

## Tears of a Clown – Shabbat Zachor

There is a story told of Joseph Grimaldi, a famous clown from the early 1800's. One day a middle-aged man walked into the office of a specialist known for treating melancholia and shared with the doctor how unhappy he had been feeling of late. "I can't eat; I can't sleep," said the man. "Everything in my life seems all so dark." The specialist turned to his patient with concern. "You really need to find a way to cheer up," he responded. "I hear that there is a wonderful harlequin performer at the Covent Garden Theater named Grimaldi who consistently brings down the house. Go see him and laugh a bit; it will lift your spirits." The man nodded and turned to his doctor with a sad smile. "I much appreciate the advice, Sir, but I don't think it will help me," the man replied. "You see, I *am* Grimaldi."

While the tears of this well-known clown have not, to my knowledge, been authenticated, there is good reason to believe that the story I just shared is true, for Joseph Grimaldi indeed had a reputation for being one who struggled with depression. And, as my colleague Rabbi Michael Gold points out, the central question of this tale – about where one who carries the burdens of others goes to relieve his own sorrow – is certainly a rich and relevant one for our time, regardless of its origin. Where does a doctor go when he is sick? Where does a CEO turn when she's not sure of the answer? Where can a parent find relief when he wishes to be taken care of? Where does a clergy person look when she's in spiritual crisis? Many of us in this room devote significant time in both our personal and professional lives to looking after the needs of others – as educators, medical professionals, parents to young children or children to aging parents, social workers, therapists, community leaders, spousal care-givers, and more. And the recent state of our world has been so devastating, leaving many of us frightened, exhausted, and depleted. When Jewish cemeteries are desecrated and Jewish students evacuated from

schools under pain of bomb threat, when gunshots are fired through the window of a synagogue and Swastikas painted proudly for all to see, where in the world do we turn for comfort, strength, and support? How do we dry the tears of our own inner clown?

I need not tell you that the last few months have been terrible ones for the American Jewish community. Just this week, the Chicago Jewish Day School on Sheridan Road was evacuated after a bomb threat was called in, just one in a long list of incidents which are now being called “telephone terrorism” – warnings that, blessedly, have proven false up until this point but which have still succeeded at creating enormous fear, disruption, and a sense of malice from the outside that is deeply unsettling not only for those who experience it firsthand but for all of us as well. At least 11 other bomb threats were made to Jewish community centers and day schools across the United States last Tuesday, including one just north of Milwaukee in Whitefish Bay, along with others in Washington, D.C., New York, Florida, my hometown of Boston and many more. The Anti-Defamation League which has been tracking such incidents since they began in early January indicates that they now number more than 130 nationwide. They include not only bomb threats but desecrations of cemeteries and synagogues, scheduled Nazi marches, and other acts of violence as when a gunshot was fired through a Hebrew school classroom window in Evansville, Indiana earlier this month.

In addition to the episode at Chicago Jewish Day School, there have been other acts of anti-Semitic cruelty that have also hit close to home in recent weeks. Both the JCC Apachi Day Camp in Lake Zurich and the JCC in Hyde Park were similarly forced to evacuate over the last few months and Chicago’s famous Loop Synagogue was defaced with broken window and painted Swastikas. Our synagogue, like many others, has revisited our safety procedures and increased our security coverage, working in

cooperation with the local Wilmette police department and taking direction from leadership at JUF concentrating specifically on this issue with its partner agencies. Those of us who are a bit younger may feel like we've entered into an unprecedented era, completely unlike anything we've ever before seen here in the United States in terms of our feeling particularly targeted as members of the Jewish people, while those of us who are a bit older may feel a terrible sense of déjà-vu as we remember how smaller acts of hate and destruction can so quickly escalate into something far worse. It is a scary and deeply upsetting time, and we are all in need of a bit of hope, reassurance, and comfort.

This morning we commemorate Shabbat Zachor, the Sabbath on which we're commanded to remember Amalek, an arch-villain of the Jewish people. Amalek is the ancestor of wicked Haman, whose story we begin this evening, and he is also said to also be the progenitor of the line from which Hitler descends – his stock is known to be pure evil. What makes Amalek so uniquely pernicious, singled out from all other enemies of the Jewish people for special recognition and repudiation? We read it in our *maftir* portion from this morning, Deuteronomy 25:17-19, which says: "Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey, after you left Egypt – how, undeterred by fear of God, he surprised you on the march when you were famished and weary and cut down the stragglers in your rear." While other peoples have threatened the Jews, Amalek exacted his malevolence in a particularly spineless and immoral way, by attacking from behind and targeting the weakest members of the community rather than giving fair fight. Crimes committed against society's most vulnerable are particularly heinous in the eyes of Torah.

