The Arrogance of the AP – Past and Present?
April 2, 2016 – 23 Adar II 5776
Rabbi Daniel Cotzin Burg, Beth Am Synagogue
Parashat Shemini (Shabbat Parah)

On April 20, 1999, two students walked into their Colorado high school, murdered 12 classmates and one teacher, wounded 23 others and touched off an epidemic of school shootings that continues until this day. What many didn’t know at the time, though it was reported in a few media outlets, is that just three weeks prior, Dylan Klebold, one of the two shooters, had attended his family’s Passover seder where he recited the four questions. Klebold, it seems, had some Jewish ancestry and though his family belonged to a Lutheran church, was raised at least marginally Jewish – a rasha if I ever saw one! You may have heard Terry Gross’ recent interview with Dylan’s mother Sue about her new book. In the interview, Susan describes her son’s recorded confession to Eric Harris that he was dreading the upcoming seder. Why didn’t she share these details sooner? Why was she in denial about Dylan’s complicity for so long? Who knows? Perhaps she felt a bit like Aaron in our parasha who, when faced with the shame of his sons having brought “strange fire,” simply had nothing to say. Vayidom Aharon, “And Aaron was silent” (Lev. 10:3). And Dylan Klebold’s expressed shame at his Jewish heritage and the subsequent massacre he committed need not and should not be read in a broader context, except perhaps to remind us that those who hate the world, who despise difference and diversity so often hate themselves at least as much. The day of the Columbine shootings was my 23rd birthday. This month, on April 20th, I turn forty.

As I think about this milestone, I find myself reflecting on many things: my wonderful wife and two terrific kids, my eleven years in the rabbinate and my great joy, satisfaction, and only very occasional frustration with being Beth Am’s spiritual leader. I think about the work undone, the unfinished symphony of helping to shape our storied congregation’s present and future and the continued challenges and opportunities associated with our striving to be an effective anchor in Reservoir Hill and Central-West Baltimore. This month of my fortieth birthday, I think about each of you, how many of you I have come to know and admire and count as students and teachers and friends. And I look forward to knowing more of you better as time goes on. I am blessed.

But there’s something else I think about, I can’t help thinking about, each year on my birthday. Because the Columbine shooting didn’t happen on April 20 by accident. Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, driven by racist and anti-Semitic proclivities, likely chose that date after months of planning because it was Adolf Hitler’s birthday. Despite the consternation of my German-Jewish Holocaust surviving relatives, my mother had no choice but to bring her firstborn son into the world on that same calendar day as the Jewish people’s archenemy and the world’s archetype of evil. There are only 365 days in the year after all! It had to happen to some of us. (Lainy LeBow-Sachs knows what I’m talking about).

I mention all of this, though, because it’s hard for any of us to escape the sordid legacy of Shoah, nor should we. That is Emile Fackenheim’s 614th commandment, to never grant Hitler a posthumous victory. That’s the mandate embedded in Parashat Zachor two weeks ago- lo tishkach, “Never forget!” And this week, just a few months after Mein Kampf was re-released in
its original German (which sold out, by the way, in a matter of days), we were reminded of one more way Hitler’s malevolent imprimatur transcends his own era. An historian in Germany has published a paper in *Studies of Contemporary History* accusing the Associated Press (AP) of collaborating with the Nazi regime. In the abstract of Harriet Scharnberg’s paper (which I’ll admit was the only part not in German) she writes, “AP pictures taken under the aegis of the Propaganda Ministry, the Wehrmacht and the SS were ubiquitous in the Nazi press. Moreover, the New York headquarters supplied the North American press with these same pictures, where they were published either as news photos or as propaganda images.” Indeed, the AP was the only Western news agency to remain functional under the Third Reich which begs the question, what made them different from other agencies who were expelled by the mid-thirties? The answer, according to Scharnberg is that the AP “…ceded control of its output by signing up to the so-called *Schriftleitergesetz* (editor’s law), promising not to publish any material ‘calculated to weaken the strength of the Reich abroad or at home.’” *The Guardian*, which reported the story, goes on to note that “One of the four photographers employed by the Associated Press in the 1930’s, Franz Roth, was a member of the SS paramilitary unit’s propaganda division, whose photographs were personally chosen by Hitler.” Apparently, soon after Scharnberg’s paper was published, the AP removed Roth’s pictures from its website.

For its part, the Associated Press put out a statement Wednesday, March 30th, denying its collaboration with the Nazis. It says, “…the AP was subjected to pressure from the Nazi regime from the period of Hitler’s coming to power in 1933 until the AP’s expulsion from Germany in 1941. AP staff resisted the pressure while doing its best to gather accurate, vital and objective news for the world in a dark and dangerous time….” They go on, “The historical research of Ms. Scharnberg concerns a German photo agency subsidiary of AP Britain that was created in 1931, two years before the Nazis came to power. As of 1935, this subsidiary operation became subject to the Nazi press-control law but continued to gather photo images inside Germany and later inside countries occupied by Germany.”

