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“The Reductive Seduction”

Unetaneh tokef k’dushat hayom ki hu nora v’ayom – let us declare the sacred power of this day, for it is awesome and full of dread. For the rabbi.

Why full of dread, more this year than in other years? Because at long last, America’s rabbis have arrived at “High Holy Days Defcon-1.” It is literally impossible for whatever I may say today not to offend.

Draw upon our traditional Jewish texts to criticize this controversy-beset American government of ours, and infuriate one group of worshipers.

Draw upon the texts of our tradition to explain or defend any actions of our government – infuriate a different group of worshipers.

Refrain from comment and stick to subjects not sullied by their presence in the news – infuriate yet another group of worshipers.

What’s a rabbi to do? Maybe all of the above?

One of my most prominent rabbinic colleagues, who serves a congregation with a famously conservative bent, published an article in June, entitled, “Why I Keep Politics Off the Pulpit,” in which he stated provocatively, “Don’t tie your Torah to this week’s headlines. We are bigger, better and deeper than that.” Two months later, after Charlottesville, the same rabbi concluded his sermon: “The President of the United States needs to repent. Shabbat Shalom.”

What’s a rabbi to do? Pick a side, and you lose. Pick no side, and you lose. This is the fractured America in which rabbis are standing on pulpits this morning, in which all of us are gathering to greet the new year – the toxic America to which we will all return once we are forced to surrender the holy oasis of this day.

The business of expressing our worldviews and the policies they sanction has never been for the faint of heart. It has always been a rough-and-tumble game where well-intended argumentation often descends into hyperbole and accusation – in American life, and perhaps even more so in Jewish life. But if there is one thing I have heard consistently from you, the members of this congregation, during these past months, it's that you are weary from living in this all-out-assault era of American and Jewish life. And I am, too.

And yet most of us would be willing to admit that the vitriol is only escalating... worse than we can ever remember. Why? Well, at the risk of making this sanctuary go full-scale vitriolic, it would be pointless to pretend that we don't have a... unique President of the United States, who is at least a major part of our societal descent into discourse decay – and hear me, that's not intended as a partisan statement at all. Let's leave out what any liberals or Democrats or even independents have said about our president. We can just stick to the words of his Republican partners in the United States Senate. They have called him a "race-baiting, xenophobic religious bigot," "a delusional narcissist," "an orange-faced windbag," "a megalomaniac strongman," "a sniveling coward," and "a pathological liar" – and that's just a small sampling, from our nation's conservative standard bearers. And let me say this... these words, while probably a pleasurable balm to liberal spirits everywhere, are fabulously unhelpful. Last I checked, name-calling is something we teach our preschoolers not to do – because beyond being just mean, being called a name doesn't bring out the best in anybody. Calling names irrefutably makes things worse. That's why we teach little children not to do it.

Of course, we who are parents already know that little children grow up to lash us with our petty hypocrisies. And if our children have been watching with even casual attention, they know that in Donald Trump, we got exactly the president we were bargaining for. While liberals will tell you they would have preferred Bernie Sanders, Joe Biden or Hillary Clinton, and every conservative I know would have preferred John Kasich or practically any other Republican candidate, it's no coincidence that we ended up with Donald Trump, the candidate most gifted at calling names – at inciting our worst human tendencies and reflecting them back to us. In a campaign of "deplorables" and "lock her up" – where every candidate got a funny nickname, where those with disabilities were mocked, where women were told it was just "locker room talk" – can it be a surprise that the most reviled major-party candidate in US history defeated the second most reviled major-party candidate?

"But my candidate *shouldn't* have been so reviled," you're thinking. "Only theirs should have been." The trouble is: fair or unfair, both sides are thinking that. And then there are the record numbers of Americans who felt that both candidates should be reviled. That's a lot of reviling going on inside us. And so unsurprisingly, we have a president who traffics with hate groups... and is himself hated. As are his supporters. As are his opponents. The race to foment hatred and turn it into victory is on.

If you think you're not a part of that equation – that you lament all this nastiness and simply seek to stop it – ask yourself what you think of your political opponents. For you progressives, what do you honestly think of your family members or friends or coworkers who stand with President Trump? Are you even speaking to them? And for you conservatives, what do you really think of those regularly lampooned on the right as

“social justice warriors”... who are used to being called traitors and worse by fellow Americans, and kapos and anti-Semites by fellow Jews?

How did we fall this far? Well, one thing is clear – one would have to be pretty certain that one is right about something in order to justify wholly dismissing or even reviling another person because they don’t agree with you about it. And as it turns out, it seems that the more complex and inaccessible our world’s problems become, paradoxically, the easier we seem to believe it is to solve them – the more certain we are that we know the solutions.

