

**Rosh Hashanah 5780/2019**  
**“To speak or not to speak...that is the question”**  
**Rabbi Alan B. Lucas**

“A young rabbi prepares to speak on the High Holy Days before his new congregation. Trying to be helpful, the officers of his new shul meet with him and say: “Look rabbi, we want you to be successful here and we want people to like you -- so there are some things we don’t think you should speak about from the pulpit. For example, we have Republicans and Democrats, who are in the congregation, so whatever you do, don’t talk about politics. We have conservatives and liberals -- so please try and avoid some of the hot button issues like the climate crisis and abortion. And rabbi - our congregation is made up of people who are more observant and less observant - don’t push kashrut too much because, well, because not everyone keeps kosher and don’t talk too much about shabbat because not everyone has the luxury of observing shabbat and please don’t talk about Israel -- you know how controversial *that* has become... and on and on it went. Finally the exasperated young rabbi protests -- “I can’t talk about Shabbes, I can’t talk about kashrut or Israel, I can’t talk about any of the moral issues that challenge us -- what do you want me to talk about? “Why Rabbi,” says the president, “talk about Judaism!”

To speak, or not to speak, that is the question:  
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles  
And by opposing end them.

Hamlet wrestled with the fundamental question of life or death, and while my dilemma is a bit more modest -- I join rabbis across this great nation who ascend their pulpits this Rosh Hashana confronted with the challenge: to speak or not to speak about some of the most pressing issues of our day.

Many of you have weighed in on this question in the last few days and weeks. Some of you have made a point of encouraging me to speak about these issues; others have expressed concern that I might do so. Those of you who think you know where I stand and believe my views are similar to yours - you tend to be the ones encouraging me while those of you who think we disagree are hoping I won’t. “Rabbi, I don’t come to shul to hear politics - in fact, shul is the place I come to get away from politics - and now you want to aggravate me here as well?”

Isn’t it interesting that the only people who don’t want me to talk about these things are the people who think I disagree with them. We no longer come to shul to be challenged - we come to have our existing beliefs acknowledged, augmented and amplified. We listen to news channels that agree with us, we read newspapers that are consistent with our views and we expect our shul to be the same kind of echo chamber to what we have already come to believe is right.

But that is not my job. My job is not to echo and reinforce what you hear on Fox News or MSNBC; the New York Times or the Wall Street Journal - my job is to be your rabbi. My job is to challenge you when you are too complacent and to comfort you when you are in need of healing -- how does that old saying go? The rabbi’s job is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. Yes, but never to aggravate.

But alas, we live at a moment when we are all so easily aggravated. That young rabbi who was told by his leaders to not say anything that might be perceived as offensive? My advice would have been very different. For I would have told him that no matter how carefully he tries to choose his or her words; no matter how great the effort *not* to offend, it seems we have entered a moment when your ability to be offended has far surpassed my ability not to offend no matter how hard I try. How am I supposed to avoid politics when everything has been politicized?

It wasn't always this way. A colleague, Rabbi Eric Woodward, pointed out that the founding fathers did indeed have a strong notion of limited government and they expected that churches and other institutions would provide the moral and civic guidance as a supplement to limited government. "It's not that rabbis are encroaching on the territory of politics" he said, "It's that politicians are increasingly talking about religion!" When they talk about sexuality, and attitudes toward the stranger, morality, peace, and the sanctity of life, that's my job, not theirs! Rather than telling rabbis to stay out of politics you should be telling politicians to stay out of religious issues. Let them do their job, but let me do mine.

Immigration is too political for me to talk about?

I get it that the particulars of immigration policy -- how open and how selective we should be in deciding who is welcome to this country is appropriately a matter of political debate. Yes, there are threats; I certainly understand that as much as anyone. I know there are those who hate us and wish us harm - as Americans and as Jews - and I do not want them using overly lax immigration laws to come here with the sole intent to undermine us. But, when we go from a fear that the wrong people are entering this country to a policy that no one should enter this country -- or only those like me should enter; when we jump from being against radical Islam to all Muslims - well then I as a rabbi, have to protest. This great country has and should always be a beacon of safety. "Give me your tired, your poor; your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore."

