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“Rigged”

For months now, the anticipation has been building to this time, when the Jews would be convening in their very largest numbers. This is that time for the Jewish people – this coming weekend. The Rolling Stones. Bob Dylan. Paul McCartney. Neil Young. Roger Waters. And The Who. All of them on three straight nights in the desert. Thank God for the Jewish New Year that it wasn't this weekend.

Yes, the Jews may be in their synagogues tonight, but one week from tonight, they're going to be at Desert Trip, the classic rock extravaganza that has been not-so-lovingly dubbed “Oldchella.” That's a reference, I trust, not only to the age of the performers. It's also talking about the age of the audience – or at least those of us who hungered to be in the audience. You better believe that Allison and I wanted to be with our brethren at Oldchella. So we texted two good friends – also Jewish and also old enough to qualify – and asked if they wanted to join us. “Absolutely,” they said, and we jumped online at the exact moment tickets were to go on sale.

Unfortunately, we were not the only old Jews who did that. So for our turn in line we waited. And waited. And all the \$699 seats a million miles from the stage sold out. And all the \$899 seats a million miles from the stage sold out. And as my turn drew near, all that was left was the choice between the \$999 seats or the \$1599 seats that were only a thousand miles from the stage. And with that decision weighing on me, I quickly texted Allison and our friends, saying: “I kinda feel that if I have \$2000 available for a pair of concert tickets, I need to be donating more of my money.” All four of us agreed with that, and that was the end of our Oldchella dreams.

Now I want to be clear – there is nothing inherently sinful about dropping two grand on a pair of concert tickets. If we are blessed to have discretionary income, we spend it on the luxury items we choose, and I'm quite sure that some of you here today did make the decision to go to the concerts in the desert. And not only is it not sinful from an American point of view to do so; it's not sinful from a Jewish point of view, either. Anyone who attempts to tell you that Judaism is against individuals achieving great wealth... the kind that would make \$2000 in concert tickets a possibility... well, they just don't know very much about Judaism. Our tradition has no problem with us becoming wealthier, even super-wealthier, because it assumes – in fact, it demands – that our financial giving should increase at the same rate that our financial earning increases. The standard set by the Torah for our charitable giving, as you may know, is ten percent of our annual earnings. Now, that's a standard very, very few of us achieve, and most of us don't come all that close either... but that's a sermon for a different Rosh Hashanah.

Our discussion tonight is about the unintended consequences from our doing what is sinful neither from an American nor a Jewish point of view. You see, we all agree that if the market bears \$2000 for the pair of tickets, that should be the price. We certainly don't want anyone telling us to sell something for less than its fair market value when we're the ones doing the selling. The difficulty is that in our minds, the conversation about right and wrong in finance tends to end with that defense of the free market. And that indicates a certain blindness on our part, because whether we like it or not... whether it's even fair or not... there are other people who get to weigh in about what's right or wrong in finance. They're the people who share our society with us – the ones who watch us as they earn and spend very differently than we do.

So the concert promoters have every right to set the ticket prices at whatever level purchasers will pay. And the concert attendees have every right to spend whatever they wish on their tickets. And the residents of Coachella Valley have every right to reach their own conclusions about the masses descending upon their neighborhood and clogging their streets. Who are these Coachella Valley residents who will be watching the audience while the audience is watching the show this coming weekend? They are among the poorest Californians to be found anywhere in the state. 41% of the residents of Coachella Valley are below the poverty level. 41%. Nearly double the statewide poverty rate of 22%. And another thing about these impoverished residents... they are overwhelming Latino.

So if you're watching the concerts this coming weekend, know that in your mind, you are attending Oldchella. And know that in the minds of those watching you, you are attending Old Rich Whitechella. And make no mistake – there's nothing productive in feeling badly about it, but there's also no point in pretending it's not true, or that it's not being noticed.

What do we think the audience of the audience will be thinking? Will they be looking on ambitiously, dreaming of being wealthy enough to attend concerts like that themselves, pondering the education they should pursue or the hours they should work to make it happen? Or will they be looking on in futility and likely even in anger, feeling like they're part of a giant system that has no real promise for them?

We, who live on the more fortunate side of that divide, often assert that they ought to be looking on ambitiously – that we or our parents or grandparents once looked on ambitiously at a better life, and then we or they did whatever was necessary to claim it, often at great personal hardship. That's all true. But we don't get to decide what the audience of the audience sees when they look at us. They get to make that decision. And if there's one thing this year's tempestuous election cycle has proven, it's that those on the outside looking in at a better life in America these days are not looking ambitiously at you and me and what we have. They're looking angrily and resentfully. Fair or unfair, that's what the audience of the audience sees.

