There is a Chinese curse which says, “May you live in interesting times.”

Well, we are living in interesting times. Sometimes, I think the world has gone so crazy that the only words that truly describe our circumstances were spoken by Woody Allen. He once said, “We are at a crossroads. One road leads to despair and utter hopelessness. The other to total extinction. Let us hope that we have the wisdom to choose wisely.” Or my favorite Jewish text which reads. “Start worrying…. Details to follow.”

We are seeing climate change, but it’s not just in the weather. Old patterns are falling away and the climate of our society and culture is changing and it threatens to overwhelm us all. One scholar calls it “cultural climate change.”

Imagine an action film where the hero is fighting an archenemy. Our hero is in one car while his enemy is in the other, so he leaps from one car but somehow manages to keep his feet in the other. He has his head in one car and his feet in the other. And it works for a few tense action filled moments. But then along comes a traffic island and the cars need to go in separate directions. The action hero has to choose which car to jump into. Too many of us feel the same way.

First, we are seeing our world split between those who are becoming increasingly secular in the west and radically religious in the Middle East. Second,
our country and Europe are being split in two, between those who celebrate diversity and those who despise it. Our world is rapidly becoming a global economy but there are far too many tribalists who equate internationalism and pluralism with Marxism and the deep state. And third, not to be ignored at this time….Israel is undergoing a political and religious revolution between its founders who were secular labor Zionists and the new leadership who are increasingly aligning themselves with the Haredi, Ultra-Orthodox communities.

First, let’s look at secularization in the West as a 300-year march. Rabbi Jonathan Sachs argued that while secularization is not necessarily evil, it often transforms our moral foundation. He taught me over the summer at Chautauqua institute about the stages of secularization. The 17th century was marked by the **secularization of knowledge.** In science there was Newton, and in philosophy there was Descartes. Now they were both religious to be sure, but what is significant about their work was that they sought to base their knowledge, not on church doctrine but rather on empirical evidence. Galileo sought understanding with the telescope not the Bible.

The 18th century was marked by the **secularization of power.** France overthrew the crown and the church in 1789, after watching America doing the same in 1776. For the first time in history, we saw the separation of religion and power, or the separation of church and state. For centuries the church was always
higher than the state house, it was the seat of political power. But that came to an end in the 18th century. Napoleon crowning himself was a significant statement about the seat of power. The 19th century saw the secularization of culture. For years, art was commissioned by the church. Go to any museum and look at the art of the Middle Ages. They were, for the most part all religious in theme. Not so in the 19th century. Impressionism, Realism, Cubism all celebrated natural scenes, people on the streets and in Monet’s case, water lilies. That would have never been allowed two hundred years earlier. Societies began building art galleries, concert halls, museums, that were larger than houses of worship. People sought the sublime in art, rather than in prayer. They were substitutes for the church. The 20th century was marked by the secularization of morality. This especially happened in the 1960s, where the world began to break free from the absolute morality of the church and the synagogue. People sought their moral guidance in books such as Zen and the Art of Motorcycle maintenance, which by the way I loved reading when in college.

The clearest example of Western secularization is the truth that most of the neo-Nazis and White nationalists are in fact atheists. Richard Spenser, who credits himself with coining the moniker, Alt Right, wishes to conduct peaceful ethnic cleansing and restore the white nation’s pride. But his movement is essentially godless. The enemy of the Jews and other minorities is no longer the church going
population who throughout the millennium attacked us for deicide. Now it’s the white secular nationalist. And while the march of secularization is continuing at home, the exact opposite is happening in the Middle East, Africa and Asia. And their revolution is spreading in Europe and almost everywhere else. In the Middle East secularization is on the decline, while religion, particularly fundamentalist, radical religion is sweeping major parts of the globe. As far as we can tell, the 21st century will see the East and Middle East getting more religious and we in the west becoming more secular. The next great conflict will not be over territory but rather over ideology, race and ethnicity.

