

Just a few days ago, PBS released the three part six-hour documentary series by acclaimed director Ken Burns entitled, “The US and the Holocaust.” It begins with the story of the Frank family, with the patriarch Otto, a veteran of the ‘Great War,’ his wife Edith and their two daughters Margot and Annelies. Like many German-Jewish families, they were not particularly observant, but with the rising threat of Nazism, as the documentary states, “They would eventually try to seek a safe haven in the United States, but they would find, like countless others, that most Americans did not want to let them in.” Not to give it all away, but their journey is woven throughout the documentary and it, like so many of our brethren, ends in tragedy.

This documentary is an eye opening exploration that contradicts the narrative that the US did not know about what was going on in Germany and the rest of Europe until late in the war. Instead it lays bare the role that “xenophobia and antisemitism, played during this crises”¹ especially in Roosevelt’s State Department. As commentator Daniel Fienberg

¹ <https://kenburns.com/films/the-u-s-and-the-holocaust/>

notes², “The answers for why the St. Louis couldn’t find safe harbor, for why Auschwitz wasn’t bombed, for why the State Department visa system was so inflexible probably won’t make most modern viewers happy, but the directors are too smart to exclusively look back damningly with 20/20 hindsight. At the same time, they’re too smart to let historical figures off with the idea that this second-guessing is only hindsight. Over and over again, *The U.S. and the Holocaust* makes it clear that the knowledge necessary to mitigate parts of the tragedy was widely available and either ignored or disbelieved — public polling data is a key piece of this tale — or, in (some) cases ... malevolently buried.”

A question can be reasonably asked, why is this documentary being released now? One reason is because of the rising levels of antisemitism and antisemitic attacks in our country. As the ADL notes, “Antisemitic incidents reached an all-time high in the United States in 2021, with a total of 2,717 incidents of assault, harassment and vandalism.”³ That is

² <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-reviews/the-us-and-the-holocaust-ken-burns-pbs-1235217963/>

³ <https://www.adl.org/news/press-releases/adl-audit-finds-antisemitic-incidents-in-united-states-reached-all-time-high-in>

an average of seven reported incidents per day, a topic we will get back to on Yom Kippur

But there are other reasons for the necessity of this documentary as well as television critic Robert Lloyd notes⁴, “Still circulating are the same bad ideas about a singular national identity, racial purity and authoritarian rule; then, as now, conspiracy theories deform political discourse.”

The reality is, our history as a nation is imperfect, to say the least. And the great debate going on is about how and when or the greater question of should we even be teaching about those historical realities. And these arguments and debates are being fought at the local, state and national level.

We have all heard the names and the acronyms. We have heard the attacks and the counter-attacks often times on social media and in the 24 hour news cycle. We have witnessed debates what books are acceptable in libraries and the content of school curriculums. It is upsetting and

⁴ <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/tv/story/2022-09-16/us-and-the-holocaust-ken-burns-pbs-review>

disheartening, and yet, as Jews, we have a role to play in these conversations. As a people whose whole tradition is based on keeping the historical narrative and storytelling alive, we can offer a unique perspective about what truth telling can do to help repair a society. In addition, we can also model teshuvah as a process for repair for our greater society as well.

In the Burns documentary we are once again reminded of the significant and profound role that hate, intolerance, and indifference can have on a persecuted minority. This is a story we know well and have experienced for the past two thousand years. Until the founding of the modern State of Israel, we have had no real political or military control over our own lives. And though there are certainly problems and challenges with Israel, it was founded on the premise that Jews would always have a home, if need be. And this is not just rhetorical, I am not sure where the nearly 15,000 Jewish-Ukrainian refugees from the Russian invasion of Ukraine would have been able to flee to without Israel.

At the same time, recent news has come out about how our own Reform Jewish institutions have failed us. This past year, following the death of

an HUC professor, who I studied with and eulogized as part of a sermon, a much needed conversation began about the role of abuse and abusers in our sacred organizations. It was a conversation that should have begun years ago, but thanks to some very brave women, the URJ, the CCAR, and HUC-JIR brought in external experts to do a full accounting of all three organizations.

