

We are living in increasingly chaotic times.
There is chaos everywhere-even in Hollywood.

In the last minutes of the Academy Awards this past February, after “La La Land” producers Jordan Horowitz and Marc Platt delivered their acceptance speeches for best picture, fellow producer Fred Berger realized that their movie was not the film that the Oscar goes to. He said: “We lost, by the way” and backed away.

Immediately Jordan Horowitz marched up to the microphone and said:
“Moonlight’ won...Guys, guys, I’m sorry. No. There’s a mistake. ‘Moonlight,’ you guys won best picture. This is not a joke.”

In the menschiest moment of the evening, he continued “Come up here,” motioning for the “Moonlight” team to come to the stage and collect the the night’s highest award, that Jordan briefly thought he had just won.
Jordan then went a step further and held up the card from the correct envelope for the camera. “ ‘Moonlight,’ ” he said. “Best picture.”

What would you have done in that situation? There was chaos, humiliation and confusion in the room, but Jordan Horowitz shone. He told the truth, even though it was awkward and embarrassing. That had never happened before in the history of the Oscars.

He took ownership of the situation. He announced the mistake and rectified it. Without placing blame on anyone, he went over and above what could be expected and said, “I’m going to be very proud to hand this Oscar to my friends at Moonlight.”

Jordan could have done a lot of things in that moment, but instead he manned up. Forget his Bar Mitzvah out in Westchester, this was when he became a man. In Jordan Horowitz’ sha’ah, in his shining moment he embodied a teaching from Pirkei Avot: בְּמִקוֹם שְׂאִין אָנְשִׁים, הַשְׁתַּדֵּל לִהְיוֹת אִישׁ which is directly translated as “In a place where there is no man one should strive to be a man.”

This is the Jewish teaching that I keep thinking about as I struggle to comprehend the almost daily onslaught of tragic, devastating and horrific news.

What does this expression mean? Let’s try understanding it using a Yiddish translation: when nobody is acting like a mensch, be the mensch. We might not all translate the Yiddish word mensch the same way, so let’s use Leo Rosten’s definition: A mensch is *someone to admire and emulate, someone of noble character.*

I keep coming back to בְּמִקוֹם שְׂאִין אָנְשִׁים, הַשְׁתַּדֵּל לִהְיוֹת אִישׁ or be a man or be a mensch because the world today is a complicated and scary place. There is so much chaos everywhere. And as Jews, we are prohibited from fighting chaos with chaos. In the very beginning of the Torah, in verse 1 we read וְהָאֶרֶץ הָיְתָה תֵהוֹ וְנָהוּ וְחָשֶׁךְ עַל-פְּנֵי תְהוֹם. *The land*

was chaos and there was blackness. And on the first day, God's very first act of creation was to create light and to see the light!

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱ-לֹהִים יְהִי אֹר וַיְהִי-אֹר: וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאֹר כִּי-טוֹב

And then all was good.

We need to step into the sun and see the light and move away from the chaos and the darkness that is enveloping us.

So many people feel stuck and helpless. But we are **not** -- because being a mensch doesn't mean we turn the other cheek. It doesn't mean we don't respond. We actually must respond, but we need to do so as mensches. We have an areyvut, a responsibility, to make this world better. We cannot stand idly by.

The Bartenura understands "**in a place where there is no man**" to mean that we have to sit at the head and to issue decisions. But we are not all in absolute leadership positions. So what can we do? How do we become the **אִישׁ**, the mesch this year?

This is the year that Charlottesville was able to happen; with alt-right militias, the KKK and anti-semitism exploding in the United States. We are currently encountering a tough enemy, an enemy who doesn't share our core values. Our enemies espouse a language of hate while we embrace a language of love. Our enemies long for a world where everyone is the same. As Jews, we appreciate and respect people's differences.

Thankfully there are resources available that can guide us on our journey as **anashim**, the plural of **אִישׁ**, as mensches through this chaotic and dark period. One of those resources is the Southern Poverty Law Center, which is dedicated to fighting hate and bigotry.

The Southern Poverty Law Center acknowledges that hate in America has become commonplace. We know this.

Hate led a young white man to open fire and kill nine African Americans who welcomed him into Bible study at a church in Charleston, South Carolina, telling his victims, "I have to do it."

Hate leads to anti-Semitic graffiti and swastikas.

Hate led a lone gunman carrying an assault rifle and a handgun to storm into a well-known gay club in Orlando, killing 49 people and wounding 53 others.

This is chaos. We need to find our way back to the light. We need to be the **אִישׁ** when faced with this.

Thankfully as large as these evil forces are, there are so many more who promote tolerance and love. The numbers in Boston at a counter-demonstration in August prove that.

More often than not, when hate flares up, good people do rise up against it — often in greater numbers and with stronger voices.

The Southern Poverty Law Center created a fantastic document which outlines ten measurable actions we can all do fight against the hate and chaos.

Their first principle is basic. **Act**. Do something. In the face of hatred, apathy will be interpreted as acceptance by the perpetrators, the public, and — worse — the victims. Community members must take action; if we don't, hate persists.

The corresponding Jewish value is found in Leviticus 19:16, from the center of the Holiness Code where we read לֹא תֵעָמָד עַל-דָּם רֵעֶךָ “do not stand idly by.” The commentator Rashbam understands this literally. We need to assist others. When we are faced with hate we can't just twiddle our thumbs or turn off the television. We need to do something. We need to act.