This is not politics! This is America 101, this is Judaism 101. The Torah's exhortations on the treatment of the stranger living in our midst and the foreigner who has found their way to our community is mentioned no fewer than 36 times in the Bible! And the Torah usually couples this plea with a companion verse: "Heed the stranger's treatment because 'you know the feelings of being a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (Ex. 23:9)

Yes, we Jews know the feeling of being strangers in a strange land. And if Egypt of 3200 years ago is a bit hard on your memory - allow me to make it easier. Everyone sitting in this room is an immigrant or the child of an immigrant. And if you are not a child of one, you are probably a grandchild one or a great-grandchild. Unless you are a Native American, you are an immigrant to this great country. And not only are we the children of immigrants -- I have a secret - they (whoever they were, the American's who were already living here who themselves were children of immigrants) they didn't want us here either. Five or six of the 120 people who sailed with Christopher Columbus were Morranos, Jews. They weren't welcome here then and they didn't want us in 1654 when 23 Jews came from Amsterdam, they didn't want us when we fled Russia in 1881, Poland in 1945, they didn't want us in the 1970s when we came from the former Soviet Union and in 1979 when we came from Iran.

But these immigrants are different you say. These are not like us - they are dangerous, or illiterate, they don't speak English, they don't have the same values we do - they will destroy our country.

That is exactly what they said about us when we were "the wretched refuse of your teeming shore." So let the politicians debate the contours of a just immigration policy, but for me, America was and must continue to be a beacon of safety in a dangerous world a home for the huddled masses yearning to breathe free. For me, your rabbi, this is not a political statement, it is a Jewish imperative.

And when did gun safety become a political issue rather than a moral one? The outrage we feel over the senseless slaughter of Americans, the fact that our schools and synagogues have been turned into fortresses hardened against attack, that our children have to learn terms like, "shelter in place" - to seek to ban assault rifles, weapons of war from our streets, to plead for background checks to keep guns out of the hands of those who are unstable - this is not political - it comes from the depths of my Jewish soul.

Abortion should not be a political issue - it is a religious and moral issue - one that should be dealt with in the privacy of compassionate conversations between a woman, her partner, her doctor and her clergy - not on the floor of a political convention. I have read that the rate of abortions has reached its lowest level since it was legalized in this country 46 years ago. As a rabbi, I have to tell you -- I think fewer abortions is a good thing. To me life is sacred, and even if we Jews do not view the fetus as a life - it is certainly a potential life. I am pro-life. But I am also pro-choice as I believe that the choice should be up to the mother and not the result of government policies or the lack of availability of health care options.

Issues of gender identification and sexual preference should not be politicized. We are students of a tradition that insists that every human is born in the image of God. "Why," asks the Talmud -- "was man created singularly?" Everything else in the creation story was created fully populated - not one blade of grass but grass, not one bird but birds -- only man was created alone. "This," says the rabbis, "is to teach of us that all of us - each and every one of us Gay and Straight, Black, White and Brown, Christian, Muslim, and Jew, believers and non-believers, we are all descendants of the same Adam - your blood is no redder than mine and mine is no redder than yours - we are all, all God's children. This is not politics, these are religious matters that should be explored and discussed here, in these walls and in these halls, certainly more appropriately than in the halls of congress.

Rabbis are afraid to talk about Israel. Israel?! It has become too divisive; a political hot potato in many congregations. No matter what the rabbi says, it will be parsed by members and interpreted as for or against their own political ideologies. It is almost impossible to bring a speaker to the shul on Israel as every speaker has been assigned a political valence - too conservative, too liberal - -and God help the rabbi who wants to offer his pulpit to someone from "the other team!"

I love Israel. It drives me crazy - but I love it - unconditionally

For a Jew, love of Israel has always and should always transcend politics. I have friends on the left who love it no less than I. I have friends to the right who love it no less than I - politics are irrelevant to the love of Israel. How dare anyone question my love and my loyalty to Israel based on political affiliation. And shame on you if you have allowed your love for Israel to diminish one iota due to your or their politics.

