

In a Difficult Year, Politically
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“A lose-lose scenario.” That’s what I was quoted as saying in the Bergen Record when I was interviewed about how rabbis are approaching these High Holy Days. It has been a difficult year, politically speaking. And we do not all see things the same way. If rabbis opt out of addressing the issues of the day, then we will disappoint those who are waiting for their rabbi to speak up with passion. But if we do speak with passion, we will no doubt anger those who feel just as passionately about the issues, but from a different perspective than that of the rabbi. And this year the issues are so charged, and the polarization is so demarcated, that there is nothing that I can say or not say about the policies of the Trump administration, or of the Netanyahu government, that will not upset some of us in this room. And so, let me begin, in the spirit of Kol Nidrei, by asking your forgiveness, if what I say may disappoint or upset you. But I stand before you as a human being, as an American, and as Jew, living through a difficult time, trying to make some sense of the world around us, and trying to answer a higher call at this most sacred evening of the year.

My purpose tonight is not to engage in political debate or try to convince anyone of anything. I want to, instead, speak, both rabbinically and personally, about how we might approach these difficult issues from a Jewish perspective, with the fear and trembling with which we are taught to examine ourselves at this time.

When I was being interviewed by the Bergen Record and was speaking about the anguish I feel about the war in Gaza, and my ongoing prayers for the return of the hostages, the reporter

asked me, with some astonishment, “Rabbi, you sound like you are a Zionist!” I had to pause before responding to that. What has happened that “rabbi” and “Zionist” should not appear in the same sentence? Of course I am a Zionist, I tried to explain, because being a Zionist means that I care deeply about Israel, that I believe in the Jewish people, its culture and religion, and celebrate its survival through history. It should not in any way mean that I seek the suffering of others. How could anyone think that?

Well, people do think that because of the polarizing silos that we put ourselves in. I spoke about that on Rosh Hashanah, how algorithmically controlled social media manipulate our access to information and opinion, making it harder for us to hear the other side, and question our own. I have been accused this past year of abetting genocide by supporting an Israeli state that is “pure evil,” and I have also been accused of abetting terrorism and antisemitism by being so unsupportive of Israel. And everything in between. And all from conversations with or connected with people from this room. I wake up every morning hoping and praying that the war in Gaza will have ended. I fervently pray that Hamas accepts the terms of the new White House plan so that the fighting can end and the hostages can come home. It seems, though, that no matter what happens, everyone holds their particular views based on which “side” they are on, and will take the news of the day and simply react to it around their positions, rather than the other way around. Loving Israel cannot mean defending every position the Netanyahu government takes.

I felt ashamed last week, seeing how the Israeli prime minister was so ostracized at the United Nations. All the extraordinary work he did in constructing relations with moderate Arab states through the Abraham Accords seemed to be crumbling like the buildings of Gaza. I pray that this trend may soon be reversed, and I am grateful for the President’s efforts in connecting

Netanyahu with the Qatari prime minister this week. I look behind me and see that flag, a flag that had always filled me with such pride and celebration, and I want to feel the same way, and yet, over the past year, I sometimes feel shame. Not because of the opinions of others in the world, but because of the awful war Israel has continued to fight in Gaza. Because of the immense suffering of so many people there. The way Netanyahu and his government is seen in the world today is the opposite of what Ben Gurion strove for, for Israel to be “a light unto the nations.” The pro-Israel side of the debate is constantly saying that “Israel has a right to defend itself.” Yes, I do agree with that. But has Israel been defending itself in a way that is “a light unto the nations?”

Now, I do not want to be misunderstood. I believe Israel’s war in Gaza is justified. Israel was attacked. Israel responded and continues to seek the subdual of its mortal enemy, Hamas, and the return of the hostages, both of which are reasonable and legitimate goals. But I also believe that it is time for our soldiers, and I see them as “our” soldiers, to come home. I believe that at this point, and before we got to this point, the way to bring the hostages home is through negotiation, and negotiations always entail some compromise. The cost of continued fighting, to both Gaza and Israel, is too high, and it should stop. I pray that it stop soon.

It is too easy to condemn any criticism of Israel as antisemitism, until we acknowledge that Israelis are the most critical of all. But that is how democracy is supposed to work. Yes, much of the criticism of Israel in the world is driven by antisemitism, but that does not mean that all criticism is antisemitic.

