A SHANDA L'YEHUDIM
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I want to introduce you to a Bar Mitzvah boy, Seth Mann.

[SHOW PHOTO]

I don't know Seth personally, but I have known and taught literally hundreds of children like him over three decades as a rabbi. His family belongs to a Conservative synagogue in Las Vegas. His father Joel served as the youngest president of that congregation and served on the regional board of the Anti-Defamation League in Nevada.

[REMOVE PHOTO]

On a Thursday morning a few weeks ago in Jerusalem Seth and a large group of family and friends from Las Vegas, including his rabbi had made the 12,000 KM journey to Jerusalem for the once in a lifetime occasion.

They all stood together, men, women, children on the plaza of the Egalitarian Section of the Kotel, or Western Wall for Seth's Bar Mitzvah. His holocaust survivor uncle was there, so were family and friends from Israel. Just to his left was another Bar Mitzvah boy from a conservative synagogue in Virginia, and to that boy's left was a Bat Mitzvah girl also from a conservative synagogue in the US. The rabbi of that Bat Mitzvah, Rabbi Perry Netter, was the rabbi who officiated at my wedding.

The Jewish world can feel very small, very closely connected sometimes; and sometimes, like the joke about the man who built two synagogues on a deserted island, one he davens in and one he would never step foot in, sometimes we struggle to find anything that we share in common.

These three conservative Jewish families adorned in tallit, tefillin, standing shoulder to shoulder singing and praying just as we have done a thousand times here in this congregation. Just as Jews have been doing in the State of Israel since the Kotel was redeemed and restored to the Jewish people 55 years ago.

We have a lot in common with those families; in our eyes they are most certainly MOTs, "Members of the Tribe".

Except there was another group there on the plaza. They didn't see those B'nai Mitzvah Families as MOTs and the prayer space the families were gathered in was certainly not a shul they would ever walk into; yet they walked in anyway; not to pray but to terrorize.

No, I am not talking about Hamas, or Neo-nazis or any of the myriad of anti-Jewish groups that have tormented and terrorized Jews at prayer with increasing violence.

This group of uninvited and unwelcome Bar Mitzvah Crashers were a group comprised of roughly 50 teenage boys and young men, many of them Ultra-Orthodox Haredi Jews, some Haredi-Leumi, aka Hardal, the oxymoronic concoction of Religious Zionists. No matter the name or flavor we might know them simply as Jewish extremists.

Armed with shrill whistles, hate filled signs and self-righteous indignation these teenage Jewish terrorists cloaked in religious garb called the B'nai Mitzvah worshipers "Nazis," "Christians," "shiksas", and — to the great confusion of those present — "Reform Jews."

What is the sound of 50 whistles during a Bar Mitzvah service, and what is the face of the unsuspecting Bar Mitzvah Boy on what to that point is the most significant Jewish moment of his 13-year-old life? Let me show you.

[SHOW VIDEO 1]

One of the main instigators, the son of a Knesset member no less,

[SHOW VIDEO 2]

tore up a prayer book being used for the Bar Mitzvah, and blew his nose in a torn out page like a tissue.

[END VIDEO]

this same prayerbook that sits on my bookshelf here at temple and that they are using at Beth Israel, Beth Tikvah and Har El this very weekend.

Over the sound of the whistles, straining to be heard as best he could Seth read his Bar Mitzvah speech, while standing in the shadow of what was once the holy temple he shared his idyllic, we might say naïve, view of what the Western Wall meant to him and the Jewish people.

Seth read from his prepared speech,

"I can't think of a better place than this to understand what it means to be part of a community and part of a people,"

Seth then stopped and laughed at the irony of his own words. Scores of Orthodox men and boys a few yards away were furiously trying to convince him that he was not part of that people, worse that he was the cause of all of the pain and suffering experienced by the Jewish people.

Joel Mann, the father of the Bar Mitzvah described what happened. He asked them:

"Why are you here?" They held up signs in Hebrew that I did not understand at the time. They gave me a response to my question that shocked me. They said we were not Jewish. I attempted to explain to them that my son is being Bar Mitzvah'd, but they would not have anything of it. They continued to harass us. They attempted to get closer to our group, but our family members stood in a half-circle around my son as he chanted Torah and protected him from these hoodlums trying to attack us.

The police did little to nothing to stop the disturbance and sometimes violent attacks that occurred. They stood there and watched as these thugs attacked people doing nothing more than praying. The Israeli Police stood there as the Haredi teens attacked Jews."

It pains me to give voice to it, but I need to explain where this vehement hostility toward reform and conservative Jews amongst the ultra-orthodox comes from. Like most radicalizations it's born of a conspiracy theory, though we might call it a conspiracy theology.

The community that was most systematically and thoroughly wiped out in the Holocaust was the ultra-orthodox Jewish communities in Poland and Lithuania. Isolated in *shtetls* and closed off to modernity and assimilation they were the last to see the gathering storm clouds of the Holocaust. They were also the most identifiably Jewish and thus first to be persecuted. The Shoah took them utterly and devastatingly by surprise. In part their piety and the self-imposed isolation it fostered left them particularly vulnerable to the Nazi raids and death squads.

