

Rabbi Rachel Schmelkin
Erev Rosh Hashanah Sermon
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Not Alone

It was a buggy, Wednesday evening on August 9th. I stood in the parking lot of Sojourners Church after attending a final non-violent direct action training prior to August 12th. There was a sense of fear and trepidation in the thick humid summer air. Perhaps you felt it too, wherever you were.

I had a plan for August 12th. I would stand on the steps of First United Methodist Church, often called FUMC, bear witness to the rally in the park, just across the street, and drown out the sound of hate, with music of peace and love. But I was afraid to station myself so close to the park. My Muslim friend who initially planned to sing on the steps with me, decided that it would be too dangerous for her to be visible wearing her hijab, so she took another important, but less public role that day. I wondered if I should follow her lead, and get out of sight. What if neo-nazis or white supremacists attempted to enter the church? What if they stormed the steps where I would surely be standing in my tallis and kippah?

So as I stood in the parking lot of Sojourners Church with Reverend Phil Woodson and others from FUMC, I shared my fears with them. I told them that I was afraid that I could be a target. I felt that lump in my throat, like I was going to cry, the pounding of my fast beating heart. But Reverend Phil looked at me and said, “I promise you I will not let anybody get near you on Saturday. In fact, I will stay on the steps with you. as long as you are out there, I will not leave you alone.” I exhaled. My heartbeat slowed a bit. I’m not alone. I’m not alone. I’m not alone.

On August 12th, a day that is now permanently etched into our memories, Phil Woodson and his colleagues at FUMC held fast to their word. The day was much worse than we imagined, and by late morning FUMC initiated its first lock down. Mid song on the steps of the church, the team at FUMC whisked me inside. Immediately I thought of those of you who were just a block away at CBI for Shabbat services. I began patting down my pants looking for my phone. I couldn't find it. I left it on my music stand. And so I decided that I would go back out to find my phone so that I could try to get in touch with someone at CBI. A young woman from the church refused to let me go, but she recognized how important it was for our community to be alerted about the violence just outside. "You should stay inside," she told me, before running out herself to find my phone. I exhaled again. We are not alone. We are not alone. We are not alone.

And while these stories are remarkable, they are not entirely surprising. According to the Torah, our very existence as a people was made possible by the acts of righteous individuals. Perhaps you've heard me tell this story before, but it's a story worth repeating over and over again.

A new king arose in the land of Egypt, an evil Pharaoh who did not know Joseph. Pharaoh said, "Look, the Israelite people are much too numerous for us. Let us deal shrewdly with them, so that they may not increase;"¹ as if to say to the Egyptians, the Israelites will not replace us.² And so Pharaoh initiated a plan to exterminate the Israelites. Pharaoh called upon two midwives, Shifra and Puah, and said, "When you deliver the Hebrew women, look...if it is a boy, kill him; if it is a girl, let her live."³ But

¹ Exodus 1:9-10

² On August 12th neo-nazis and white supremacists chanted "Jews will not replace us" as they marched through the streets and terrorized the people of Charlottesville.

³ Exodus 1:16

Shifra and Puah refused to carry out the plan, creating a clever cover story about how the Israelite women gave birth before they could arrive.

Who were these two women, rabbis and scholars wonder alike. If we read the Hebrew of Exodus 1.15 as Hebrew Midwives, we may conclude that they were brave Israelites, a powerful possibility, Israelite women risking their lives for the future of their own people. But there is another possibility that Shifra and Puah were not Israelite, maybe Egyptians who served Israelite women. I don't know about you, but for me, this interpretation is just as powerful, if not more powerful, than the first. Shifra and Puah, righteous gentiles ⁴ who prevented the extermination of the Israelite people through an act of dangerous civil disobedience.

And what's more, when Moses was born and his mother Yocheved could no longer hide him, she sent him down the river in a wicker basket. Pharaoh's daughter, most certainly Egyptian, spotted the basket while bathing in the Nile River. When she opened it, she discovered baby Moses crying, and exclaimed, "This must be a Hebrew Child!" ⁵ Presumably Pharaoh's daughter knew about her father's harsh decree and knowingly defied it by rescuing him. Shifra, Puah, and Pharaoh's daughter remind us that the Israelites, our ancestors, ultimately made it to the Promised Land because **they were not alone.**

But why would these women do this? Why would they risk so much? Exodus 1.21 says, "*yaru hamiyaldot et-HaElohim.* The midwives feared or were in awe of God."

⁴ Eskenazi, Tamara Cohn, and Andrea L. Weiss. *The Torah A Women's Commentary*, New York, NY: URJ Press and Women of Reform Judaism, 2008.

Footnote 15 on page 309 of the commentary explains that it is unclear from the wording of the Hebrew whether or not they are Hebrew women who work as midwives, or Egyptian midwives who serve Hebrew women.