The reports are damning and distressing by both what they say and what they are unable to say. Individuals were time and again allowed to abuse their positions of authority by assaulting especially women through sexually aggressive acts as well as through acts of verbal and emotional abuse.

All three organizations have put forth the preliminary findings as well as proposals for how they are going to proceed. Some individuals have been named while others continue to be examined. It has been extremely upsetting, but not really all that surprising. But if there is a positive to come out of it, truth telling can begin the necessary process of repair already underway in our Reform organizations.

But it is not just our institutions. As author Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg notes in her new book On Repentance and Repair – Making Amends in an Unapologetic World, “We all cause harm sometimes. Maybe it’s intentional, a result of a calculated attempt to gain power, or from a place of anger or spite. Maybe it’s out of carelessness, or ignorance, a reaction to fear, or because we are overwhelmed and dropped some balls. Maybe it’s because we were acting out of our own broken places or trauma, or because, in our attempt to protect some interests, we ran roughshod over others. Maybe it’s because our smaller role in a larger system puts us in the position of perpetrating hurt or injustice. Maybe it’s for one of a myriad of other reasons, or a combination of them.”⁵

Rosh Hashanah marks the beginning of the New Year. It is supposed to be a sweet and celebratory time. This is why we wish each other a “*L’shana Tova u’metukah*, a good and sweet year” To mark this, we eat apples and honey. Though the reasoning for the minhag, the custom of eating apples and honey is lost to the mists of time. It is neither found in

⁵ Ruttenberg, Danya, On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in An Unapologetic World, Beacon Press, Boston, 2022, Pg. 4

the Tanaach nor the Talmud. By the 7th century were dipping honey, most likely from dates or figs, with other fruit or breads symbolizing the sweetness of the New Year.

Rosh Hashanah is also the time where, according to the Babylonian Talmud, “The Gemara goes back to discuss the Day of Judgment. Rabbi Kruspedai said that Rabbi Yochanan said: Three books are opened on Rosh HaShana before the Holy One, Blessed be God: One of wholly wicked people, and one of wholly righteous people, and one of middling people whose good and bad deeds are equally balanced. Wholly righteous people are immediately written and sealed for life; wholly wicked people are immediately written and sealed for death; and middling people are left with their judgment suspended from Rosh HaShana until Yom Kippur, their fate remaining undecided. If they merit, through the good deeds and mitzvot that they perform during this period, they are written for life; if they do not so merit, they are written for death.”⁶

⁶ BT Rosh Hashana 16b

As I have argued before, the Sefer Chayim, the Book of Life, was most likely not intended to be taken as literal truth but instead as a powerful metaphor with two central components. The first being that our choices, our actions, our words have meaning; they are noticed, and they have an impact. And secondly, it is a book that has been written, but without an ending. We are in the middle of the book, and where we go next is entirely dependent upon our ability to change course based on those decisions, actions, and words that we made. It is a change to quite literally and metaphorically, turn the page into a new chapter.

Thus, even as we enjoy our apples and honey or other similar symbols, we are also continuing the hard work of self-reflection and repair. Which stands in stark contrast to the greater societal focus on individualism.

The challenge of individualism is twofold, one is that it focuses on the rights of the individual and not on the obligations of us as individuals, which is contrary to our Jewish tradition. In Judaism we focus on mitzvot, the obligations we have towards each other.

And secondly, the idea that “well it’s all in the past,” is an anathema to the Jewish experience. As we heard about at the beginning, our entire

experience, as Jews, is based on what has happened to us in the past. As a matter of fact, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are the only holidays not based on the notion of “they tried to kill us, we won, let’s eat.”

Instead, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are instead focused on examining the past as a means of actualizing a better future for ourselves. Only by working to understand, accept, and to ultimately overcome the mistakes of the past, do we have any hope of turning the page.