Time for a little torah. The torah reading for Rosh Hashanah is one of the most challenging sections in the entire Bible. Genesis chapters 21 and 22 focus on the first Jew, Abraham and some difficult moments in his life - arguably the most difficult challenge he faced - not to mention the challenge it confronted his son Isaac with. If you want to talk about things rabbis avoid talking about on the High Holy Days - it is frequently the torah reading. It is incredibly rich and enormously meaningful but it is so complicated and requires so much grounding in Biblical understanding - that it is a challenge to deal with it without speaking in terms that are overly simplistic and that do justice to the depth of ideas it contains. So since I am making it a point today of talking about things I "shouldn't talk about," let's talk about this.

Abraham waited his entire life to have a child. Abraham, the man of faith who was promised by God that he would be the father of a great nation, "as numerous as the grains of sand on the shore of the sea.." is approaching the end of his life and does not even have a child, let alone a nation. And then, miracle of miracles, a child is born. And just when things are looking up, Abraham receives a command from an angel of God, to take his son, his only child, and offer him as a sacrifice to the Lord. It certainly makes a thinking Jew wonder about the nature of a God who would make such a demand...and the nature of the man who would consider it. But as I said, the complexity of this remarkable torah reading defies easy explanation. So instead of trying to make sense of the whole section - I would just like to direct your attention to three words in it. These three words come at one of the most incredible moments in the torah. Abraham has been given this terrible, awful command - to sacrifice his son on a mountain of God's choice. Abraham saddles his donkey, takes his son and some servants to assist and heads off to the place that God will show him and then the three words: *va'yelchu sh'nayhem yahdav* - the two of them went off together - father and son, went off together. And should the incredible nature of the moment be lost on us - Rashi, the great medieval interpreter of the torah underlines the moment with a simple but profound commentary: "The two of them walked off together - father to slaughter, son to be slaughtered."

The silence of the Bible is deafening. What they were thinking - father and son - executioner and victim - as they walked off together. The bible does not tell us. But it does tell us: *yelchu sh'nayhem yahdav* - that they walked off together.

The entirety of Jewish history -- all 4000 years can be understood as an unending series of ups and downs, peaks and valleys - that are marked by how well or how poorly we as a people have embraced and implemented these three words - *va'yelchu sh'nayhem yahdav* - they went, together. Our entire history as a people is marked by alternating periods of togetherness - *achdut* - or antagonism disagreement and discord. And it is not only Jewish history but the history of all great nations is similarly marked by periods of inclusivity and exclusivity. Our greatest accomplishments as Americans - have been achieved when we have worked together, as one - joined by a common vision that what unites us is so much greater than what divides us.

Jewish history is filled with examples of my thesis - I will share just one. In the year 70 Jerusalem was besieged by the Romans. Roman forces surrounded the city and inside the gates, we Jews fought with each other. We were divided into factions, at war with each other as much as with the Romans. Many of us remember the story from our childhood of how Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai was forced to escape Jerusalem, hidden in a coffin to meet with Vespasian. The Zealots believed we Jews should fight and die to the last man and manned the gates of the city to prevent anyone to try and do otherwise. The more moderate leaders felt that to fight against the Romans, to fight to the last man would be just that - the end of Judaism and the Jewish people. But there was no talking to these

Zealots, no reasoning with them, so the great rabbi had to feign illness and fake his death so his students could take him out in a coffin to be buried outside the city. Once outside he could escape the zealotry of those Jews who opposed him and meet with the Roman General and negotiate an accommodation that would ensure the Jewish story continued. What was the greater threat - the Romans or our own dissension - both threatened to destroy us. Incredibly we know what Vespasian was thinking. His thoughts and actual words were preserved by the Roman court historian Josephus Flavius. In the writings of Josephus, he records that Vespasian chose to hold off his attack on rebels in Jerusalem because he knew that Jewish infighting would do most of the work for him. Here are Vespasian's actual words recorded by Josephus: "The Jews are vexed to pieces every day by their civil wars and dissensions, and are under greater miseries than any that could be inflicted on them by us. Let the Jews destroy each other and we ought by no means to meddle with these men now, they are afflicted with distemper at home." (Avital Chizhik-Goldschmidt NY Times White Supremacists Stole my rabbi husband's identity)