⁵ Exodus 2:5-6

And midrash suggests that the daughter of Pharaoh was named Bittiah, as seen elsewhere in the Bible, meaning the daughter of God.⁶ It seems that connection with God had a profound influence on their actions, so much so that they acted as God's partners, bringing Godly love into a moment of hate and terror.

As Jews, and as people who live in Charlottesville, we know a thing or two about hate and terror. On August 11th and 12th, and the days that followed, I asked myself, "Where is God in all of this?" I knew I had experienced moments of light even in the midst of great darkness, but God still felt hidden from me, from us, from our town. I wonder if you felt the same, or if you still do.

But one of my teachers, Rabbi Sheila Weinberg, pointed me towards a beautiful text. "*Rabi Nachman masbir*, Rabbi Nachman explains, *V'afilu b'hastarah she b'toch hahastarah bivadai gam sham nitzah hashem yitbarach*. Even during a concealment *within* a concealment, Adonai is certainly there." Perhaps for some, what happened this summer in Charlottesville felt like a concealment within a concealment. The days leading up to August 11th and 12th, and the days themselves, got worse and worse and worse. But, Rabbi Nachman teaches us that even in the most difficult of circumstances, God is there, somewhere, standing with us. It's just that during try times, we may have to look harder, dig deeper, think differently, in order to find God, in order to connect to something bigger than ourselves.

As I process the events of that horrible weekend, and reflect on the weeks leading up to it, I see that God was there all along, showing up through the acts of righteous

⁶ Leila Leah Bronner, *From Eve to Esther Rabbinic Reconstruction of Biblical Women* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 55.

people- through the Shifras, Puah's, and Bittiah's, of our day, through wonderful human beings, who were created in the image of God, and who act as God's partners.

God's protection came through clergy who offered to surround our synagogue during Shabbat morning services. God's compassion and generosity showed up in letters, artwork, sheet cakes, and hundreds of donations that people from around the continent sent to CBI. God's healing came through nurses, doctors, and EMTs who treated the injured victims of the car attack, some even rushing to the scene itself. God's loving-kindness showed up in therapists and trauma specialists who offered and continue to offer free counseling for members of the Charlottesville community. God's embrace enveloped us as we held hands with strangers, hugged one another, walked across a room to hand someone a tissue, and dry their tears.

As we begin a new year tonight, a year we hope will be suffused with love and healing, I pray that we will also truly know that we are not alone. When we feel alone, when we feel afraid, when we find ourselves asking questions for the first time like, "Should I tuck my Star of David necklace under my shirt?" or "Is it okay for my child to wear her CBI t-shirt in public?" it is easy to turn inwards, and stay there.

One version of another teaching by Rabi Nachman says, "*kol ha'olam kulo, gesher tzar meod, v'haikaar lo lhitpached k'lal*". The whole world is a very narrow bridge, but the main thing is not **to make ourselves afraid.**" If we allow ourselves to be overcome by fear, we may close ourselves off from the world around us. Internalizing the feeling that we are not alone may help give us the fortitude and courage to turn outward, to notice others in Charlottesville, in our country, and in the world, who feel afraid, unseen, and alone.

My husband Geoff volunteers with a Syrian family, who came to Charlottesville seeking refuge from violence and war. One of the members of the family admitted to Geoff that he was absolutely terrified on August 12th, because he had no choice but to go downtown for work. And two weeks ago, I stood outside in the pouring rain, surrounded by a sea of umbrellas, listening to the personal testimonies of undocumented UVA students, who feel alone and afraid more than ever right now. And just last week, on my way to the airport, I had a taxi driver who is an immigrant from Kenya. He has been here for ten years. I asked him how he has been feeling since the weekend of August 12th, and he said, “I am torn in two directions.” “What do you mean?” I asked him. “I have to decide whether to stay or go,” he explained. He doesn’t feel safe anymore. There are many more stories just like these about people who feel afraid and alone. And, my African American clergy friends tell me that though many speak of Charlottesville as a beautiful and progressive place, they felt fearful and unsupported here long before the KKK and the alt-right ever descended on our little town.

As Jews, we have numerous stories of times we have felt marginalized and alone, but also countless stories about people who have protected us and stood by our side. What would it be like if people from marginalized, fearful communities, could share their own stories of hope and comfort, because we reached out to them, and helped them feel less alone? Many in our community already do this holy work. But now is the time to recommit ourselves or begin to do this work for the first time.

Let’s open our eyes, step outside of our comfort zones, seek out spaces where we can meet people we otherwise wouldn’t get to know. Let’s do for others, what so many others have done for us. We too can be God’s righteous partners who stand courageously

next to those who feel other, offering them compassion, courage, and loving-kindness.

Let us remember, that we are not alone, so that we can say to so many others, we are with you. Even in a time of darkness, even during a concealment *within* a concealment, you are not alone, you are not alone, you are not alone.

