

**Kol Nidrei**  
**Har Shalom**  
**2021**  
**How to win the Afghan war**

I promised myself I wasn't going to do it....This past year was such a hard, stressful, challenging year that, I promised myself I was not going to do it. You, my dear friends, on this, the holiest night of the year needed to hear words of hope, words of renewal, words of inspiration to put the last year in perspective and set us on the right path for the upcoming year. So I promised myself I wasn't going to do it, this year, I was not going to give a sermon based on a Star Wars movie!!

However, as I was recuperating from surgery two weeks ago, and I had the chance to re-watch, every Star Wars movie, in order and in hi-definition and ended up breaking that promise to myself.

(it's ok, after all Kol Nidrei released me from all promises, right?)

So, my dear friends, allow me to spend some time tonight reflecting on the Star Wars movie, called "The Last Jedi." Why that particular movie?

Well, like every Star Wars movie before it, TLJ also has some powerful truths that are worth reflecting on both as people and as Jews.

I am not going to sum up the movie, although the title kind of gives it away. TLJ is the beginning of the end of the saga of Luke Skywalker.

There's a scene late in the film where Luke Skywalker, wracked by guilt from past mistakes, drives away his young apprentice, a woman called Rey. Shortly after, a wise mentor shows up and tells Luke that while he has much strength to offer as a teacher—mastery of the Force, wisdom from his years of experience—the greatest lesson he can impart to Rey are... his failures. At the risk of giving away who this wise mentor is, the exact advice given to Luke is “the greatest teacher, failure is.”

Let me share with you what my dad used to call a BFO, a blinding flash of the obvious...: As Americans, we don't do well with failure.

Gene Krans, , was an [American aerospace engineer](#), a former [fighter pilot](#), who served as NASA's second Chief Flight Director, directing

missions of the [Gemini](#) and [Apollo](#) programs, including the first lunar landing mission, [Apollo 11](#). He is best known for directing the successful efforts by the Mission Control team to save the crew of [Apollo 13](#), and we all now know his famous phrase; common, say it with me: “Failure, is not an option.”

We are taught all our lives that failure is not an option. And when we do fail, we tend to beat ourselves up and often want to give up or quit. This is certainly true in so many different aspects of life. In business, in relationships, and even in faith.

And yet, tonight on this event of Yom Kippur, a day, if you will, practically dedicated to failure, I think it’s fair to say that failure takes place all the time, everywhere, and with everyone.

And so if you accept the wise saying by Yoda in Star Wars that “failure is the greatest teacher,” then by that measure, some could look at the past year as one of the greatest years of learning in recent memory.

Some see the pandemic as a failure to adequately prepare and respond, so what have we learned this year?

Some see the climate of racial injustice as a failure to empathize and act. So, what have we learned?

And some have seen the current political climate of dissent and violence as a failure of people to listen and respect. Again, what have we learned?

And then there is the end of the war in Afghanistan. One of the most personally painful few weeks of my life. What have we learned?

As I struggled to comprehend not only what happened, but why it happened and most important what does it all mean to me, to us, to this country and yes, to this congregation, Yoda's advice kept swirling in my head. What have we learned?

My friends, I have to come to a somewhat surprising conclusion; What have I learned, well, quite simply, I learned that: We can still win the Afghan War.

I think we all understand that war is more than people inflicting violence on each other in the field of battle. War involves principles, ideals and beliefs. And while we have left the field of battle in that far away land, our real failure has yet to come if we allow it, and, is in fact something that tonight, on this Kol Nidrei night, we can change.

It sounds like a huge challenge right? How can we, tonight, here at Har Shalom...how can I, here, tonight in the middle of Potomac, win the Afghan War??

I think I might have a solution...

I would propose to you that if Judaism has taught us nothing else, it has taught us that our world should be seen, not as a whole, huge, complex system; not as billions of people, and countries, and ideologies; but rather, our world as Jews is comprised of individuals who can effect change on three people: 1) the person to the right of you, 2) the person to the left of you, and 3) the person you see in the mirror every morning while shaving or brushing your teeth.

There are few, if any, national mitzvot for the Jewish people, but there are a whole many personal ones that affect, again, 3 people, yourself and your immediate surroundings.

The Marine Corps, by the way, taught me that long ago. To the Marine, War is not about nations, it's not about ideologies, and it's not even about territory; it's about the Marine to your right and to your left, and how YOU feel, interact, and protect them.