These young boys are their ideological and, in many cases, biological descendants.

The only way they can make sense of what happened to their family members in Eastern Europe, the only way they can believe in G-d who allowed the Holocaust to happen, the only way they think they can heal from their generational trauma is if they can find a reason for the holocaust. As psychiatrist Viktor Frankel, himself a survivor of Theresienstadt, taught from his own experience, "human beings can endure anything if they can find meaning."

Extremist ultra-orthodox Jews see the holocaust as divine punishment. They see the beginning of Reform Judaism in the 1840s and 1850s in Germany and Hitler coming from Germany as punishment upon the whole of the Jewish people for allowing Reform Judaism to take hold in the Jewish community.

We here in this room, those fellow Jews there on the Kotel Plaza are in their conspiratorial view the reason for the holocaust, our heresy in not following the dictates

of rabbinic Judaism, our assimilation then and now is why G-d allowed Hitler to murder their families.

Those boys with their whistles and nasty name calling have been taught in their yeshivas by their rabbis and their parents that Reform and Conservative Jews holding mixed gender, non-orthodox prayer services anywhere but particularly at the Kotel is such a desecration of G-d's name that G-d will bring another holocaust as punishment for this perceived transgression of Torah.

Like most extremists their actions are justified by the righteousness of their cause. For now, its words and whistles, vandalism, and vitriol – but if we have learned anything from the news of the day and our own history; the difference between an extremist and a violent extremist is often only a matter of desperation and indignation.

Take for example the story of Pinchas which began at the end of last week's parasha and concludes at the beginning of this week's torah reading, the one that bears his name.

A plague has befallen the Israelites as they make their march through the wilderness to the promised land. 24,000 people have died, and no one knows why. Neither G-d nor Moses have revealed the cause of the plague. Remember, "human beings can endure anything if they can find meaning". Not knowing why is causing grave distress amongst the community.

Pinchas, the grandson of Moses's brother Aaron, the High Priest witnesses a Jewish man Zimri ben Salu, being publicly intimate with a Midianite woman, Cozbi bat Zur. This enrages him as a violation of the commandment prohibiting relations with foreign women. Such relations have led to the Israelites becoming "attached" to the foreign god Baal-peor, a form of assimilation which was unacceptable to the grandson of the High Priest.

Filled with zealotry and emboldened by his interpretation of Torah he takes a spear and murders the cohabitating interfaith couple. No one tells him to do this, he is motivated only by what he thinks God and the moment demand of him.

The plague is stopped and the text records that God rewards Pinchas for his zealotry.

Quoting from our parasha, God declares:
"Pinchas, son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, has turned back my wrath from the Israelites by manifesting such zeal among them on my behalf that in my jealousy I did not consume the Israelites."

A close reading of the aftermath of Pinchas' actions reveals that God does not in fact endorsement Pinchas' violent extremism, and sets about curtailing such acts in the

future, including curtailing G-d' on jealous rage. But the dye has been cast; a culture of extreme intolerance has been codified in the Torah, an example for all time.

In his important essay, "How to Cure a Fanatic," the late Amos Oz explained:

"…this is a battle between fanatics, who believe that the end, any end, justifies the means, and the rest of us, who believe that life is an end, not a means. It is a struggle between those who think that justice, whatever they would mean by the word, is more important than life, on the one hand, and those of us who think that life takes priority over many other values, convictions, or faiths."

The inexcusable actions of haradi youth at Seth Mann's Bar Mitzvah, or those of Pinchas in our parasha are the first and the most recent examples of the battle between those who think that the fundamental rights of others come second to their rights, beliefs, principles, and deeds.

Later in his book Oz offers this possible solution to fanaticism:

"[We must develop] the ability to exist within open-ended situations, even to learn how to enjoy open-ended situations, to learn to enjoy diversity, may also help…. [We must try to] imagine each other when we quarrel, imagine each other when we complain, imagine each other precisely at the moment we feel that we are 100 percent right. Even when you are 100 percent right and the other is 100 percent wrong, it's still useful to imagine the other.

Many years ago, when I was still a child, my grandmother explained to me in simple words the difference between Jew and Christian.

"You see," she said, "Christians believe that the Messiah was here once, and he will certainly return one day. The Jews maintain that the Messiah is yet to come. Over this," said my grandmother, "over this, there has been so much anger, persecution, bloodshed, hatred . . .

"Why?" she said. "Why can't everyone simply wait and see? If the Messiah comes, saying, 'Hello, it's nice to see you again,' the Jews will have to concede. If, on the other hand, the Messiah comes, saying, 'How do you do, it is very nice meeting you,' the entire Christian world will have to apologize to the Jews.

"Between now and then," said my wise grandmother, "just live and let live..." She knew the secret of living with open-ended situations, with unresolved conflicts, with the otherness of other people.

That's not the complete solution to the situation we find ourselves in, but it's a start. It starts with empathy, with patience and with being able to live with difference.