This morning, I’d like to talk about what it means to be Jewish in America in 2019. A light topic. But really, what does it mean to be Jewish in the United States in light of rising anti-Semitism and increased political polarization? I’d like to start with a story about two Jews in Germany in 1935. The story goes that Rabbi Altmann and his secretary were sitting in a coffeehouse in Berlin in 1935. “Herr Altmann,” said his secretary, “I notice you’re reading Der Stürmer, a Nazi libel sheet! I can’t understand why. Are you some kind of masochist, or, God forbid, a self-hating Jew?”

“On the contrary, Frau Epstein. When I used to read the Jewish papers, all I learned about were pogroms, riots in Palestine, and assimilation in America. But now that I read Der Stürmer, I see so much more: that the Jews control all the banks, that we dominate in the arts, and that we’re on the verge of taking over the entire world. You know – it makes me feel a whole lot better!”

It’s been a hard year to be a Jew, and the dark humor about Rabbi Altmann might not feel quite as removed from our own time and place as we might hope. In
times like this, our history and the wisdom of our tradition can help guide us. How might Jewish tradition ask us to respond to anti-Semitism and to relate to our Jewish identity during difficult times? On Rosh Ha-Shanah in particular, we can turn to the figure of Abraham, who, as the founding ancestor of the Jewish People, not only survived but thrived during his lifetime. Abraham can help us understand what we are fighting for as Jews today.

In this morning’s Torah reading, Abraham is already a relatively powerful man, despite being the leader of a small minority tribe. In earlier chapters of Genesis, Abraham defeated a Canaanite king in battle in order to save his nephew Lot who had been taken captive. He then received Divine promises that his offspring would be as numerous as the stars, and that they would be given the land of Canaan. And at the beginning of this morning’s Torah reading, Abraham’s long-awaited son Isaac is born. By the time we read about him in today’s reading, despite the fact that he was a Hebrew in the land of the Philistines, Abraham must have been feeling quite secure in his position, as he cuts a deal with Avimelekh, a powerful Philistine king, so that he can settle in Avimelekh’s territory, in a town that Abraham names Be’er Sheva.

The midrash says that in Be’er Sheva, Abraham had a tent open on all sides and that he would run to welcome strangers, and to invite them into his tent. How
did he get there? How did Abraham come to feel so safe, so secure, so strong in his own minority identity?

The answer to this question lies in Genesis Chapter 20. In Chapter 20, Abraham tries to hide his identity and pass Sarah off as his sister rather than his wife, out of fear that the powerful king Avimelekh - the same one with whom he later makes an oath - will kill him in order to marry Sarah. Abraham’s plan backfires. Just as Abraham had tried to avoid, Avimelekh takes Sarah into his house with clear intentions to take her as a wife. In order to protect Sarah and Abraham, God reveals her married status to Avimelekh in a dream. Avimelekh confronts Abraham the next day, asking him why he lied. Abraham admits that he was afraid of being killed so that Avimelekh could marry Sarah.

Upon learning the truth, Avimelekh returns Sarah to Abraham, gives them sheep, oxen, and servants, and invites them to settle wherever they want in his land. Abraham only benefits from Avimelekh knowing his true identity and status. A mutually beneficial relationship evolves out of Avimelekh and Abraham’s open and honest communication.

Abraham learned a critically important lesson that can offer us guidance today: hiding his identity wouldn’t work. On the contrary, Abraham’s hiding of his identity initially led to more conflict and confrontation with Avimelekh. It was
ultimately Abraham’s honesty, Avimelekh’s ability to empathize and to forgive, and a bit of Divine intervention along the way that turned this into a good situation for Abraham. Only after this does Abraham really become secure in the land and re-establish this open tent in Be’er Sheva.

Our situation as Jews in America today is, of course, a bit different. And yet we should learn from Abraham that while trying to fly under the radar might work for a short period of time, open and honest engagement with others can lead not only to peaceful coexistence but long-term cooperation and mutual support.