We think that these are new problems we face today, but Ecclesiastes, which we read next week on Sukkot, returns every autumn to chillingly remind us that there is nothing new under the sun. I was going through my father's papers and found a typed manuscript of a sermon he gave on Kol Nidrei in 1982 at our synagogue in Queens, just after the Sabra and Shatila massacres in Lebanon where thousands of Palestinians were murdered by Lebanese allies of Israel while the Israeli army stood by. My father spoke about the outcry in Israel, the outrage and shame. He preached that we should not give into the "kneejerking defensive reaction to the incredibly hypocritical scorn of the world." My father always strove to see the positive, to recognize the hopeful without giving in to naiveté. He wrote, and I share with you his words:

And so, my friends, we will be a "light unto the nations"—but they won't love us for it. They don't like to be reminded that they (and we), as human beings, are capable of doing better. And we remind them of that—by the uncompromising standards we set for ourselves. And they (or most of them) will hate us for it,—as they always have. It is our burden in history. It is also our glory.

He went on to say: "I am confident that—through the democratic process—Israel will emerge from this trauma strengthened." I do not know if I can claim the same "confidence" that he did, although that democratic process as it is supposed to work is something I look towards. But what I found more challenging—and inspiring—in his words from forty-three years ago was his message that we achieve the standard of being "a light unto the nations" through setting uncompromising standards for ourselves. Rather than defend everything, we will succeed only when we demand that we do better.

So it is okay to feel ashamed of things we love, and to give voice to it. I look at both of these flags behind me, they represent me and my highest standards for myself, and yet I have, over this past year, felt shame for both. Isn't that what we are supposed to do tonight? Are we not supposed to beat the breast, to say *ashamnu* and *al het shehatanu*, that we have sinned and transgressed? I have a long list of things I am upset about when I look at the Stars and Stripes today. I grew up in a Democratic family while believing President Reagan when he told us that America was a shining city upon a hill. Who believes that today? Not our president, who tells us that our country, which is no longer "great," is facing emergency after emergency. Not our traditional allies who have seen us question and pull out of long-standing relationships. Not the world, who saw last week how we were notably absent from the climate talks at the United Nations. And not the people of the District of Columbia, who watched federal troops cross the Potomac like Caesar's legions crossing the Rubicon. Is there nothing new under the sun? I spent the summer in Europe, and felt ashamed when my German friends explained that they could not see themselves visiting the United States at this time. I grew up pledging allegiance to this flag every morning in homeroom. I ask now whether the republic for which it stands still guarantees liberty and justice for all.

Still guarantees? Some would say we never did. Our republic was built on the foundations of African slavery and indigenous subjugation. And we have been too slow to acknowledge these original sins, too proud to say *ashamnu* and *al het shehatanu*. But it should be through holding ourselves up to uncompromising standards that we establish a more perfect union. As Jews we are trained not to white-wash the past, not to over-glorify our accomplishments and forget our wrongdoings. "Because of our sins we were exiled," the Musaf liturgy tells us. Calling out our

transgressions does not belittle us, it raises us up. Self-criticism should be constructive, not demoralizing. Dissent is an act of loyalty, not betrayal.

It is those uncompromising standards that we set for ourselves that establish the type of Jews and the type of Americans we are. This has been a difficult year politically. What will we say to ourselves and others, when we look back, about who we were at this time? Whenever he would call attention to racism or bigotry, President Obama would always use the memorable words, "This is not who we are." Of course, his words were aspirational, but he was always addressing some shameful event that had already occurred, a dark episode that, he insisted, should not determine our path forward. And there are so many such dark episodes in our country these days. It reminds me of the Hasidic story of Reb Zusya. When he died and went to heaven, the story goes, he was led to the judgment seat of God and waited for God to appear. He grew nervous, thinking about his life and how little he had done. He began to imagine that God was going to ask him, "Why weren't you more like Moses? Why weren't you more like King David or King Solomon?" But when God appeared, Reb Zusya was surprised. God simply asked, "Why weren't you more like Zusya?"

It is troubling, all the criticism of us, as Americans, as Jews, from around the world. But the most important critics are not from the outside but within each of us. We cannot pretend to ourselves that we are always right. There is no point in stubborn defensiveness when we stand before the All Knowing. Tonight let us be brave enough to express shame and remorse. Let us commit ourselves to the ideals that these flags stand for. And through our acts of atonement we pray that the new *shana* be *tovah*, a good, a better year.

