

In May of 1940, the Nazis invaded France. They came not only to subjugate its people but to consume its culture. They wanted to absorb the richness of France into the Third Reich. And when it came to Jewish culture, their goal was even darker: dismantle it, sell it for scraps, and—most dangerously—recast it. From a story of honor and vibrance into one of disgust and degeneracy. And for the most part, they succeeded. Across Germany, Austria, and even parts of France, our story was rewritten.

But not everywhere. Not in one particular museum in Paris. Because there, standing in the shadows, was a diminutive, unassuming woman named Rose Valland. Rose was the daughter of a poor blacksmith. She loved art, she studied art at the Sorbonne and the École du Louvre. But in the 1930s, women weren't thought of as curators. She was dismissed, underestimated. So she volunteered at the Jeu de Paume Museum. She catalogued art, helped with exhibits, did the jobs no one else wanted to do. She was invisible and invaluable.

And then came the boots. The Nazis marched into her museum. The Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg — the Nazi art-looting task force — took over. They underestimated her too -- thought Rose was just a clerk. What they didn't know was that she was brilliant. She spoke German fluently. And she was listening.

Day after day, as priceless works of Jewish families like the Rothschilds and David-Weills were stolen and shipped away, Rose took notes. In ordinary notebooks, she created extraordinary records. Which train cars carried which paintings. Which German castles or salt mines received which treasures. Every note she took was a death sentence waiting to be discovered. If the Nazis had realized she understood their language, if they had cracked her code, she would have been executed on the spot. And yet, because of Rose Valland, thousands of works were returned. Because of Rose, our story — Jewish art, Jewish culture, Jewish dignity — was not erased.

So let me ask you: Would you have done the same? Would you have risked everything to save our story? Eighty-five years later, our story is being stolen again. Only this time, the threat looks different. More subtle. In many ways, more successful. Today, we are not only accused of being oppressors. We are recast as the genocidal Nazis themselves.

Friends, the word genocide has a very specific meaning. It was coined by a Polish-Jewish lawyer, Raphael Lemkin, after the Holocaust. He wanted the world to have a name for the deliberate destruction of an entire people. But Lemkin knew something important: that suffering and tragic deaths in war — as horrific as they

are — are not automatically genocide. For genocide, there must be intent. It must be official policy. That's why the Nazis declared a "Final Solution." That's why the Hutu government called for the extermination of the Tutsi.

Israel has never made such a declaration. We may criticize Israeli leaders, we may challenge its tactics, but its stated aims have remained consistent: Free the hostages. Defeat Hamas. Protect Israel's security. That's not genocide. And here is the spiritual danger: when we are accused of the worst crime imaginable, when people insist that we are genocidal monsters, it becomes almost impossible to admit and work to overcome the very real mistakes and failures that always happen in war.

That's why knowing our story matters. When we are accused of the *worst thing imaginable*, it becomes impossible to admit even the smallest mistake. Because only when we are grounded in truth can we hold ourselves accountable — and still refuse to accept lies about who we are.

Let me give you an example. Imagine you're driving. You rear-end another car. The other driver's brake lights were out, so maybe you share some blame, maybe not. You get out, concerned, apologetic, ready to talk. But then the other driver notices your Temple Adat Elohim nametag. Suddenly he grabs his back and screams: "You

tried to murder me! You Jews are trying to kill my whole family!” With that accusation, you can’t have a calm discussion about shared responsibility. You can’t talk about fixing the damage. The accusation is so extreme that the truth gets lost. That’s what happens when our story is stolen, when we are accused of the absolute worst acts in humanity.

And friends, this matters today — on Rosh Hashanah. Because today is *Yom HaDin*, the Day of Judgment. The day we imagine God writing the story of our lives into the Book of Life. The day we reflect on the story of our people. But too often, we ourselves have forgotten that story. Too often, we shut down. Often, the most loving and empathetic among us accept the harshest accusations uncritically, as though they must be true because we just want the suffering to stop. Still others dismiss every criticism as antisemitism and close our ears. These are not the Jewish way.

Many of us — maybe most of us — are just caught in the middle. Unsure. Less than fully informed. Overwhelmed. Afraid. And that fear... sometimes even shame... keeps us silent. But silence is not an option. Not when our story is being erased. Not when the ill-informed are speaking for us. This is why we need to become, in our own way, like Rose Valland. She didn’t fight with weapons. She

didn't shout in the streets. She listened. She learned. She wrote it down. She preserved our story. We can do the same. We can become curators of our people's story.

And that's why this year, first I want to invite you to a discussion we are having on Yom Kippur afternoon as several of our members, smart, caring people, will share how news of Israel and Zionism and antisemitism are affecting them, because they are affecting all of us. You are not alone.

And second, I want to invite you to something new and important. Together with my colleague, Rabbi Ari Averbach at Temple Etz Chaim, we are asking our congregations to read the book, *Uncomfortable Conversations with a Jew*. At a very basic level, the book explores basic questions such as "what are we, as a people", are we a race? A religion? Something else entirely? It looks at the roots of antisemitism and the meaning of Zionism and Israel in the modern world. It is an important take on our Jewish story.

The book is written by two people who model exactly the kind of conversation we need right now. Emmanuel Acho — a Black American who wrote *Uncomfortable Conversations with a Black Man* during America's racial reckoning. He is not Jewish, but he shows the power of curiosity, honesty, and compassion in

confronting hard questions. The fact that he was criticized by many in the Black community for entering this discussion is exactly why we need to enter into discussion. His co-author is Noa Tishby — an Israeli actress, activist, and former Israeli envoy against antisemitism. She knows Israel's story, but she is not afraid to criticize its government. In fact, she was fired for just such a criticism — and she is proud of that. Together, they invite us into conversations that are not easy, not comfortable, but deeply necessary and for me, deeply meaningful.

So here's what we're going to do:

1. **Read the book together.** Not alone. In order for us to fully explore its ideas and to recapture the sense of this story being *our* collective story, we need to read this — in small groups where we can question and react and explore together. Judaism is not tennis, it is a team sport.
2. **So join a group. Or even better host one.** Open your home, open your heart. Meet at a restaurant, wherever you like.
3. **Connect through our neighborhoods.** On Yom Kippur I will be talking about our Neighborhood Connections initiative to help us realize that we are surrounded by people from this congregation who can care for one another.

A great way to connect is to find others in your neighborhood to explore with.

4. **Listen to the podcast.** Rabbi Averbach and I are launching a podcast called *Two Rabbis, Three Opinions* in which we will be highlighting the ideas in the book and wrestling with the book's themes to invite you into our dialogue. They will be coming out about once-a-month, so we will not be overwhelming anyone with our voices.
5. **Bring your hardest questions.** If you wrestle with the information in the book, bring questions and challenges to us. We don't promise easy answers. We do promise honest, thoughtful engagement.
6. Invitation will be coming soon.

Friends, this is not about slogans. This is not about parroting talking points. And it is certainly not about silencing criticism. It is about recovering our story. So that we can better listen to the stories of others as well. So that we can understand and discuss with integrity. So that we can face the future without shame or fear. So we can aspire to be like Rose Valland. She was invisible. Underestimated. Ignored. But she knew the power of preserving our story. And because she did, generations after her could still look upon the art, the beauty, the culture of our people and know: we were never what the Nazis said we were.

On this Rosh Hashanah, let us be Rose Valland. Let us be the curators of our own story. Let us risk the courage to know ourselves, to defend our story, and to share it with the next generation. And may we be inscribed, not only in the Book of Life, but also in the Book of our People's Story — a story of vibrance, a story of resilience, a story no one can erase.

Shanah Tovah.