

Rabbi Wilfond Rosh Hashanah 2022

Last week, world leaders gathered at the UN for this year's opening of the General Assembly. Among all the global crises, the main topic was the war in Ukraine. This war is not just a problem for Ukrainians, it effects the lives of everyone on the planet, even if they don't realize it. The soaring cost of fuel means this winter millions of Europeans will be unable to heat their homes. For years we have talked about the benefits of reducing dependency on fossil fuels in favor of solar power and alternative green sources of energy. Now this need is felt more keenly than ever before as oil becomes a weapon in the hands of the Kremlin. The food crisis is no less dire. Nearly half the world's wheat and sunflower oil comes from Ukraine. Millions of people are in danger of starving this year as food prices rise beyond the reach of the world's poorest people. With the invasion, about 15 million Ukrainians fled their homes, creating Europe's largest refugee crises since WWII.

Rosh HaShana is about stopping our normal hectic and frenetic lives to look unflinchingly at the past year to ask ourselves what are our responsibilities to the greater society? In Genesis, Cain asks "Am I my brother's keeper?" All of the Torah is one emphatic "Yes." When

ever someone is murdered their “Blood cries out to God,” Genesis. We are told “Love the stranger, the orphan, the widow,” the defenseless, the vulnerable, Exodus. We are taught “Do not stand idly by while your neighbor bleeds,” Leviticus. “Even in a place where no one is acting like a human being, act like a human being.” Pirkey Avot, ethics of the Talmud. This is our planet, our world, our responsibility. Rosh Hashana is about the head, the rosh. It is about not turning our heads away from the unpleasant, or inconvenient. Its about facing the real world, and understanding Hillel’s’ words “If I am only for myself, then what am I?” and If not now, when?”

This morning I want to address the war in in Ukraine. I also want to share the Jewish people’s connection to this land in Eastern Europe where many of our congregation have roots.

Some of you know that when I graduated from Rabbinical School more than 25 years ago, I was recruited to serve as the first Reform Rabbi in Ukraine since the Holocaust. Many people are familiar with Ukraine as the home of the mythical Anetevka, the Shtetel of Shalom Aleichem’s Fiddler on the Roof. Less familiar is that virtually all the large cities of Ukraine, such as Odessa, Lvov, Chernovitz had large Reform Synagogues before the war. Just like our

Temple Shaaray Tefilah, Reform Synagogues in Ukraine used musical instruments in services, had mixed choirs of men and women singing together just like us, and had prayer books with translations into the vernacular. The Reform Synagogues in Ukraine were part of a broader movement of The Enlightenment that swept through Europe in the 1800's and attracted the Jewish Intelligentsia that wanted a Judaism that was more modern and sophisticated.

Tragically most of these synagogues and their congregants were destroyed in a double-barreled assault of the Holocaust and then the Soviet Union. When the Soviet Union collapsed in the 1990's groups of Jews gathered and said to the Ukrainian government, show us that you are different than the Anti-Semitic Soviets. Gives us back our synagogues.

It's a bit mind boggling to grasp, but on the eve of the second world war, there were 2.7 million Jews in Ukraine, hundreds of synagogues. Many got burned down or bombed in the war, but if the building survived it was put to use. In Kiev, I saw historic synagogues that the Soviets turned into an arena for boxing matches, a puppet theater and a movie cinema. My congregation in Kiev met in a historic synagogue that the Soviets renamed

“The Actors House.” Converting synagogues into theaters and sports halls was a Soviet way to mock Judaism as they tried to break the spirit of the Jewish community.

When the Soviet Union finally collapsed in 1991 there were still about half a million Jews in Ukraine. It was then the 4th largest Jewish community in the diaspora.

In the 1990's the new Ukrainian government acquiesced to the requests by local Jews to have the historical synagogues returned. I heard the following scenario repeated many times. The local Jewish community petitions the government for the return of an old synagogue. They get it. They organize a huge party. They enter the synagogue, look at each until someone says “Ok. Now what do we do?” You see no body every went to Sunday School, or Hebrew School, or attended a Jewish Summer camp. Nobody knew *lecha dodi*, or how to light shabbat candles, or sing the Kiddush. Under the Soviets if you had a Torah book like we give out to every Bar and Bat Mitzvah, that was grounds for arrest. You could be sent to the Gulag. People had zero access to Jewish education. They knew they were Jews, they were they were even proud to be Jews. But they did not know how to live as Jews. As one old Jewish man told me in

Kyiv, under the Soviets I suffered because I was a Jew, now I want to know, what was I was suffering for? In Ukraine I found people hungry to learn about Jewish life. In the 90's, requests from Jewish communities in Ukraine reached the offices of the Union for Reform Judaism in New York. We need a rabbi they said. We need someone who can teach us about Jewish customs and traditions. Bu't... We are not orthodox. We need someone who reflects who we are. Could you send us a "Reform" Rabbi? That is how I got recruited for my first rabbinical position.