While Jewish history is riddled with examples of oppression and persecution, it is also full of examples of mutually beneficial partnerships between Jews and non-Jews. One of the greatest Jewish thinkers of all time, Maimonides, moved from Spain to Egypt, where he was appointed the chief rabbi of the Jewish community. His status as a philosopher and physician spread beyond the Jewish community, and after a few years, Maimonides became the court physician for the Muslim royal family of Egypt while still serving the Jewish community as chief rabbi. Few people know that Maimonides actually interceded with the Egyptian Sultan on behalf of Yemenite Jews under the Sultan’s reign who wrote to Maimonides asking for his advice and help in the face of religious persecution. Shortly after Maimonides spoke with the Sultan, the persecution ceased.
In more recent history, during the horrors of the Holocaust, American Jews engaged in public campaigns to help European Jewish refugees, through organizations such as the JDC, AJC, and HIAS. And even more recently, learned Jewish communal leaders such as Rabbi Avi Weiss, the last Chabad Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, and Elie Wiesel helped mobilize Jewish communal efforts to pressure American politicians for the release of Jews from the former Soviet Union. A deep and public Jewish identity can be an important tool for helping other Jews and society at large.

In our situation today, in light of the two horrific shootings at synagogues in Pittsburgh and San Diego over the past year, our community at Or Atid has been reviewing our security measures. This is indeed a Jewish task in and of itself - *pikku’ah nefesh*, protecting human life, is the ultimate Jewish value and obligation. And thank God - **we are alive**. All of us in this room. In this moment, we are here and we are safe. Not only are we safe - we are a thriving community with dedicated lay leaders who help us gather for learning, celebration, and support all year long. And right now, we are in this beautiful space to mark the Jewish New Year together. So let’s use this time to envision a path forward and to create our ideal reality - one in which we emulate Abraham in building and living in a firmly
rooted and open tent, in which we feel secure and grounded, and into which we
invite guests as they cross our paths.

In order to build a rooted tent, we must engage with and strengthen our own
Jewish identities, so that we can share who we are – our traditions and values
--with others and create partnerships with people who are different from us - again,
like Abraham did with Avimelekh. In doing so, we are protecting more than our
right to enjoy Jewish culture through things like food, with all due respect to bagels
and lox. We are protecting the living chain of Jewish tradition as it continues to
unfold and evolve. If we want to protect that chain of tradition, we must choose to
be a part of it. We must educate ourselves and strengthen our own Jewish
identities. We must study and learn from and teach about Jewish history, Jewish
culture, and Jewish religion, which is inexorably bound up with Jewish culture.
It’s not about the specific choices you make - that is your own personal decision,
reflecting your journey, and how you choose to express and practice your Judaism.
Regardless of our diverse choices around Jewish practice, we can and should
strengthen our understanding of our tradition and our history.

My humble hope is that we can learn and grow in our Jewish identities,
together. Everyone here should feel empowered to engage in some form of Jewish
learning, because knowledge is power. And once we have built up our knowledge,
then it’s up to each of us to figure out who we are in the grand arc of Jewish history and in this particular moment today in the American Jewish community.

What are the facets of your Jewish identity? What is your way into the tent? There are too many ways in to list them all, but I’ll name a few: History. Music. Literature. Social Action and Social Justice. Prayer. Meditation. Philanthropy. Cooking. How are you rooted? Strengthen those roots. As a Jew, what are you fighting for?

Educating ourselves about our own history and traditions empowers us to share with others what being Jewish means to us and why our traditions are important to us. Embracing our history and traditions enhances our living Jewish values with integrity and adds a sense of authenticity and confidence to our advocacy for ourselves and others. Only when we have the power of knowledge can we address issues beyond protecting our basic human rights to life and freedom. Which Jewish values obligate us to advocate on behalf of the State of Israel? And perhaps just as importantly, what is the historical spiritual meaning of the Land of Israel according to Jewish texts? Which Jewish values obligate us to stand up for refugees and asylum seekers? And which Jewish values obligate us to support Jewish institutions? Whatever your way in is, whichever obligations resonate with you, knowing the sources in our texts and history enriches what you
share with others, increases your identification with Jewish values, and promotes those values.

Of course, we can only engage in education and dialogue with people with whom we feel safe. Avowed white supremacists, neo-Nazis, and other open anti-Semites are not likely to become our allies any time soon. And common sense requires us to call out anti-Semitism on any end of the political spectrum. At the same time, there are so many people in our world, even in our local communities, with whom we can build relationships, with whom we must work to make our world safer, more kind, more loving, and more just.