Great societies and cultures are never conquered from without until and unless they are weakened from within. Vespasian rejoiced over the discord within the Jerusalem, our eagerness to destroy each other - and so do our enemies today.

Our enemies rejoice as we fight over which American political party is best for Israel. Our enemies rejoice as we fight over who is welcome to pray at the kotel. The enemies of America also rejoice as we create divisions in our own country over gun safety and immigration. Republicans and Democrats are no longer parties of political affiliation but tribes that we cling to with fervor greater than our love for our own families - indeed our families are torn asunder as Thanksgiving and Yontif tables become a battleground for debate and dissension. How many of you sitting here today have during the past year: let a friendship drop, not invited a relative to your home, and avoided an invitation to their home - -because you were angered and aggravated by their politics? Oh how our enemies rejoice.

I love Shtisel. I love The Amazing Mrs. Maisel, I love "When Heroes Fly". There has been a wave of TV shows featuring and focusing on Jews but they come with some controversy because of the ways that they portray Jews to the general public - but I have to tell you, I love them. And I love them because they portray such a variety of our Jews - secular Jews, assimilated American Jews, Ultra-Orthodox Jews - and they are all my people - warts and all. I laugh at their foibles and rejoice in their successes; I mourn their losses and I embrace them in all their messy complexity because they are my family. A thanksgiving dinner with Kiva Shtisel and Midge Maisel - or Sholom Shtisel and Susie Myerson - how much fun would that be.

That Hasid who is yelling at me as I join in an egalitarian Service at the Kotel -- he is not my enemy. (Although I mourn the fact that I think he sees me as his enemy) That relative of yours who votes for the other party - he or she is not your enemy -- although I fear we have allowed ourselves to believe just that.

Oh -- it is not that we do not have enemies - we do indeed. And they are the ones who are sitting back, like Vespasian - and enjoying our "distemper" rejoicing as we destroy ourselves.

White Supremacists create fake Jewish profiles on Facebook and Twitter and post opinions with the express purpose of stoking ferocious fighting within the Jewish community by highlighting our most sensitive topics. Russia invests millions of dollars doing the same thing here in America - creating

fake internet postings that are eagerly consumed by our current atmosphere of hate and resentment. How our enemies rejoice as we fight with great vehemence over whether AIPAC or J Street best promotes our cause. We each eagerly retweet the most extreme examples of our "enemies" mendacity as proof of the righteousness of our own cause and the evilness of theirs - as our real enemies fan the flames that will consume us.

The Romans' military strategy was to encourage division within their enemy and then swoop in for the kill. It was the Jews' internal warfare, especially the starvation imposed by one group on another that weakened their resolve in the face of Vespasian's army. On August 30 of the year 70, the Romans entered a besieged Jerusalem, burning and destroying the Second Temple, and sending the Jewish people into an exile from the Holy Land that would end only 2000 years later with the founding of the modern state of Israel.

We have enemies - but they are not the ones you are spending all of your time fighting. I am not the enemy. You are not the enemy. Those who seek to exploit our disagreements and foster tension within our midst - those who wish to permanently damage the consensus of support for the State of Israel, those who wish to pit Jew against Jew- American against American -- they are the enemy.

*Va'yelchu sh'neyhem yachdav* - when we were together - we created the State of Israel after 2000 years of dreaming!

*Va'yelchu sh'neyhem yachdav* - we banded together across all political and religious differences to demand freedom for Soviet Jewry. - We, the tiny, statistically insignificant Jewish people humbled the mighty Soviet Union -and we were able to do so because we were united in our determination, undivided in our tenacity.