Time and more scrutiny will tell whether the Associated Press is as innocent as it protests to be; but I have to say, Scharnberg’s accusations should give us pause. For example, in June 1941, the Nazis invaded the Ukrainian town of Lvov (Lviv) and, between the Germans and Ukrainian nationals, murdered 5,000 Jews. Scharnberg says, “Instead of printing pictures of the days-long Lviv pogroms with its thousands of Jewish victims, the American press was only supplied with photographs showing the victims of the Soviet police and ‘brute’ Red Army war criminals…. Which events were made visible and which remained invisible in the AP’s supply of pictures followed German interests and the German narrative of the war.” Or to put it bluntly, the AP’s cooperation, through its subsidiary, allowed the Nazis to “portray a war of extermination as a conventional war.”

The question for us to consider is, really, Santayana’s – that “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” Could it be the AP’s professed organizational ignorance has allowed it to make other dubious choices in order to remain in the good graces of other totalitarian regimes? *The Guardian* piece points out that in 2012 it was the AP which became the first western news agency to open a bureau in North Korea and, since then, “questions have repeatedly been raised about the neutrality of its Pyongyang bureau’s output.” In 2014, an agency called *NK News* released a confidential draft agreement between the Associated Press
and North Korea’s state media outlet which says the AP will “serve the purpose of the coverage and worldwide distribution of policies of the Worker’s Party of Korea and the DPRK government.” Sound familiar? The same Paul Colford who handles media relations for the AP denied the AP submitted to censorship in this case too, but inside sources at the bureau, told a different story: “AP tries not to be a mouthpiece of North Korea, but it is basically impossible under the terms the bureau operates…. The foreign AP staffers are under so many limitations that there has not been any unfettered real journalism produced by the AP bureau in Pyongyang.”

And Matti Friedman, who was a reporter and editor in the AP’s Jerusalem bureau for five years, wrote the following in Tablet, August 2014, “There has been much discussion recently of Hamas attempts to intimidate reporters. Any veteran of the press corps here knows the intimidation is real, and I saw it in action myself as an editor on the AP News Desk. During the 2008-2009 Gaza fighting, I personally erased a key detail—that Hamas fighters were dressed as civilians and are being counted as civilians in the death toll—because of a threat to our reporter in Gaza. (The policy was then, and remains, not to inform readers that the story is censored unless the censorship is Israeli…).” According to Friedman, this culture of promoting a particular narrative, or kowtowing to dictators in order to retain market share, is hardly limited to the Associated Press. Such accommodations, in varying degrees, are common.

News agencies are supposed to report the news, not make the news; but sometimes they do, and more often than not it is arrogance guiding their decisions. Arrogance-to think you can make a deal with the devil and come out unscathed. Arrogance-to think you can force a particular narrative without sacrificing your integrity. For what sin did Nadav and Avihu really deserve such harsh punishment when they brought eish zara, “strange fire?” The Midrash says, “Moses and Aaron walked first [up to Mt. Sinai] with Nadav and Avihu following behind.” [And the whole time the stragglers were muttering to each other: “Pretty soon, these two old men will die and in their place we shall wield power over the community of Israel” (P’sikta d’Rav Kahana, 26). They were arrogant. And hubristic people, when they sacrifice principles for influence or revenue, should they not be held accountable? Are they not also culpable? Hitler, Kim-Jung Un, Hamas – these are murderers. Surely, the sins of news agencies are less? Well yes, of course, much less, hopefully that goes without saying. But they’re not insignificant either… with photos, approved by the Nazi regime, mobilized to obfuscate and distract from millions of lives imprisoned and eventually snuffed out, assuming the historical paper is accurate. Is there not blood on the hands of an agency which allows a story to be so wrong?

Rabbi Hama bar Hanina said, “What does it mean when [Proverbs 18:21] reads Mavet v’Chayim b’yad Lashon, ‘Death and life are in the ‘hand’ of the tongue’?” It means just as the hand can kill, so can the tongue. One might say that just as the hand can kill only one near [so too with the tongue, but we read in Psalms (64:4)]: “Their tongue is a sharpened arrow.” Then one might assume that just as an arrow kills only within [a short distance], thus also the tongue…therefore the text states, “They set their mouths against heaven and their tongues range over the earth” (Psalms 73:9). – Talmud Bavli Arachin 15b. The printed word, the social media posts, these can have enormous consequences.

So what then can we do? Is there a cure for arrogance and libelous manipulation? I don’t know about a cure, but there is a response, actually: knowledge. That’s why combatting Holocaust
denial, still prevalent in some parts of the world, is so important. That’s the Jewish way – to learn, to teach others, to ferret out the truth, to not take things for granted. To be rodfei emet, “seekers of truth”. And in that spirit, I have an invitation for all of you. On April 20, you are all invited to my birthday party – which will be masquerading as a Beth Am program! Our Continuing Ed. Committee will be hosting our own Susan Fisher Sullam as she presents the true story of her father, Joel Fisher and his collection of top secret and classified files detailing billions of dollars of plundered Nazi wealth. I always thought that maybe sharing my birthday with Hitler or the Columbine shootings meant I have some responsibility to redeem the day. So come redeem ignorance and hatred with knowledge and community, and learn Susan’s remarkable story. And, in the meantime, don’t take too much for granted, because arrogance can be seductive and scapegoating profoundly and perversely effective.

And accountability?

Well that, like a birthday, seems to be a pretty rare occurrence.