This human tendency was described brilliantly by the renowned social critic, Courtney Martin, in a much-discussed piece she published last year entitled, “The Reductive Seduction of Other People’s Problems.” Martin’s premise emerged from the massive proliferation of young social entrepreneurs raising many millions of dollars to fund enchantingly simple solutions for some of the world’s biggest problems, especially in the most remote corners of the planet. Hunger. Unsafe drinking water. Illiteracy. The bigger and further away the problem is from our own personal lives, the more obvious that just a little of our common sense would solve it.

And so you end up with inventions like the SOCKET – a soccer ball designed to generate reusable energy every time you kick it. Sounds great and really fun, right? This irresistible idea for rescuing power-starved communities in the developing world generated nearly \$100,000 in donations during its short Kickstarter campaign in 2011. Three years later, with the ball a total flop, the company wrote to its funders: “In summary, we totally f*#ked up this Kickstarter campaign.”

This was only one of many cases that Martin cited in her article. \$16.4 million for a merry-go-round water pump by which kids at play would produce safe water, but which turned into a mirage instead. TOMS donating American-made shoes to poor people in the Global South – and putting local shoe factory workers out of their jobs. Martin explained: “The ‘reductive seduction’ is not malicious. But... it’s dangerous for the people whose problems you’ve mistakenly diagnosed as readily solvable. There is real fallout when well-intentioned people attempt to solve problems without acknowledging the underlying complexity.”

This hubris, of course, is not only true of humans who work as social entrepreneurs in Africa. It’s true of us humans, too. Which means that when we look at a huge, faraway problem, like what’s going on in Syria, we are much more inclined to take refuge in grand statements about what must be done – statements that comport with already established beliefs we hold about things we think we do know about. The new case simply reinforces how right we are about all the old ones. The U.S. must intercede. The U.S. must not intercede. The refugees are innocent victims who must be taken in. The refugees include dangerous people who must not be taken in. Being so far away and knowing so little ironically tends to increase our confidence that we know the answers, even though it obviously shouldn’t.

Move a little closer than the developing world, but still pretty far away, and you have the American Jewish response to Israel. This past summer marked the fiftieth anniversary of Israel’s landmark victory in the Six Day

War – fifty years of Israel controlling all of Jerusalem and the West Bank. This means that American Jews across the political spectrum, most of whom have spent less than a single month in Israel, issued forth with their declarations. Fifty years is enough... it's time to finalize Jewish sovereignty over our historic land. Or fifty years is enough... it's time to end the occupation now. Whatever you already believed about Israel's presence in the lands captured in 1967, this summer was the time for repeating it loudly.

The truth, however, is a little more nuanced than that. Many of you know that I was in Israel twice this past summer – once to lead our temple's study trip, and once to participate on a rabbinic mission. It was this second trip that did more to puncture my own reductive seduction than any time I'd ever spent in Israel before. For those of you who may still cling to the idea that Oslo launched a peace process that we are still working to conclude, I feel compelled to disabuse you of that notion. From America, you may see a languishing peace process. From both Ramallah and Jerusalem, that's simply not the case.

We sat in the Palestinian Authority offices with Saeb Erakat, Chief Negotiator for the Palestinians, and I asked him how a two-state peace deal would be implemented without a unified Palestinian leadership to enact it. He openly admitted to me that if ever a two-state agreement were finalized between Israel and Palestine, Hamas would sell it out the very next day. We then met with progressive after progressive in Israel who said the same thing. They all want out of the occupation. They all know it threatens Israel's moral and physical survival. But polls demonstrate that 70% of Israelis believe that Saeb Erakat is right... that if a two-state solution were finalized now, Hamas would be attacking from East Jerusalem. So when we say "peace now" to Israelis, even progressive ones, they see a deal bringing less peace and more death.

The big new bestseller in Israel this summer was written by my teacher, Dr. Micah Goodman. It's entitled *Catch '67*. His premise? What can Israel do, given that it can't afford to stay in the West Bank... and it can't afford to leave the West Bank? He prescribes five tangible steps that most Israelis support to minimize the occupation – to make it less awful for the Palestinians – which might demonstrate some measure of good faith to rekindle interest in making peace someday.

Not very cheery, I know – but that's where things actually are in Israel. So when American Jews roar that there is no occupation... the Jews have just come home – or when American Jews demand that the occupation must end immediately – all we do is instigate hostility between each other, while Israelis know full well that both arguments are bogus.

Now pull the camera lens in still a little closer, so that you're looking just at America, and I want to propose something that may be a little radical and will almost certainly aggravate some of you, though that is surely not my wish. I want to propose that the giant issues over which we are fighting to the partisan death in America are actually pretty far away from us, too, at least in terms of our daily lived reality... far enough away to be subject to the reductive seduction of other people's problems. That is to say, we are probably overconfident in our capacity to solve them... probably uncomfortable acknowledging the massive time and patience and mind-changing and heart-changing that will be necessary to solve them for real, not just to gain a political win that

inevitably ignites the looming backlash. And in this time of tremendous anxiety in our country and our world, I find myself wondering if I – and you – while fighting for political victory, are spending enough time asking ourselves whether our rigid allegiance to whatever formula we've always chosen for social change ever betrays us... whether it leads us sometimes to be short-sighted, less effective, closed-minded or hearted, or even just wrong?