*Va'yelchu sh'neyhem yachdav* - when we were together we as Americans sent a man to the moon, eliminated polio, have made strides in curing cancer, almost single handedly created the great innovations of our modern world - the car, the airplane, the computer, the internet, the cell phone and most impressively we Americans built a nation dedicated to freedom and justice for all.

They, our enemies, they want us to be afraid - they want us to be afraid of each other; they want us to be afraid of the other - the other party, the other skin color, the other nationality, the other religion. It is on us -- not to give them the pleasure.

Maybe the binding of Isaac was not so much a test of Abraham's faith in God, as it was a challenge for the ages, an appeal for the importance of unity in the face of adversity. They, father and son, went together, they, Abraham and Isaac, remained together. The bond of love could not be broken, their faith in each other could not be shaken. In a world that constantly makes absurd demands on us - the source of our strength is and always has been each other. As Americans, as Jews -- we have each other; all we have is each other -- but for 4000 years that has been enough, this faith in each other. For 4000 years we have depended on each other. Our belief in each other, our faith in each other, our love for each other -- don't let them take that from us now.

So what is a Jew to do? How rabbi, do you suggest we extricate ourselves from the mess we are in today and create an America that is worthy of Lady Liberty's shining light and a Jewish people-hood that is worthy of father Abraham?

That will be the topic of our conversation on Yom Kippur Day. Yes, this is Part 1 of a two part message. Today we began our journey. I hope I have convinced you of the true nature of the challenge of this moment. But if Judaism challenges us with a vision of how the world should be, it thankfully also provides us with the means to achieve that vision - and that is what we will talk about on Yom Kippur.

Can we as Americans rise above the hatreds and resentments that separate and divide us at this moment in our national history? I believe we can. Can we Jews rise above the hatreds and resentments that separate and divide us as a people? Yes, here too, I believe we can.

I began today by promising I would try not to aggravate you. I understand that telling you, you have to wait 10 days until Yom Kippur for the end of my message might be a bit frustrating -- so I'll give you a hint. My hint comes from the great Jewish prophets John Lennon and Paul McCartney who said: "All you need is love!" Or as the Book of Leviticus puts it: "*V'ahavta L'reyecha K'mocha*" - Love your neighbor... All the rest is commentary - and will be explained on Yom Kippur.

A rabbi once asked his students a simple question: "How far is east from west?" Sensing he was trying to teach them something important, they immediately gave the matter deep thought. One student suggested, "the distance from east to west is half-way around the world -- half the world is east, the other half is west -- so you would have to travel half-way around the world to get from east to west." The rabbi shook his head and rejected his answer. So another student offers his answer: "The entire circumference of the world - one would have to travel the entire world to get from east to west." "No," says the rabbi. The students are stumped, so they turn to their rabbi and ask -- "So rabbi, how far is it from east to west?" To which the rabbi said: "All you have to do is turn around. If you are facing east - simply turn and you will be facing west. It is as simple as that. It is all in the turning." These are the *aseret y'mai teshuvah* - the Ten Days of Repentance - literally, the Ten Days of Turning. Why not use these 10 days to think about what in your life is in need of turning? Is there someone in your life you have turned away from during the past year - because of politics or resentment over a perceived slight? Maybe it is time to turn.

I began by pondering the question: "to speak or not to speak." and I decided I must; we must. We must speak to each other, turn to each other, and rediscover the ability to love one another again. I encourage you to think of one person to whom you need to turn? Someone to whom you may not have spoken during this past year, someone who you cannot speak to because of politics, lifestyle differences or values. Maybe it is a friend, maybe it is relative, and maybe it is your child whose lifestyle choice has disappointed you. Use the next 10 days to reach across the divide and talk to them, reach out to them.

"To speak or not to speak? Speak! And don't try and explain your opinions to them try and listen and learn and better understand their perspective. All you need is love.

How do you move from resentment to acceptance, how do you travel from intolerance to embrace, how does one go from hatred to love?

How far from you to them?

How far is it from east to west?

All you have to do is turn.