The word we're hearing again and again to describe their feelings is "rigged." They feel that the game is rigged against them, so there's little reason even to try. And that sentiment is not just coming from one side of the political spectrum. In this election, we've heard "rigged" just as passionately from idealistic white college kids who will graduate with massive debt as we've heard it from unemployed white steel workers in the Rust Belt... from people of color objecting to how they are policed, to followers of Islam who are feeling hated without even being known. "Rigged," they say. "The system is built to disadvantage us, and we are powerless to fix it."

This is what the audience of the audience will see this coming weekend... see and seethe. But to be clear – the attendees of Old Rich Whitechella are hardly the only targets of that rage. We are all the targets, so often without even noticing it. This election has made it inescapably obvious. Others look at us and feel angry. They feel angry when they see us carrying our picnic baskets into the Hollywood Bowl... when they see us in our excellent seats at the stadium... when we pull up at the light in our pristine high performance vehicles... when we are enjoying our preferential treatment on the airplane. They feel angry, as they watch us, the captains of this free market, continuing to build an economy predicated on maximizing the profit created by the smallest number of people who are willing to pay the most. That's just good free market business. But let's not pretend there aren't other costs attached to those higher prices we are happily paying. The gates behind which we may place our homes might protect us from intruders, but they cannot protect us from the smoldering resentment that is mounting outside. There is an audience, and they're watching.

Now, if you're stuck on whether that resentment is fair or not, on whether the claim of "rigged" is fair or not, let's look at a few statistical truths. Those crying "rigged" claim that the rules just keep making it harder for someone not already living the American dream to live it. Are they right? Is it actually harder now, more hopeless now, than it was when we were the ones trying to break through?

A few numbers:

The slice of the national income pie going to the wealthiest 1% of Americans has doubled since 1979.

Since 1990, CEO compensation has increased by 300%. Corporate profits have doubled. The average worker's salary has increased 4%.

CEOs in 1965 earned about 24 times the amount of the average worker. In 1980 it was 42 times as much. Today, CEOs earn 325 times the average worker.

How about the Obama recovery? Has that made things better? From 2009 through 2012, inflation-adjusted income for the wealthiest 1% rose 31%. For everyone else – 0.4%.

Perhaps this says it most plainly: the top 1% earns 20% of the nation's income and owns 40% of the nation's wealth – the greatest divide we've seen since the 1920s. The 1920s. Our wealth disparity in America has returned to early 1900s levels. So perhaps the most helpful visual is the Titanic – with all of us, enjoying the splendor of E Deck, while the masses are corralled below us in steerage. They're largely content with their lot, enjoying their own parties and pleasures while the ship is afloat. But when crisis hits – say, a major recession or a war – they discover that the lifeboats they see aren't for them. They peer through locked metal gates that bar their way to safety. And they glare with rage at those they see on the other side. They glare with rage at us.

And let's be clear – a lot of us know how they're feeling, because a lot of us aren't in the top 1%. And there are plenty of worshipers in this room – plenty – who have seen their own financial fortunes take a marked turn for the worse, who can't find their niche anymore, who are afraid they'll never be what they once were, who fear they'll never be able to retire or last in retirement on what they've saved. I'm your rabbi, which means you tell me your stories – and it is important for this congregation to know how many frightened people are sitting

among us... people who are themselves feeling like the game is now rigged against them. And frankly, they have a point.

But at the risk of making an uncomfortable conversation even more uncomfortable, I feel compelled to point out that, still, even with all of this, and without getting into the numbers, the overwhelming majority of us are at least in the top 5% when it comes to our earnings or our accumulated wealth... and practically none of us is below the top 10%. We much prefer to think of other people as the rich ones – and there is always someone richer than you are. But if we look at the stark reality in this city, in this country, and certainly all over the world, the truth is that we are sailing together on E Deck, and even if we don't have what the people down below think we have, they're looking through the gates at us, and they're mad.

This is the 2016 election, across the political spectrum, particularly on its two poles. What does our religious tradition, which has nothing against our wealth, have to say about it?

The great modern Orthodox rabbi, Haskel Lookstein, gave a sermon when he was just 34 years old that is still much fabled. It was 1966, so it's likely race was most on his mind when he wrote these words, but I would suggest they might speak to us today even more broadly than that. He wrote: "It is the Talmud that says that no man is free if he must live in a segregated community, whether that segregation is the creation of law or the result of informal social consensus... It is the Talmud that states that no man is free unless he has economic opportunity, a chance for employment, the social possibility to work in any geographical and economic area in accordance with his God-given and acquired talents." In short, Rabbi Lookstein was saying: "Judaism is fine with wealth, even extreme wealth. It is not fine with 'rigged.'"

