

Rosh HaShanah Day 1 5779/ 2018: On Borders, Walls, Fences, & Boundaries

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“From [Palestine](#) to Mexico, [all the walls have got to go.](#)”

This slogan, equating [security and border fences in Israel](#) with the proposed wall at the U.S.-Mexican border, was emblazoned on a sign that **Senator Cory Booker** held while posing for a photo at a conference this summer in New Orleans. In the photo, Senator Booker is pictured with the government affairs associate of the group that coined this slogan, an anti-Israel organization that endorses the [BDS](#) (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions) movement, known as the [U.S. Campaign for Palestinian Rights](#). The photo was posted on Twitter on Friday, August 3.

According to a spokesman for Booker, the NJ Senator believed that the sign referred only to the wall between the U.S. and Mexico, and that he does not equate this wall with Israel’s security and border fences that have been erected to save innocent Israeli civilians’ lives from rockets, bombs, kites on fire, and other forms of terrorism.

For the purposes of my sermon today, I do not intend to bash Cory Booker for holding up this sign, nor do I intend to defend him. For me, that is beside the point. Rather, today, I would like to respond to some of the current rhetoric in regarding **walls, fences, borders, and boundaries**. Since I am a rabbi, rather than a journalist or politician, my intent is for today’s message to be spiritual, rather than political.

To begin my exploration of the **theme of walls, fences, borders, and boundaries**, I would like to share with you another 'slogan' of sorts, a saying that was coined by **Robert Frost**, in his 1914 poem, "Mending Wall". The action described in the poem is that of the speaker and his neighbor doing the annual task of repairing the stone wall between their two farm properties in New England. This wall was originally erected by both farmers as a barrier to keep each of their own animals in & to keep the other person's animals and each other out. When the poem's speaker wonders why the wall is needed, the neighbor replies with an old adage that he learned from his father, "**Good fences make good neighbors.**" This saying seems to convey the very opposite sentiment of that conveyed by the slogan, "**All the walls have got to go.**"

In **2016**, during the presidential election campaign, **Robert Frost's poem** was alluded to in an article that advocated for the building of wall between the U.S. and Mexico. The headline of that article was "Good Fences Make Sovereign Nations"./ In **1962**, on a trip that **Robert Frost** took to the Former Soviet Union, the **Russians** reprinted an excerpt of this **poem** on the Eastern side of the Berlin Wall. Yet, it is interesting to point out that the **Russians** omitted a line from the poem that conveys an anti-wall sentiment.

The line from Frost's poem that was left out on the East side of the wall was quoted by **President John F. Kennedy** when he inspected the **Berlin Wall**, from the other side, in West Germany. That line is: "**Something there is that doesn't love a wall.**" / JFK was not the only one to highlight this line of the poem and to see within it a message that advocates for broad-minded liberal internationalism, universalism, and the breaking down of all barriers and boundaries between countries and people. The headline of a 2016 article¹ in the LA Times was entitled, "**Donald Trump** Should Read Robert Frost's Poem "Mending Wall." As the headline suggests, Frost's poem can be read as "a polemic against building walls."

¹ by Alexander Nazaryan

The poem's speaker questions and critiques the need for a wall in the first place:
"He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines.
I tell him.
He only says, "Good fences make good neighbors.""

The speaker in the poem goes on to say:
"Why do they make good neighbours? Isn't it
Where there are cows? But here, there are no cows.
Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offence.
Something there is that doesn't love a wall."

Yes, if we focus on these lines of the poem (instead of focusing on the "Good fences make good neighbors" adage) the poet's point of view seems to be opposed to wall-building.

Yes, one could make the case that the poem is 'anti-wall'./ However², "if we take a closer look, it is not a polemic in even the most casual use of the word, and it is not "against" the notion of walls. Only mediocre poets write poems that are explicitly for or against anything.

The poem, "Mending Wall" contains two apparently conflicting statements. One begins the poem, the other ends it, and both lines are repeated twice. What did Robert Frost want us to believe? In the end, who is right about the wall? The poem does not answer that question exactly. Rather, it engages us and demands that we think.

When Frost himself was interviewed about the poem's intended meaning: he said, "The secret of what it means, I keep." In his interview, he also said, "Everyone applied what they wanted. "I could've done better for them, probably... by saying:

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
Something there is that does."