As Rabbi Ruttenberg goes on to write, “We have all been harmed. We all nurse stories about the tender places where we have been bumped, cut, battered by others, - by people, institutions, or systems. Sometimes, maybe we have managed to heal completely; sometimes a scar is left behind. Other places still ache now and again. Some injuries may hinder us from being able to do things that we once could, or even cause immeasurable, even irreparable damage - to ourselves, our families, our communities, our heritage.

We are all bystanders to harm. We read about it in the news, debate it on social media, decide when to speak up about it at work or to a family

member, and witness social structures that do not deliver on ideals of equity, respect and justice.

And we occupy all of these roles on the small scale – in personal relationships for example – and on larger ones, as members of society as stakeholders in institutions, as citizens or inhabitants of nations. So it's critical for all of us to think through the work of repentance, accountability, and transformation, for a lot of different reasons.”⁷

And this is why it is so essential for us to be engaged in these conversations about history, about institutions and about harm. It is not about making someone feel badly, or less than or guilty on a personal level. Rather it is about understanding the systems and biases built into structures and organizations and governmental bodies that impact people disproportionately often based on the color of their skin or, in our case, because of their religion.

Teshuvah means looking deeply into the mirror. As Dr. Lewis E.

Newman writes⁸, “The promise of *teshuvah*, then, is that we have at our

⁷ Ruttenberg, Danya, On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in An Unapologetic World, Beacon Press, Boston, 2022, Pg. 4

⁸ <https://evolve.reconstructingjudaism.org/teshuvah/>

disposal the power to lessen the mistakes we have made in the past; even more, we can grow beyond those mistakes, allowing them to propel us to greater levels of wholeness. This perspective on *teshuvah* is the antidote to the view so many of us have of this process. The point is not to bemoan our failings, much less to berate ourselves over them. It is to learn from them and to see them as a stage on our journey to becoming the people we are meant to be, that we have always wanted to be. In the inspiring words of Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, “You should regard the faults as something constructive, like the beginning of a new and beautiful story.”⁹

On this Rosh Hashanah, where we are confronted by the failures of the 1930s and 40s, where we are working our way through the failures of our own institutions, and where we struggle against those who would deny the teachings of historical failures, we know in our own experience that there is a better way. To improve, to create a new beautiful story, means looking inward and outward.

⁹ *Strife of the Spirit*, Jason Aronson, 1988, p. 101

As Rabbi Ruttenberg writes, “It can be different. We know that it can ... but the only way out is through. And on that way through, you know – you have seen ... profound healing can happen. Individual lives and relationships can be transformed. Communities and cultures can move toward care, accountability, restoration. Institutions can do the work needed to protect the people they serve. Nations can face the truth of what they have done – even if the work is imperfect, messy, or haphazard – and can make the choice to write a new story for tomorrow. Repair is possible. Atonement is not out of reach. What is needed – and this is, of course, a great deal – is the willingness to do the work. What is needed is the bravery to begin.

On the other side of that bridge, on the other side of transformation, is another more whole, more full, more free way of being, one that we can’t fully imagine from here. A way that we must simply bring into existence, step by step.

The Talmud teaches, in the name of Rabbi Hama Bar Hanina, “Great is repentance, for it brings healing to the world.”¹⁰ For this healing to happen, we must share our stories. We must examine our histories, even if the conversations are difficult and especially when they are difficult; for the process of teshuvah may not be easy, but sweet is the outcome when it is done right. For as we know, ignoring history only enables it to be repeated over and over again. And that is not the gift we wish to leave this day or any day. Instead by sharing and genuinely examining stories of suffering we can work together to bring about a better world for all of us to live in. And isn’t that the greatest gift of all. Out of all the pain, hurt, and trauma to be able to witness a world where others will not have to suffer the same fate.

L’shana Tova

¹⁰ Ruttenberg, Danya, On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in An Unapologetic World, Beacon Press, Boston, 2022, pgs. 201-202