I mean, let's face it. We are well-read, well-educated and well-intentioned. But for most of us... not all, but most... the realities that are troubling so many, be they undocumented immigrants in the Central Valley of California or former union machinists in Middle America, are just not a close part of our lives. Most of us don't have much direct experience with the psychic costs attached to being both at home and a vulnerable stranger in our own land... to closing factories or vanishing manufacturing jobs. Most of us are inventing the new economy, not being left out of it. And for most of us, the ethnic diversity in our lives is something that we choose for ourselves, precisely where and when we want it, not something that is foisted upon us in ways and places we did not choose.

Let me be clear – none of that makes Charlottesville acceptable. But perhaps it might change our strategy for dealing with Charlottesville... and with each other.

I serve on the board of a human rights organization called T'ruah, named for the sounding of the *shofar*, our call to collective Jewish action which we will hear today. One of my fellow T'ruah board members, Rabbi Mordechai Liebling, was one of fifty brave clergy people who chose to stand moral witness, sandwiched between the hundreds of angry white supremacists and Antifa demonstrators in Charlottesville. This took a lot of guts for anyone to do, but for Mordechai, even more so, as the son of Holocaust survivors and the grandson of Holocaust victims. He saw the boiling hatred in Charlottesville with his own eyes. And when he got home, he wrote the following: "I think it is no accident that our nation is so polarized at the time that we have the largest wealth and income gap since the Civil War. Over half of our population has seen no improvement in their real wages in decades while the top 1% has grown fabulously wealthy. People are feeling angry and hopeless... We are faced with a difficult challenge: we cannot tolerate white supremacy and we must listen to the fear and pain that many of its supporters carry... It is the work of those white people who are able to hear their pain, attempt to reach over barriers and advocate for policies that will benefit them as well. Dehumanizing and dismissing them leads to more hatred."

I felt my breath pause as I read these words. Because I knew. I hadn't been there, but I had dehumanized and dismissed them. I had no aspiration to listen to *their* fear and pain. I hated them, as they hated me. My goal was simply to roll over them, to vanquish them. As I thought about it, I realized there could be no more un-Jewish wish than my own.

The longtime Chief Rabbi in England, Jonathan Sacks, notes that there are 613 commandments in the Torah, but curiously no biblical Hebrew word that means "obey." Only the word *Sh'ma*. Yes, that *Sh'ma*. Its meaning is broad and difficult to capture: "...listen, hear, attend, understand, internalize, respond.' So distinctive is this

word that, in effect, the King James Bible had to invent an English equivalent, the word, 'Hearken.'" When Judaism commands us to act, we are called not to do, but to hearken.

Most of us are pretty good at hearkening when we learn of another's bereavement... or we see the victims of a hurricane... or we see a child in pain. Our hearts open, and we don't even think about the sufferer's worldview. In Israel this summer, I visited a hospital wing filled with Syrian fighters having their lives and limbs saved by Jewish caregivers, none of whom pause to consider what these guys were taught to think of Israelis since they were born. A lot of us are even good at hearkening to those facing systemic disadvantage because of their race or status or gender or lot in life. But when it comes to those who disagree with us – who possess some differences in vision for our society, perhaps informed by a different upbringing or different life circumstances – most of us are less than disinterested in hearkening. We want only to dominate and defeat. So is it any wonder that our ideological opponents want only to dominate and defeat us?

If we want to reverse the partisan zero-sum game in this country that we all say we loathe, somebody's going to have to extend that first hand in curiosity. Rabbi Liebling sets the bar pretty high. He managed to hearken to white supremacists in Charlottesville. If that's just too much for you to achieve right now, how about we start by just attempting to hearken to those who voted differently than we did, perhaps because they feel unheard to? For the sake of diminishing the spiral of hatred all around us, might we revile them a little less?

Shortly after inauguration day, I began reaching out to some of our congregants who I knew to be political conservatives. I said, "I have to imagine it's a hard time to be a conservative at LBT. I'm your rabbi, so I want you to know I'm thinking of you. Please let me know if you'd like to talk." A number of you took me up on my invitation, and I've learned a great deal from our conversations, which are still ongoing. For one, I heard your painful personal stories – marriages in tension over politics, adult children telling you that you should be ashamed of yourselves. Some might say, "Well, they *should* be ashamed of themselves." Others might say, "Boy, it has to hurt deeply to be so castigated by one's own child." Still others might say, "I wish those adult children had come up with a way to open conversation instead of end it." I also learned that in our fully separated wind tunnels of information, our country's two political universes know practically nothing about each other anymore. Each possesses a cartoon of the other – a straw man that is easy to mock and dehumanize. But when we started talking about the big issues – race, immigration, anti-Semitism, economic injustice – the distinctions seemed to be less about holding different values, and more about how each group prioritizes the competing values at play on any given issue. And when I thought about that, I realized that navigating the tension between essential values that compete with one another is as old as Jewish law itself.