² as the author of this article, **Alexander Nazaryan**, himself admits

Frost apparently intended for his poem to contain **nuance and complexity, something which seems to be absent in much of the current political discourse both in favor of & opposed to walls, fences, borders, and boundaries.**"



One very stark example of the **lack of nuance & complexity in current political discourse about walls, fences, borders, & boundaries** can be found in the speech that the Pulitzer-prize winning author, **Michael Chabon**, delivered at the Hebrew Union College Los Angeles graduation ceremony this past May. In his commencement address, Chabon exhorted the graduating class of rabbis, and Jewish educators, and other Jewish professionals with the following words, "This is my charge to you, class of 2018, Jewish leaders of the future: **Knock down the walls.**" Which walls? Apparently, according to Chabon, every wall—marriage to other Jews, Jewish customs, history, ritual, etc. etc. etc. In his speech, Chabon expressed an "instinctive mistrust" of ALL literal & metaphorical walls. Standing before a captive audience of HUC graduates, all newly trained professionals who are committed to the transmission of Jewish traditions from one generation to the next, Chabon ranted **against ALL barriers, borders, and boundaries**³.

Now, it is one thing to be tolerant of differences and to be inclusive of and welcoming to interfaith families in our Jewish communities. But it is quite another thing to go as far as Chabon did, by actually speaking out **against** "endogamy" ("in-marriage" or "intra-marriage) and the maintenance of Jewish tradition.

In Chabon's words:

³ In their article in the September 2018 issue of Commentary magazine, "Saving Judaism from Michael Chabon: On a fashionable novelist's assault on the very structure of the faith" (pp. 42-46), Rabbis Chaim Strauchler & David Wolkenfeld write, "Allow us to explain **the chutzpah in exhorting young leaders that their task should be to preside over the destruction of that [very] thing to which they have committed their lives.**" (p. 45) They include a Talmudic story about Pappos ben Yehudah and Rabbi Akiva, who tells a parable about fish telling a fox that they need water in order to survive. I believe the source is B'rachot 61b.

“Like our parents, grandparents and.....great-grandparents before us.....my wife and I **married-in**. Marrying-in was, on the face of it, a strange thing for me to have done. **I abhor homogeneity and insularity, exclusion and segregation, the redlining of neighborhoods, the erection of border walls and separation barriers....**”

“In the 25 years since my Jewish wedding and the 23 [years] since the birth of our first child⁴, power around the world has gone on drawing its **lines**, enforcing its **borders**, building its **walls and camps**, **patrolling its checkpoints**; excluding and imprisoning and denying human beings their humanity. Over the years that followed, my **retreat from religious practice** only deepened.....And here we are, living in a world that feels so irredeemably addicted to **the building of walls, to the architectures and economics of exclusion....**”

“So now, today, at this retrograde and perilous moment in history, when ideologues are busily trying to string the world with **eruvim of intolerance**, were you to ask me if I hope my children marry-in, I would say, Yes. I want them to marry into the tribe [of people who]..... see **nations and borders as antiquated canards**, and **ethnicity as a construct**, prone, like all constructs, to endless reconfiguration.....There will be plenty of potential partners for my children to choose among; a fair number of those potential partners are even likely to be Jews.”

Taken to its logical conclusion, **Chabon’s insistence on a borderless world** could potentially wipe out Judaism, but Chabon doesn’t seem too bothered by this. When it comes to the disappearance of the 4,000-year old Jewish tradition, well, that’s just how things go sometimes. As Chabon put it,

“If Judaism should ever pass from the world, it won’t be the first time in history—far from it—that a great and ancient religion lost its hold on the moral imaginations of its adherents and its relevance to their lives... and anyway the history of the Jews, like the history of humanity and every individual human who has ever lived, is just one long story of grief, loss and fading away.”

In addition to attacking **the walls of “in-marriage”** and other Jewish traditions, Chabon also made some **virulent attacks against Israel’s security walls**. He condemned these walls, proclaiming, “We tend to draw a distinction between walls that protect and walls that imprison, but that is only the same dark logic again, justifying itself, as always, in the name of security. Security is an invention of humanity’s jailers. Anywhere you look it is—and has always been—the hand of power drawing the boundaries, putting up separation barriers and propagandizing hatred and fear of the people on the other side. Security for some means imprisonment for all.”