And did we really even need him to tell us that? We are here today, honoring the Jewish calendar's call of the new year – to look at the truth in ourselves, to stop hiding from it or denying it or blaming it on someone else. These Ten Days of Teshuvah – from tonight until we break the Yom Kippur fast – are for precisely this purpose. To ask ourselves the really hard questions that we actually know the answers to, but that we spend the whole year not saying out loud.

Tonight, it's time for us to say it out loud. We are, all of us, a part of creating and perpetuating a system that is, in fact, rigged in our favor. That's true whether you're a progressive or a conservative, whether you're a Democrat or a Republican. And a lot of us have done it without any intention of doing it. You see, the sociologists tell us that we humans are hardwired toward precisely the type of self-segregation that the Talmud and Rabbi Lookstein were forbidding. We seek to live with people who look and think and believe most like us, because that makes us most comfortable. And then, of course, it becomes much harder for us to understand what those "not as much like us" are feeling or experiencing. The fears we understand are the ones lived by us and expressed also by the people we know. This explains why one community can see an economic recovery, while another can't. It explains why one community can see racial and religious diversity as an American virtue, while another sees that same diversity as our nation's doom. It also explains why Donald Trump can be seen as an anti-establishment messiah by some, and the greatest ever threat to American democracy by others. It all depends upon which wind tunnel you're speaking and listening into.

This is how things get rigged. We lose our capacity to feel into those not like us, because we have no real access to them or their realities. We don't even really go looking for that access. And so even if you're writing checks to stop the rigging, and you're voting to stop the rigging, and you're emailing everyone you know about how rigged things are, it's not close to enough – because the fact remains that your efforts are going entirely unnoticed by the audience of the audience in Coachella Valley. They have no idea which of us made donations for their benefit and which of us didn't. We all look the same to them, because they have no real experience of us, either. And they're angry, because to them, we are the embodiment of everything that has caused them to give up.

How can we even hope to fix something like that? Well, it's not going to be easy. The institutionalized advantages we enjoy by virtue of the places where we live, the people who we know, the color of our skin – these things have been built into America for centuries. So there are no simple solutions. But I can tell you how we start. We start by chipping away at our segregation by “informal social consensus.” We step off of E Deck, and we demonstrate a sincere interest in encountering those on the other side of the metal gate – in convincing them that they shouldn't give up, because we want them to count.

The most basic way to say that you truly don't want the system to be rigged is to encourage another person to vote. Getting another person to vote is getting that person to say they matter and that it's not hopeless. It's nowhere near a solution all by itself, but in this era of national rage that we so desperately want to temper, it's the best place our democracy gives us to start. And so our temple is going to spend these weeks between now and November 8th going face to face asking people to vote. And since we're face to face right now, I'm going to start with you – because you might find this shocking at a socially conscious congregation like ours... I sure did... but do you know what percentage of eligible Leo Baeckers voted in the 2012 election? We actually had a local justice organization calculate that for us – and the number was 74.3%. Much higher than the national average, but much lower than I would have guessed. The last time we elected a president, one out of every four of you didn't vote. So I want to start right there. With the future of our country and even the world so clearly at stake, it's not a time to say you don't count. You have to count.

And if you're thinking that your vote isn't all that important in the national scheme of things, perhaps it will be helpful to focus on the local and statewide level, because as you likely already know, the November election is absolutely loaded with ballot initiatives. Everything from school bonds to health care to the abolition of the death penalty. Here at LBT, we are focusing on two ballot measures in particular – one local and one state – because we can be very proud that our congregation had an awful lot to do with them getting onto the ballot in the first place.

Do you remember four Rosh Hashanahs ago, when I told you that we were going to build a train through the Sepulveda Pass? I remember it, because you looked back at me as if I was categorically insane. But our community organizing team never surrendered their vision for rail transit connecting the Valley to LAX, enabling our part of Los Angeles to intersect with the rest of Los Angeles face to face, instead of bumper to bumper.

We got used to being told it was impossible. Well, now it's not. Measure M is on the ballot, and it includes the Sepulveda Pass project because this temple assembled a citywide coalition of faith communities, business, labor

and environmental leaders, and government officials, all the way up to Mayor Garcetti, who has identified Measure M as his top priority for this election.