Midat hadin, the attribute of judgment, and *midat harachamim*, the attribute of compassion, are famously in tension with one another throughout 2000 years of rabbinic literature. We all want perfect judgment and perfect compassion – but we can't have them, because increasing one often forces us to diminish the other. And so our sages ride the crest of that tension, attempting to calibrate the harshness of judgment and the softness of compassion in proper balance. In the Talmud, Rav Judah describes God's daily schedule as he

imagines it. During the first three hours, God is studying Torah – apparently, even God needs to hit the books. During the second three hours, Rav Judah imagines God sitting in judgment over the whole world. But when doing so reveals that the world is so filled with guilt as to merit its destruction, God gets up from the throne of judgment and moves to the throne of compassion. And so God’s dance goes, day after day. So our dance goes, day after day – each of us struggling to determine what coaxes us to move from the throne of judgment to the throne of compassion.

That doesn’t sound so worthy of revilement. It sounds like God’s own struggle – perhaps a struggle we can even help each other navigate to a shared destination.

A pipe dream? Maybe. But these holy days are supposed to be for bolder, grander, more loving visions of ourselves, both as individuals and as a collective, and I know it can’t happen if we don’t try to rehumanize each other. I also know what happens when we don’t try.

Perhaps it was best described by a man widely considered one of the finest minds of the 20th century, the Jerusalem Prize-winning social philosopher, Isaiah Berlin. Born in 1909, Berlin saw the whole bloody century, and it led him to deliver his “Message to the 21st Century” in 1994, just three years before his death. That message? It sounds like it comes straight out of the Talmud: “The central values by which most (humans) have lived... are not always harmonious with each other. Some are, some are not... complete liberty is not compatible with complete equality... Justice... is not fully compatible with mercy... If these ultimate human values... are to be pursued, then compromise, trade-offs, arrangements have to be made if the worst is not to happen. So much liberty for so much equality, so much individual self-expression for so much security, so much justice for so much compassion.”

Rav Judah couldn’t have said it any better himself. But Berlin added a word of caution for those of us who rightly fight tooth and nail for values we hold dear but also venture into the treacherous terrain of villainizing those who disagree with us: “If you are truly convinced,” he writes, “that... one can conceive an ideal society which (humans) can reach if only they do what is necessary to attain it, then you and your followers must believe that no price can be too high to pay in order to open the gates of such a paradise. Only the stupid and malevolent will resist... If they cannot be persuaded, laws must be passed to restrain them. If that does not work, then coercion, if need be violence.”

The reductive seduction of believing too fully in one’s own world view. The seduction to overwhelm and dominate, and not to hearken.

The year 5778 arrives beneath a cloud of fear and uncertainty. There’s North Korea. The Middle East. DACA. Health Care. Racial subjugation. Our radically unpredictable President, and the raging hatred that swirls around him. The ominous march of our planet’s changing climate. Of course, we’re unsettled. So of course, we’re tempted to fight for our ideals with a desperation that permits a little dismissing of those we know to be wrong.

The problem is: History screams to us that that doesn't work. Vanquish your political rival at your own peril, history teaches, with blood dripping – because his rage at you will multiply, and given the chance to retaliate, he will stop at nothing to vanquish you and your vision.

The giants of social change – the heroes like Martin Luther King, Jr. – they understood this. They understood that the long, slow slog to transformation is a relentless walk, a crawl sometimes, toward changing minds and hearts. Win a little, build a lot. Do we have the patience, the discipline, for such a harrowing walk at such a frightening time?

Friends, there is no other choice. Isaiah Berlin acknowledges: "I know only too well that this is not a flag under which idealistic... men and women may wish to march – it seems too tame, too reasonable, too bourgeois, it does not engage the generous emotions. But you must believe me," Berlin concluded, with his eye squarely trained on a tragic century at its end, "one cannot have everything one wants – not only in practice, but even in theory."

The new year has dawned. We have fights that demand fighting – and fight them, we will. But the biggest fight of all may be to preserve what remains of the hope for the human family. Hearken. Humanity needs you.

(I want to express my deep gratitude to Rabbi Mordechai Liebling, Dr. Yehuda Kurtzer, Dr. Micah Goodman and my partners on the board of T'ruah for their teachings and inspiration.)