Friends, there is still time for us to win the war in Afghanistan; not us the country; not us, the Jewish people; and not even us, Har Shalom; but us, the individual Jewish souls sitting here tonight or viewing us virtually.

There are, I believe, 3 lessons we need to learn:

First- Failure or surrender in the battlefield does not mean we surrender our values.

While it was hard, devastating to watch the last days at the Khandahar Airport, the image that should be ingrained in our minds and in our hearts, are the images not of the fighting but of US service members holding and caring for those little Afghan babies. The images of American service members, treating people, with dignity and respect, and yes, even the images of our fallen heroes, being carried respectfully, honorably, and compassionately off that airplane at Dover Air Force Base.

I see the skepticism in many of your faces, I see the anger, the cynicism towards those in charge. There is plenty of finger pointing, Monday morning quarterbacking, and stupid comments on the internet.

But tonight, on this night where we examine our failures and learn from them, I think tonight, we can win the war if we don't surrender our values as Jews and as Americans.

I don't know about you, but I can't change US policy, I can't effect change in the Pentagon or in the United Nations, for sure I can't effect change here at Har Shalom...but I can decide, even in the most trying of times, not to surrender my values, rather I can honor them by being more compassionate, I can act more honorably, I can treat that person to my right and to my left with dignity, respect and love. Tonight, we, you, me, and that person seated to your right and left, we can win THAT war....

Second - Tonight, we can win the war if each us makes a commitment to help those afghan refugees coming to our shores. We can still win if they see us opening our hearts, our arms, and our communities to them. We can all write a check or make a donation, but to truly win this war, they need to see us, they need to look into our eyes and see our giving hearts and souls.

The war in Afghanistan was fought thousands of miles away. Most of our boots never touched that dirt, to many of us it was a headline in the news or on the TV. We failed in that war, but now, today, we, you and

me, have a chance to win by showing that person to the right of you and to the left of you what we have learned from that failure in the battlefield and that has not shaded our giving, our love and our compassion. We can win the war if we give of ourselves to helping others.

My friends, let's get our hands dirty. Har Shalom has some wonderful initiatives to help those who helped us. They need to see us, shake our hands, see our smiles, and feel our open arms. While financial help is always important, we will win if we give of ourselves.

And finally, we have to work on always being good people. Sounds simple, doesn't it? But it's not.

I love watching TV, but during these past few months all I saw was shows that, frankly, depressed and upset. I couldn't turn off the tv without being angry, upset and with a pain in my soul. And then I began watching a new show on Apple TV Plus called Ted Lasso, where the main character is seen by many as a goofball, a simpleton, hired to coach

a British soccer team, many thinking that he would fail. But what was seen by many as an idiot, who doesn't have a clue, turns out to be a humble, sweet, and good person who doesn't let the cynicism and contempt of others shade or change the way he behaves.

We live in a time where there is a dearth of people looking out for each other. We see people being proud of how horrible they are in public discourse and how normalized it has become to be mean.

And so leave it to a television show to leave us with a warmth in our hearts and a smile in our face. This world needs more Ted Lasso! Not the character, but real people, you and me.

I know all of us here are good people. But how many of us have let our lives shade the goodness in us? We can win the war, dear friends, if we can all work every hour of every day to let the goodness in our hearts come out. While we are at home, when we deal with others, I know it's a

stretch, but even when we are driving in the belt way....we each need to become Ted Lasso.

One of my favorite new chocolate bars is a bar called a Kind Bar. When the owner and CEO Daniel Lubesky, (yes, an MOT) was asked about the origin of the name for his company, he share the amazing story about his father, a Dachau survivor who experienced a moment of kindness, when a camp guard, when no one was looking, threw him a potato to eat.

Despite everything his father went thru, motivated by that small act of kindness by an enemy would be his primary motivation for living.

Without bitterness and rancor for what he went thru, Lubesky's father lived the rest of his post-holocaust life, doing small acts of kindness.

When it came time to name his company, his son Daniel could think of no better name: KIND!!

My friends, if we are to still win this war, we have to be kind, live kind, and by our actions, teach others to do the same.

The combat in Afghanistan was lost, but let us commit ourselves today to win the war. Not by bullets, and not weapons of warm but:

- by not abandoning our values

- by welcoming those who did so much for us and country

- and by being kind

President Kennedy once spoke of his vision for our country. He said:

“I am certain that after the dust of centuries has passed over our cities, we too will be remembered not for the victories or defeats in battle or in politics, but for our contribution to the human spirit.”

My friends, lets win this war together. Shana Tova!