We want trains for all sorts of Jewish reasons. Trains preserve our planet, as we've been commanded to do ever since Adam and Eve. And building trains means thousands of green jobs that can create dignity and self-sufficiency. But most of all, we want a train because we're on the side of Rabbi Lookstein and the Talmud – which is to say, nothing puts an end to self-segregation like trading in our cars for trains.

The great French Jewish philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, taught that “the approach to the face (of another) is the most basic mode of responsibility... the ethical rapport with the face is asymmetrical in that it subordinates my existence to the other.” This is what it is to be human – to welcome the subordination of my own existence by looking into the eye of someone else, and seeing that I am obligated. We don't get to do that all that much, because we never get to see the face of the other from the unholy cocoon of our cars, as we drive by entire worlds that are closed off from us at every freeway exit. We never see a face there, so we never experience that most basic mode of responsibility. But when we build trains to connect us to those worlds, we will look into faces and eyes that will subordinate our own existence every time the doors open. We will, at last, begin to be one Los Angeles.

So Measure M is our chance to make a four-year-old Leo Baeck Temple dream come true. But that's not our only focus among the ballot initiatives. Do you remember three Rosh Hashanahs ago, when I asked you to crash Governor Brown's phone lines in support of immigration reform? And then you did it again for affordable housing? And then again just last year to combat racial profiling? Well, it seems the Governor caught on to who was calling him all the time, because this past April, the Governor decided to call us.

As some of you know, just before Pesach, I received a phone call from Governor Brown, asking me to convene a meeting for him with local rabbis to discuss what would become Prop 57, the legislation to reform criminal sentencing and parole for those who commit non-violent crimes. He wanted our help in getting the measure onto the ballot, and many of you circulated petitions to do just that at your Passover seders.

What impressed me most in our meeting was how the Governor clearly saw this issue as a matter of religious justice... Jewish justice, in fact. Said the Governor, “There is no greater incentive than freedom.” He spoke of teshuvah, our Jewish process of self-change that is our work on these High Holydays, and insisted that Prop 57 will open the gates to that type of growth for countless young non-violent offenders currently languishing in prison without hope. He said that 80% of these prisoners are poor African-Americans and Latino-Americans, and when their initial brief sentences are trumped up through sentencing enhancements to last for decades, they have no reason even to try to transcend their errant ways. They succumb instead to a rigged game, and that's when the gangs feast upon them, and they turn to violence and narcotics. Prop 57 will move us from the futility of mass incarceration to the humanity of rehabilitation, supervision and education.

So these two measures are our temple's priorities – because we worked hard to bring them to the voters, and because they each can contribute mightily toward breaking down the anger and mistrust – of us – that is presently cursing our nation. But as I said before, the most fundamental way to begin attacking that anger and mistrust – that cynicism among those who say the system is rigged, and we're the ones rigging it – is by urging

others to vote, so they might believe again that we want them to matter. So here's something unusual – a temple that has placed a pledge card on your seat on Rosh Hashanah, and it asks for none of your money but all of your soul. Start by just committing yourself to vote. Then make your commitment to Measure M and Prop 57 – the initiatives our temple has fueled. And then join us in making the most important commitment of all – the commitment that says, “I want you to matter” – by helping us turn out voters across this city. We are going to be pairing our canvassers with canvassers from lower income neighborhoods... so that when we knock on those doors, the message will be clear: We are in this together. Black, white, Latino. Christian, Jew, Muslim. Westside, Valley, inner city. We want them to see it in your eyes: “You count.” And if you're not ready to make the trip to have them see it in your eyes, then at least let them hear it in your voice – join our phone banking effort, and tell those on the other end of the line that you want them to matter again.

In a few moments, you'll have some quiet time to fill out the card and give it to one of the members of our organizing team. It's the High Holydays – the time when we're supposed to ask more of ourselves. Ask more of yourself. Go further than you were prepared to go when you first found that card sitting on your seat. Check another box or two. Stretch yourself to push back against this climate of anger and resentment and “rigged.”

Rabbi Pinchas of Koretz taught: “Long ago, I conquered my anger and placed it in my pocket. (But) when I have need of it, I take it out.” What did he mean by that? I think he was trying to teach us that anger isn't necessarily bad. There are things that are good for us to be angry at. We call that kind of rage outrage. Rage has the power to destroy us... outrage, the power to rescue us.

These are perilous times. The very fabric of our society is in danger of being irreparably torn. There is a withering rage growing all around us... and at us. Let us quell it with outrage.