After a year in Ukraine, I got a phone call: "Rabbi, we have an old Torah that was hidden, since the time of the war, in between the walls of house. Now that the Soviet Union is over, we took it out from the hiding place. An old man here has taught some of our teens to read from the scroll. We called an Orthodox rabbi to come and do a Bar and Bat Mitzvah ceremony, but he said no, because we have girls in our group, who have also learned to read from the Torah. Someone in our town heard there is a "Reform Rabbi" in Kyiv, so we are calling you to ask would you come and lead a Bar and Bat Mitzvah. "Of course" I reply, and few weeks later I went to this former shtetl about an hour from Kyiv and led the ceremony with the

hidden Torah. When it was over an old woman approached and said “You know Rabbi you used have family in our town?” What do you mean? There used to be Wilfonds here. Malka Wilfond is my friend, she lives in Vorzel next to Kyiv. Here is her number, call her.” I did and then went to meet her. Malka was in her 90’s, and she gathered 4 generations of Wilfands to meet me and my Mom when we went to visit a few weeks later during Pesach. After a few minutes we discovered we really were relatives - *mishpucha*. Her husband, Yudl was from the same Shtetel as my grandfather. Malka and my Mom spoke in Yiddish and together they sang Pesach songs. I imagine once Malka’s parents and my grandparents sat at the same Pesach seder table 70 years before and sang these same Jewish songs. We exchanged addresses and hugs. Eventually I left Kiev. For about 25 years we kept in touch off-and-on until this past January when the newspapers announced Russian army troops were encircling Ukraine and threatening an invasion.

I texted my Wilfond cousins in Kyiv “Are you guys Ok?” An answer came back “No. Our neighborhood has been hit by rockets. We have no electricity. My husband Yuri had to carry his mother who had a stroke down 20 flights of stairs to get her out of her apartment to our car. We are

fleeing the city with our two children, my mother-in-law, and my son's girlfriend and her mother. We're in two cars." The next night they slept on the basement floor of strangers in a house near the highway. Each day they drove west on roads clogged with cars trying to stay away from armies and missiles. Each night they slept in the basements of strangers. After a week they got to the border with Poland. They had not washed, slept or eaten properly for a week. Suddenly near the border they were confronted with a painful choice. Do they stay together as a family in a war zone, or divide the family and send the women over the border to safety in Poland? Ukraine passed a law, men between 18 and 60 were not allowed to leave the country, but were needed for the army.

What do you do? Stay together and be at risk, or split the family and maybe save a few. An impossible situation. My cousin Max Wilfand, 25 years old and his girl friend Tanya got married on that day next to the Polish border, not knowing if they would ever see each other again. After a quick wedding at a nearby city hall the women and men hugged one last time and separated from one another.

(Pause). If you have got a loved one. Hug them. Hug them every day, tell them you love them. Everyday. None

of us knows which day will be our last. You can wake up one day, and think everything is normal and then suddenly, in an instant your life is turned upside down and everything is lost. 15 Million people in Ukraine fled their homes in about two weeks. Wives left behind their husbands, children their fathers. People left behind everything, their homes, their language, their foods, their country, their culture. Everything lost in an instant. Don't take for granted what you have and who you have.

My cousins Natalya Wilfond, her daughter Karina, mother-in-law Halina Wilfond, and daughter-in-law Tanya crossed the border into Poland, while the men stayed back in Ukraine.

At the time this nightmare was unfolding, I volunteered to join a group of Rabbis from New York bringing humanitarian aid and medical supplies to Ukrainian Refugees in Poland. We would only be on ground in Poland for three days, two nights. As soon as we landed, I began texting with my cousins. They told me the women had just crossed the border and were traveling to a Refugee Center in Warsaw run by the Jewish Agency. I looked up the address. They were staying just a few buildings away from where I am staying.

Do you believe in miracles? I am a rationalist. I believe in science. I believe in Darwin and Einstein. Do I believe in miracles? At that moment 2.8 million refugees from Ukraine had crossed over in to Poland in two weeks. What are the odds that I would find my cousins from Ukraine in Poland in two days? Like a miracle that night I go to the refugee center to see Natalya, Karina and the rest of the family. They looked shattered. In an instant they lost everything. Their home, their family, their safety. We hug, we speak and cry. I try to give words of comfort, and I give them some money. The next morning the real miracle happens. They go to the Warsaw Airport and they go up to the ELAL counter and say "We are Jews, there is a war, please save us." And what does the ELAL person say? "*Bruchim Haba'im* - Welcome." This is the miracle of Israel. This stands in such stark contrast to the catastrophe Jews faced in Warsaw just 70 years ago. Exactly 70 years ago in 1942, nearly half a million Jews gathered in Warsaw, surrounded by war. No country in the world would take them in. Not America, not England, and not Canada. In 1942 if you were a Jew, the doors of the world were shut closed in your face. What those desperate Jews would have given for an ELAL counter at the airport. Almost every Jew in Warsaw in 1942 was

murdered at Auschwitz and Treblinka, about 500,000 people.