The message of Shabbat Zachor is one of many reasons that we share a collective sense of fury and heartbreak about the events of recent months – because it is not only that our community is being threatened but it's being threatened in the most cowardly and pernicious of ways. While there are

many victims of the terror of these past few weeks – parents terrified for their sons and daughters, family members sick over the spoiled graves of their loved ones, synagogue members forced to witness the violation of their sacred space – the primary targets of this latest wave of anti-Semitism have been the most vulnerable ones: young children and the deceased, neither of whom have any real ability to defend themselves. We are outraged anytime Jews are singled out and stereotyped or blamed or limited or made afraid on the basis of our religious identity and beliefs; we know far too well the danger that comes when Jews are set apart and made “other.” But when the attacks are against the youngest, most innocent members of our community, children who can no longer attend school without fear, and against the most defenseless members of our community, loved ones now departed whose eternal rest has been violated in the ugliest of ways, we simply cannot abide it. *“Z’chor et asher asah l’cha Amalek – Remember what Amalek did to you,”* urges Torah. Be vigilant that it not ever happen again!

The Jewish people are a people of memory, as Shabbat Zachor emphasizes, and our focus on remembrance is for a very particular reason. We recall our troubled relationship with Amalek not to be vengeful or grudge-bearing or paralyzed by the past but rather to learn from it, understanding that cruel and immoral people will plague every generation and that we should be careful and responsible to stop their evil ways. The question of how, exactly, to do this is a challenging one and I’m not sure that there is any one failsafe answer for our day but rather a patchwork of responses. We can express our gratitude to the police officers working to keep us safe and to government leaders supporting our people at this troubled time, as with the entire U.S. Senate which – in a rare moment of bipartisan cooperation – unanimously endorsed a letter calling on the Trump administration to take swift action on the issue of growing threat to the Jewish community. We can donate money to organizations like the ADL who are on the frontlines of fighting anti-Semitism or to organizations like our own synagogue whose growing safety costs have the potential to tax already tight budgets. We can attend rallies and

demonstrations and stand with affected communities, preferably alongside Christian and Muslim allies, to publicly send the message that love ultimately trumps hate, and we can be there for our interfaith partners when their communities, similarly, are targeted and discriminated against. We can be positive representatives of all that Judaism stands for in our neighborhoods and work places, because it's easy to hate someone in a group that is "other" when you've never met someone from that group. We can teach our children and grand-children values of pluralism and tolerance, for the future will be in their hands.

Finally, we can take care of ourselves and of one another, for the emotional toll of difficult events such as those which we have been experiencing of late can be quite heavy. So it does, indeed, feel like the Purim holiday which begins tonight comes at a particularly ripe time this year! For starters, Purim's central story – about the challenges and dangers of maintaining one's Jewish identity in a largely secular world, about a King too easily manipulated by an anti-Semitic higher-up in his administration – feels startlingly relevant for this day and age getting at issues of power and authority and how a secular government has the power to either protect or to harm the minority populations within the realm of its control. And, of course, there are the examples of Esther and Mordechai who, when faced with circumstances both similar and different from our own, were able to defeat forces of evil through a combination of smarts, bravery, access, and interpersonal savvy. But there is also the idea that Purim is Judaism's answer to Mardi Gras, the one day on which we're encouraged to let go and let loose, to eat and drink a little bit too much, to disguise ourselves in silly costumes and to laugh at Purim spiels, all for the sake of then settling back down and doing the hard work that living in an imperfect world requires. We all need a break from the unremitting bleakness we have been feeling of late; we all deserve the opportunity to take a night off and laugh a bit in order to recollect our strength and energy. I hope that

you will join us for the Purim festivities tonight and tomorrow at BHCBE. We could all use a little bit of distraction!

In closing this morning, I'd like to return to our friend Grimaldi. It's possible, of course, that the case of this well-known clown is an ironic coincidence – depression, after all, is quite prevalent in society and there's no reason to believe that it shouldn't afflict circus performers and mimes and comic actors just as it affects lawyers and professors and architects and stockbrokers. Just because one quite literally puts on a happy face doesn't necessarily mean that he'll come to feel the same way. Clowning is no bulwark against melancholy.

It is also possible, however, that Grimaldi chose the profession of clowning precisely because he wished to stave off his own inner demons, perhaps believing that the best way to try and feel better was to be in a position of providing comic relief to others. There are few things as uplifting as making another person smile, after all, not to mention that dressing in silly clothing and acting in silly ways often does have a strong impact upon mood. What we wear and how we conduct ourselves goes a long way towards creating a sense of emotional well-being. In these dark days, let's put on a festive costume and laugh a bit tonight!

*Z'chor et asher asah l'cha Amalek* – May the memory of Amalek inspire a renewed commitment on our part to fighting modern day anti-Semitism in all its many and terrible forms.

Chag Purim Sameach and Shabbat Shalom!