Second, we are witnessing, few can deny it, the decline of civil society. We are losing a sense of decorum. At times it seems like the wheels are coming off the bus. Our streets have lost all semblance of civility. There is profanity spewed before children without any regard for their upbringing. I remember Laurie telling off a young person who was hurling invectives before our young children. And the response was….well I can’t even tell you on the pulpit what he said. This nation build to be a haven for the oppressed is closing its doors to refugees. And while I worry about the rise of anti-semitism that comes from many in the Middle East, I would hate to see the day when we stop showing concern for the most vulnerable in the world. Hate is becoming normative. Anti-semitism, racism, homophobia is acceptable in too many circles and it is defended by those who wish to protect.
white America. And we are overwhelmed with fear and anxiety, not only for the most vulnerable in our society….blacks, gays, Mexicans, Muslim refugees but Jews as well.

So many are lamenting the levels of vulgarity that are displayed in public office today. But this is just the symptom of the problem. The real issue is that we no longer live in a world where we come across people who differ with us. We listen to the news channels that confirm our prejudices. We place filters on our Facebook page so that we only get the news that supports our politics. On Capitol Hill Democrats and Republicans don’t socialize anymore. They stick to their own. And when we do talk to each other, there is a level of vulgarity and coarseness, the likes of which few have ever seen before. And it’s not just our politicians who don’t listen to each other. Town Hall meeting are a thing of the past. Why? Because leaders can’t even get a word out at a public forum without fear of being heckled, interrupted or shouted down. There is a meanness on the streets of our country and it threatens to tear us apart. Hate is now in the open and it has become normalized and celebrated. I was struck by the reaction of Governor Christie who after being verbally assaulted at a baseball game, had just about had enough. He lashed out in a manner we are just not used to seeing. It’s a testament to how we have fallen as a culture.
There are some who argue that the only response to all this decline is withdrawal. Rod Dreher, whose new book, “The Benedict Option,” argues “There can be no peace between Christianity and the sexual (sic) revolution, because they are radically opposed,” “L.G.B.T. activism is the tip of the spear at our throats in the culture war. The struggle over gay rights is what is threatening religious liberty, putting Christian merchants out of business, threatening the tax-exempt status and accreditation of Christian schools and colleges.” The only option, he argues, is to withdraw from society. Believers should follow the model of the sixth-century monk St. Benedict, who set up separate religious communities as the Holy Roman Empire collapsed around them. “Christians”, he wrote, “should withdraw inward to deepen, purify and preserve their faith.” They should secede from mainstream culture, pull their children from public school, and put down roots in separate communities. The only option to corruption is not accommodation but resistance. We see this in some Christian communities and we are certainly seeing it amongst the Ultra-Orthodox.

And this brings me to religion in Israel.

If America is becoming more secular and tolerant, then Israel, founded to be a secular state is rapidly being transformed into a country ruled by Haredi, or Ultra-Orthodox. Israel, let me remind you, was founded by the secular Labor Zionists but now it is increasingly being controlled by the ultra-orthodox. Ask any
Israeli and they will tell you, “Half are becoming fundamentally more religious and half are becoming antagonistic to it.” Each year the Ultra-Orthodox are gaining influence in spheres of government and personal practice. Many in the Ultra-Orthodox community no longer care about liberal Jews. They don’t care about the Diaspora’s support, for they see us as corrupt and unredeemable. A few weeks ago, the chief Sephardi Rabbi of Israel, stated publically, “Reform Jews are worse than Holocaust Deniers.”

If you remember, Bibi Netanyahu commissioned Natan Scharansky to come up with a solution to the Reform Movement’s request for an egalitarian worship space at the Kotel. Both were on record as being supportive of this plan. But his government coalition was beholden to the ultra-orthodox and they threatened to walk out, leaving Netanyahu in the cold. He knew where his electoral Challah was buttered. It was with the Orthodox not the secular. So he overturned the solution and put a halt to the plans to build an egalitarian worship space. To make matters worse, the ultra-orthodox then put before the Keneseth a bill that would disallow all non-Ultra-orthodox conversions and weddings. This was to go before the Keneseth, but has been stayed for six months. Israel is in a fork in the road. Is it going to be a state for the Jewish people or a Jewish state? I yearn for it to be a state for Jews, where all forms of religious expression can be celebrated. As of this moment, it seems that this may not be the case.
I have heard a few of you say that they will not support Israel, or buy an Israel bond, if you are not allowed to be a proud Reform Jew in Israel. That is your right to jump into one car as the road diverges, but I think there is another option.