The second principle is to **find who our allies are** and join forces. The extremists hate more people than just us Jews.

And their third principle is that we need to **support the victims**. This is why you read about interfaith vigils occurring all over the country. We need to reach out to allies from churches, schools, clubs, and other civic groups. When one group is targeted in this country because of their faith or the color of their skin, we are all vulnerable. Our Torah is very explicit when it teaches לֹא תִאֲמָץ אֶת-לִבְבְּךָ וְלֹא תִקְפֹּץ אֶת-יָדְךָ מֵאֶחָיִךְ הָאֲבִיּוֹן You shall not harden your heart, nor shut your hand from your needy brother¹.

Two thousand years ago, the rabbis of the Talmud taught us a simple yet profound interfaith message. We provide for the gentiles' poor with Israel's poor, we visit gentiles' sick with Israel's sick, and we bury the gentiles' dead with Israel's dead. What is the reason? מפני דרכי שלום; due to the ways of peace.² We need to focus on doing things with others for peace not for hate. That is menschlike. That is being an אִישׁ .

Elie Wiesel taught that neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere. When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant. Wherever men and women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must - at that moment - become the center of the universe.

¹ Dvarim 15

² Gittin

We must **speak up**, which is the 4th principle. Use what ever resources you have when you encounter hate. We also need to **educate ourselves**, which is the fifth principle. We can't rely on hearsay. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr wrote in his letter from the Birmingham jail, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." That there are neo-Nazi rallies happening on American soil in 2017 is heartbreaking and unacceptable, and it should be condemned by all.

The Southern Poverty Law Center also encourages us to **create alternatives to hate, to pressure elected leaders to take a stand, and to stay engaged**. This seems like a lot of work when we have our own lives to lead, but **לֹא עָלֶיךָ הַמְּלָאכָה לְגַמְרָהּ, וְלֹא אֶתָּה בֶּן חוֹרֵין לְבַטֵּל**, It is not your responsibility to finish the work, but neither are you free to desist from it.³

The second to last principle is to **teach acceptance and tolerance**. We do that. That is what Jewish education is all about. We are menschlike when we offer brachot and blessings to those around us. Rabbi Elazar teaches in midrash Tanchuma "One who becomes compassionate to the cruel will ultimately become cruel to the compassionate." Cruelty cannot and **may** not become commonplace. Neo-Nazis cannot be condoned. Our messages of tolerance and pluralism must be heard and it must be louder.

The final principle is to **dig deeper**. We are encouraged to look inside ourselves for biases and stereotypes. We must, each of us, commit to disrupting hate and intolerance at home, at school, in the workplace and in our faith communities. In his time, Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, "We are a generation that has lost the capacity for outrage." Let the current generation prove him wrong.

Rabbi Tarfon taught

הַיּוֹם קָצָר וְהַמְּלָאכָה מְרֻבָּה, The day is short and the work is much⁴. We did not ask for anti-Semitism and racism to rear its ugly head to the degree that it has in this country-or Spain, or France or Britain for that matter--but we need to respond. I realize that 10 action steps is a lot to do and remember on a day when we are not eating or drinking or writing things down. But you can find this sermon on line next week or google the Southern Poverty Law Center. Sometime tomorrow go on their website and commit to at least one action or principle. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim.

Amidst the chaos which is all around us--be the mensch.

Some of you in here experienced the Nazis first hand. A lot of you in this room were around and active in the civil rights movements. For others like myself, the degree of blatant racism, homophobia, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism and hate that we are experiencing in

³ Pirkei Avot 2

⁴ Pirkei Avot 2

this country is new. I did not learn how to respond to this degree of hate in school or youth group or summer camp. This is real. We can't ignore it.

Don't only look at Southern Poverty, look at what the ADL or Facing History and Ourselves is suggesting as well. When there is no one around to teach you, you must teach yourself.

You can make a difference. One person can make a difference. This is true from the mundane moment when Jordan Horowitz was a mensch and spoke truth on stage at the Oscars to the much more sacred.

This morning in our Torah reading we read about the ritual that was done for atonement on Yom Kippur, back when we still had a Kohen Gadol, when there was one High Priest, and when we had a Mishkan/Tabernacle or a Great Temple. At the end of the fourth aliyah, we read

וְכָל-אָדָם לֹא-יְהִיָּה | בְּאֹהֶל מוֹעֵד בְּבָאוּ לְכַפֵּר בְּקֹדֶשׁ עַד-צִיאָתוֹ וְכִפֹּר בְּעֵדוֹ וּבְעֵד בֵּיתוֹ וּבְעֵד כָּל-קֹהֵל יִשְׂרָאֵל:
When the Cohen Gadol goes inside the Ohel Moed/Tent of the Meeting nobody else shall be there until he goes out. This is the story of one person making a huge difference. He is being the man when nobody else can be the man.

In Yizkor we refer to people's neshama and nefesh, their soul. We ask God to remember the souls of our loved ones who have gone to their eternal home.

But this morning, before we begin Yizkor, take a moment and remember when your loved ones shone, when they were the אִישׁ .

Hold those memories in your heart as we turn to page 290.

Oseh shalom... "May the Source of peace descend on us, on all Israel, and all the world, and let us say amen"...