Israel exists not just for Israelis. Israel exists for the Jewish people, wherever they are. Whenever they are needed. To save Soviet Jews, Ethiopian Jews, Ukrainian Jews. Any Jew who feels threatened by war or antisemitism

We, the Jews of this generation, are all safer because there is a modern and vibrant state of Israel. I pray that Israel may continue to be strong and forever serve as a beacon of hope for Jews everywhere.

What does the future hold? Our congregant Harvey Doppelt in his leadership role with the American Jewish Committee organized a zoom for Rabbis to meet the Ukrainian Ambassador to the UN. I asked the Ambassador what will it take to end the war? He replied by quoting Golda Meir, who was born in Kiev, and is seen by Ukrainians not just as a Jewish Hero, but as a Ukrainian Hero. Golda Meir said "If our enemies lay down their weapons, there will be peace. If we lay down our weapons, we will cease to exist." In February most of the world, including Putin, expected Russian tanks to roll over Ukraine and conquer it in a few days. Few people understood the bravery of the Ukrainian People,

defending against one of the world's super powers. Few, could have imagined the courage of the Ukrainian people even when threatened by an army possessing the world's largest nuclear arsenal. Few anticipated the resilience of the Ukrainians when faced with missiles fired by Russia at Ukrainian nuclear power stations. When Zelensky, the President of Ukraine spoke to the UN last week he sounded like a Jewish Prophet. He said, "This war will end and the aggressor will be brought to justice." Zalenksy is right. The Ukrainians will not be defeated because they possess a spiritual power. They are a community, what we in Judaism call a *kehila*, a sacred a sense of obligation to take responsibility and take care of each other.

We Jews learned long ago in Pharoah's Egypt to stand up against tyrants. Let us stand with the people of Ukraine. This Pesach with the help of Gary Cohen our social action leader, we sent over a hundred tourniquets that my former congregant in Kiev, Victor Toplink used with his medics unit in the battle of Kharkiv to stop the bleeding of civilians and soldiers. *Pikuach Nefesh*, saving life is one of Judaism highest values. Any medical supplies we send to Ukraine can save lives.

What can we do? Rabbi Leo Beack, the Chief Rabbi of Germany during the Holocaust was asked this question.

“What can we do in the face of evil? He replied the
“Torah says “Thou shalt do!”

Lo Alecha Hamalahca Ligmor., “You don’t have to solve the entire problem, The Talmud teaches, you just need to begin. Here are some ways. We can support “Doctors without borders” they are providing insulin and other medicines keeping people alive. On the ground in Kyiv and other places they are providing surgery, medical care, physical therapy and psychological support to victims of war. At AFYA in Yonkers we can volunteer to pack humanitarian aid parcels being sent to Ukraine. Our congregation helped start a new organization this year called “Reset,” aiding refugees here in Westchester and recently helped a family from Ukraine. Please speak with Gary Cohen or Adam Barnet to get involved. We can educate our children in democratic principles and advocate for the importance of international laws respecting a country’s borders. It seems that some have forgotten why the UN was created, for safeguarding peace and cooperation. We need to remind ourselves why The Geneva Convention Rules of War and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights were drafted, so that people would never again be dragged to mass graves of civilians treated as though human life was disposable.

We need to advocate our elected officials to understand we have a moral responsibility to stop the wanton destruction of cities and the violation of international borders for the sake of political and economic greed. We need to use more green sources of energy to reduce the use of oil as a weapon. I want to lead a group from our congregation to go to Poland to volunteer in the refugee centers that serve 3 million Ukrainians displaced by war. One day I hope we will travel to Ukraine to help rebuild schools, hospitals, and orphanages. We can help clear the shrapnel from city play grounds and parks. We can let those ravaged by war know this time the world didn't turn its back as though it didn't know. 70 years ago, people said after the war, we didn't know. With today's technology and communications, we know and therefore we have a responsibility to act.

Its estimated there are still about 100,000 Jews in Ukraine. I am in contact with members of my former synagogue in Kyiv. They continue to hold weekly shabbat services. I have kept in touch with my Ukrainian cousins now divided between Israel and Ukraine. They pray to soon be united as a family.

We here are a highly educated congregation. Many of us are doctors, lawyers, teachers and nurses. After this

service, and in the coming days let's put our heads together and come up with a plan to fulfill our Torah responsibility to be our "Brother's and our Sister's Keeper." In every Jewish service in our prayers we say it is our duty "to lift up the fallen, to heal the sick, to free the captive, and to keep faith with those who sleep in the dust." Now is the time to put these words into action.

This Rosh HaShana I want to leave you with a message of hope. Unlike the Holocaust, where the Jews were forgotten and left to perish, this time the world is watching and waiting to rebuild Ukraine. Israel is a beacon of hope for the Jews of Ukraine and for all of us in every corner of the world.

Oseh Shalom Bimrov hu ya'ase shalom alenu, May we find the strength to help bring peace and hope to all who need it. May we write ourselves in the book of life through our actions. May it be a year in which we increase the goodness in to the world. Shana Tova.