With a little bit of honesty and relationship-building, Avimelekh turned out to be a safe and powerful ally for Abraham. Avimelekh was not a Pharaoh or a Haman who wanted to destroy the Jewish People. And most of the time, we are not confronting a Pharaoh or Haman, either, but rather an Avimelekh - someone who doesn’t know what Jewish values and needs are. We must defend ourselves against the Pharaohs and, at the same time, we must educate and partner with the Avimelekhs of our world. And we must embrace those righteous among the nations who support us, like the Berlin architect Simon Luetgemeier.

Simon Luetgemeier's research on the apartment building he had lived in for 20 years led him to title documents, which led him to Peter Gossels, brother of Or
Atid member Werner Gossels and uncle of Bonnie and Jon. Peter and Werner had lived in that building before they escaped on a kindertransport when Werner was 5 years old and Peter was 7. Simon - who is not Jewish - researched the stories of all of the Jewish families who lived in the house during Nazi rule; he created an exhibition for the lobby of the building, obtaining consent from 100% of current residents, that explains the history of the house. He hosted an event this past May to dedicate a memorial to those families, which was attended by many people living in the neighborhood as well as the Gossels family, who flew in to be a part of the ceremony at Simon’s invitation.

As many of you know, I was born in New Haven, Connecticut, and grew up in the area, in a suburb called Hamden. When we were in college and grad school, my Hamden friends and I would enjoy reuniting in town and stopping by a local liquor store called Happy Harry’s. Shortly after I graduated from college, I started experimenting with wearing a kippah most of the time, including in public. So I happened to be wearing a kippah during one of these visits to Happy Harry’s. As we browsed the aisles, I walked by a middle-aged man who appeared to be intoxicated. This man saw my kippah, and shouted to the cashier - “oh, look out, he’s Jewish, he’s gonna try to steal something, he’s gonna take your money!”
Based on that experience, I might have justifiably decided that I should not wear a kippah in public. It was a disturbing and scary experience. But I decided not to be afraid. I decided to learn, to grow, and to be a proud Jew.

Ultimately, we are all in this together. Ignorance, intolerance, hatred, and violence will hurt all Americans if they are left unchecked. As Deborah Lipstadt wrote in her book *Antisemitism: Here and Now*, “Anti-Semitism flourishes in a society that is intolerant of others, be they immigrants or racial and religious minorities. When expressions of contempt for one group become normative, it is virtually inevitable that similar hatred will be directed at other groups.”¹

So let’s do the teshuvah, the soul-searching, self-education, and self-improvement that we need to do so that we can not only survive but thrive alongside our fellow Americans. Dr. Ari Gordon of the American Jewish Committee puts it quite succinctly: to defend Jewish interests, engage across differences.² So let’s learn: how are we different? And how can we engage across those differences? Like Abraham did with Avimelekh, we too must build alliances. We must build coalitions on issues of common concern, and also embrace the power of being a unique voice with unique identities as we partner with those who are different from us.

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At Or Atid’s annual meeting in May, I shared the words of Rabbi Yisroel Goldstein, the rabbi of the Chabad of Poway in San Diego, who lost a finger in the shooting at his synagogue on April 27, 2019. I share his words again now in the hope that they inspire us to deepen our Jewish knowledge and strengthen our Jewish identities for our own benefit, for the benefit of America, and for the benefit of the world. This is what he said: “I pray that my missing finger serves as a constant reminder to me. A reminder that every single human being is created in the image of God; a reminder that I am part of a people that has survived the worst destruction and will always endure; a reminder that my ancestors gave their lives so that I can live in freedom in America; and a reminder, most of all, to never, ever, not ever be afraid to be Jewish.”

To leave you with one final powerful image, my friend and teacher Dr. Yehuda Kurtzer recently said the following: “American Jews… have thrived at making America the land of the Jewish free. The next big challenge is to make it equally the home of the Jewish brave.”

May it be a year of joyous, beautiful, and brave Judaism for us and for the entire Jewish People. Shanah Tovah.