Tonight, on the holiest night of the year, I would like to suggest that we liberal, Reform Jews must be the bridge between the rising tide of radicalism in the East and religious indifference in the West. We must resist the Benedictine option where the religious withdraw into their monasteries or the indifferent simply walk away. We must build bridges between the ultra-Orthodox and the assimilated Jew, between those who are radically alone and those who are here for each other. We must stand up for Israel as she confronts so many enemies from without while standing up for our rights to worship as we choose within. We must continue to work to build up communities that support one another. We have to reclaim the title of religion and speak about faith without fanaticism, culture without become cult like, unity without demanding uniformity. We must speak words of decency and reclaim the English language and stand up for morality.

As to the rise in secularization here in the U.S….I believe in synagogues. I have often been asked why belong to a shul. I usually talk about covenant and responsibility. That’s been my message for years. But I have come to believe recently that I was wrong. The real reason to belong is because it makes your life
better and you will live longer if you affiliate. Robert Putnam observed in his now famous book, *Bowling Alone* that our society is becoming more individualistic, poor in altruism and we are all the worse for it. Later, he wrote a less popular book but with a hopeful point. In *American Grace*, he observed that social cohesion and altruism exist in one unique category of places… churches and synagogues. People who go regularly to houses of worship are healthier, happier, more generous and even live longer. He writes, “If you go regularly your life expectancy is increased by 7 years.” Or maybe it just seems longer.

The truth is, if you are a regular at Beth Or, you are more likely to shelter the homeless, find someone a job, coach little league and give tzedakah. The best predictor for a long happy life, says Putman, is not class, ethnicity or education, but how regularly you go to a house of worship. It doesn’t matter what you believe, but if you go, you will be a better person, and you will live longer. Even if you're an agnostic, you’re still going to benefit. I will always remember an doubting Jew, who was lamenting the harshness of life, and he said in Hebrew, “There is no God.” But he said it in Hebrew using these words, “Ein Elokeim.” Even as he sought to leave, and deny God’s existence, he was respectful of our tradition and he affirmed his place in the community. Even the non-believer who belongs is stronger and less alone.
Here is where the social capital exists. Here is where you are not alone. The synagogue or the church, is the best hope for our world. Why belong? Because, in places like this, we speak of caring for the weak and respecting all of humanity who are created in the image of God.

Religion is the great source of community in America, said Putnam. We support altruism and believe in the altruist. Beth Or is not solely about God, but about our ability to come together to help one another.

A 2011 medical survey revealed that the average millennial has 237 Facebook friends. When asked how many one could rely on in an emergency, a majority responded two. A quarter responded one and an eighth responded none. This not a criticism of Facebook, but there is a difference between a Facebook friend and a face to face friend.

Let me tell you a story about our shul. Last year a member of our community went into kidney failure. He lost one kidney and his sole remaining kidney was failing. I met with him numerous times and he feared that he would soon go on dialysis and permanent disability. We commiserated together and offered to support him in any way we could. One day he called me from the hospital and asked if I would do him a favor. He asked me to advertise to the Beth Or community, asking if any member would be willing to get tested to donate a kidney. He was not asking for a kidney at this point, only that we would get
volunteers to get tested. I agreed. We had 8 volunteers sign up to have their blood tested. Months later, we had a perfect match. The hospital informed the potential donors and asked if there was a willingness to take the next step and offer a kidney to his fellow Beth Or member. And the answer was ‘Yes.” This summer, in mid-July Aaron Nielsenshultz, our religious school director donated his kidney and saved the life of Marc Silverman. Now I know of members of a family donating to save another member, but I know of no one who does this for a complete stranger. And Marc was a stranger to Aaron. But he was a member of this shul. So it happened, and this stuff only happens in a shul, or a church. We are bound by a covenant. You will live longer if you affiliate.

Returning to that image of our action hero trying to be in both cars as the roads separate, we must be the island where our action hero can hop off and build a safe place, an island in the diverging roads. America needs moderates who can talk to both sides. As the world becomes radically more secular and more extreme, we as liberal Jews need to bridge the gap, and offer an alternative that is religious but not fundamentalist. And we must have the courage to stand by our convictions while listening and affirming the position of those with whom we disagree.

We are indeed living in interesting times. May we meet the challenges, bridge the divides, restore decency and civility and a faith that affirms the rights of women. Our presence might just be what the world needs.