I don't think it's ever been about a statue. I think it's been about right is right and wrong is wrong.”

She continued, “so many people stand for the wrong things happening and not many of us have come out until it's too late... This was the face of white supremacy. This is what we

deal with everyday being African-American. And this has always been the reality of Charlottesville.”¹

As someone who has always admired Thomas Jefferson for his political and philosophical achievements, what Tanesha said next really hit me like a ton of bricks. She said:

“You can’t stand in one corner of this city and not look at the master sitting on top of Monticello. He looks down on us. He’s been looking down on this city for God knows how long. This is Charlottesville.”

The Master Tanesha is talking about is obviously Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson was a human paradox. He was a person who was ideologically an abolitionist, and yet throughout his lifetime he owned more than 600 people. To me in this regard, Thomas Jefferson represents a kind of horribly unfulfilled potential. He wrote numerous documents advocating for the abolishment of slavery in the United States, including in his original draft of the Declaration of Independence.

“We hold these Truths to be self evident; that all Men are created equal and independent; that from that equal Creation they derive Rights inherent and unalienable; among which are the Preservation of Life, and Liberty, and the Pursuit of

¹ <https://news.vice.com/story/vice-news-tonight-full-episode-charlottesville-race-and-terror>

Happiness; that to secure these Ends, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the governed; that whenever, any form of Government, shall become destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter, or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its Foundation on such Principles, and organizing its Powers in such Form, as to them shall Seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

In his list of complaints against King George III Jefferson wrote that the King had

“waged cruel War against human Nature itself, violating its most sacred Rights of Life and Liberty in the Persons of a distant People who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into Slavery in another Hemisphere, or to incur miserable Death, in their Transportation thither. This piratical Warfare, the opprobrium of infidel Powers, is the Warfare of the Christian King of Great Britain. He has prostituted his Negative for Suppressing every legislative Attempt to prohibit or to restrain an execrable Commerce, determined to keep open a Markett where Men should be bought and sold, and that

this assemblage of Horrors might want no Fact of distinguished Die.”²

Scholars commenting on this draft copy of the Declaration makes a most pointed statement.

“It is always a puzzlement to consider Jefferson’s obvious abhorrence of slavery, as this draft of the Declaration of independence clearly shows, and his ownership of slaves. One wonders how the two could exist side by side in the same individual. If a man like Jefferson was able to make compromises like this what does this mean for the rest of us? Jefferson had any number of opportunities to lead by example. We all know that actions speak louder than words; as the great sage Hillel once said, “In a place where no one is human, one should strive to be human”³ and despite Jefferson’s eloquence on so many matters, with respect to slavery, Jefferson through his actions remained silent.

Slavery is this nation’s original sin, but there have been so many moments in history where the voices of well intentioned people were silent or were silenced by the screaming hate filled masses.

² <http://oll.libertyfund.org/quotes/59>

³ Pirke Avot 2:5

Rabbi Joakim Prinz, one of the speakers during the 1963 March on Washington, D.C., had this to say about what happens when good people remain complacent. He explained:

“When I was the rabbi of the Jewish community in Berlin under the Hitler regime, I learned many things. The most important thing that I learned under those tragic circumstances was that bigotry and hatred are not the most urgent problem. The most urgent, the most disgraceful, the most shameful and the most tragic problem is silence.

A great people which had created a great civilization had become a nation of silent onlookers. They remained silent in the face of hate, in the face of brutality and in the face of mass murder.

America must not become a nation of onlookers. America must not remain silent. Not merely black America, but all of America. It must speak up and act, from the President down to the humblest of us, and not for the sake of the Negro, not for the sake of the black community but for the sake of the image, the idea and the aspiration of America itself.”⁴

⁴ <http://www.joachimprinz.com/civilrights.htm>

Rabbi Rick Jacob's president of the Union for Reform Judaism, echoed Rabbi Prinz's sentiments in his own comments this past week.

"Racist, anti-Semitic, and xenophobic views have no place in a society that cherishes freedom and liberty for all. The right to speak and to hold repugnant views is not a right to circumscribe the ability of others to live in peace and security. Torch-lit marches of hate evoke the KKK; the image of a heavily armed "militia" standing among the neo-Nazi protestors should send an alarm to every person of good conscience in our nation.

The vile presence and rhetoric of the neo-Nazis who marched this weekend in Charlottesville is a reminder of the ever-present need for people of good will to stand strong, to speak loudly against hate, and act both to delegitimize those who spread such messages and to mitigate the harm done to the commonweal of our nation and to those that are the targets of hate messages."⁵

The URJ's Religious Action Center published a few days ago a list of things that we can do immediately to make our voices heard. It includes things like joining local protests and marches. Tomorrow

⁵ <http://urj.org/blog/2017/08/12/urj-president-rabbi-rick-jacobs-charlottesville>

from 10-noon at Austin city hall, there will be a march against white supremacy. You might also be interested in attending a national protest called 1000 ministers march for Justice on August 28th in Washington, D.C. The march will go from the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial to the Department of Justice on Monday, Aug. 28, the 54th anniversary of the March on Washington.

There is the Bethelightforjustice Hashtag campaign on social media. You should certainly consider making donations to organizations that help to fight hate, like the Anti-Defamation league or the southern poverty law center, or other organizations of your choosing. But I would say perhaps the most important, but also perhaps the most difficult thing that anyone of us might do is to confront people in our social circles who have found it okay to perpetuate a moral equivalence between nazis and people protesting nazis.

I have hope that we will be able to move past this difficult time. We are as a people well acquainted with times of turmoil and hardship. If we have learned nothing else from these experiences it is that we can not sit idly by as people suffer. That we must work with everyone we can to bring light and justice into the world.

I would like to conclude with the words of President George Washington, in his letter to the Hebrew Congregation of Rhode

Island, which was written 227 years ago today. To me, at this time, it reads like a prayer, and represents the true promise of what America can and should be.

“The reflection on the days of difficulty and danger which are past is rendered the more sweet from a consciousness that they are succeeded by days of uncommon prosperity and security.

If we have wisdom to make the best use of the advantages with which we are now favored, we cannot fail, under the just administration of a good government, to become a great and happy people.

It is now no more that toleration is spoken of as if it were the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights, for, happily, the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens in giving it on all occasions their effectual support...

May the children of the stock of Abraham who dwell in this land continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants—while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree and there shall be none to make him afraid.

May the father of all mercies scatter light, and not darkness, upon our paths, and make us all in our several vocations useful here, and in His own due time and way everlastingly happy.”⁶

And let us say, Amen!

⁶ <http://touro-synagogue.org/history-learning/tsf-intro-menu/slom-scholarship/86-washington-letter>