⁴ In Chabon’s speech, he actually says “*Yidele*” (instead of child)

Morin Zaray, a graduate of HUC's Master's program in Non-Profit Management, felt that Chabon ambushed her graduation by turning his self-proclamations into a diatribe "in which **Jews are evil oppressors and the Palestinians are powerless victims.**" In an article that she wrote in the LA Jewish Journal on May 22, 2018, she also had the following to say:

"Very quickly, it was clear that Chabon, as eloquent as he was, **viewed Israel in black-and-white terms.** As I heard his **one-sided take,** I thought: Unlike Chabon, **I lived in Israel throughout the Second Intifada,** and **know that the security wall is not a prison. It is a lifeline.** I know that the fear of people on the Israeli side is not driven by fake fear or government propaganda, but by constant terrorism that we experience and the loved ones we have lost. I know that **the same wall he said he despised** enabled me to live a normal life and to use the bus as a young girl."

".....As I heard **Chabon's simplified takedown of my country.....**I felt ashamed for being part of this gathering, ashamed that many in the audience were just nodding at this **reductionist view of a multilayered and complicated country.**"

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A few days later (May 2018), **Jonah Cohen** wrote a critique of Chabon's speech in The Weekly Standard, entitled, "Michael Chabon Disses Jewish Culture in Speech at Hebrew Union College The Pulitzer-winning novelist leaves newly ordained rabbis feeling isolated with his ranting about inclusion." In Cohen's words:

".. **That's the paradox of Chabon's philosophy.....: He thinks he's tearing down all boundaries and traditions, unaware he's creating new ones—ones spun round his own self-image."**

Morin Zaray and other HUC graduates and their families felt curiously excluded from Chabon's [so-called] 'inclusiveness'. **The same man who opposes all walls** managed somehow to erect a nearly impenetrable emotional rampart around those who don't see things as he does<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> In their article in the September 2018 issue of Commentary magazine, "Saving Judaism from Michael Chabon: On a fashionable novelist's assault on the very structure of the faith" (pp. 42-46), Rabbis Chaim Strauchler & David Wolkenfeld write, "By all means, a writer like Chabon should explain how **Israel** must more carefully respond to the humanity of its neighbors, even if they are its enemies. Such a writer will be far more successful if he or she does not present wildly ungenerous interpretations of **Israel's** motives. Sentences like... are both counterproductive and untrue. **Such words are also walls. Chabon says that he wants to break down walls, but he has only replaced one set of walls with different walls.**"

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Unlike Michael Chabon's reductionist view of walls and boundaries, Robert Frost's poem is filled with **nuance** & does not project a one-sided advocacy of fences nor does it contain a clear-cut **anti-wall polemic**. The beauty of Robert Frost's "Mending Wall" is that it contains two apparently contradictory messages:

Sometimes good fences do indeed make good neighbors, and we might recall that the phrase "mending fences" means to restore communication and neighborliness. But, equally true is the notion that "something doesn't love a wall." The wall in the poem is not presented unequivocally as an impenetrable "barrier between human contact and understanding." Certainly a wall may be just that, but it can also serve precisely the opposite function.

Yes, something there is that doesn't love a wall,
But something there is that does love a wall

You see, the issue of **walls, fences, borders, and boundaries** is a much more complex and nuanced issue than Michael Chabon makes it out to be. While one might be make an argument **against some distinction-marking boundaries**, there are other fences that may be perceived as "good fences". And vice versa.

At a Rabbinical Assembly conference that I recently attended (July 2018) at JTS that was focused on outreach to interfaith families, a speaker from the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism made the following claim,

"We are currently undergoing a tremendous **paradigm shift**. We now live in an age in which people of different faiths, ethnicities, and races are inter-marrying with each other.We also now live in an age in which gender identities are fluid and gender boundaries are permeable."

While this speaker may have over-stated the case about a "paradigm shift", it is certainly true that religious and gender boundaries are much more permeable today than they were 50 years ago.

In response to the USCJ speaker's comments, one conference participant⁶ raised the following concern: **How can authentic traditional Judaism survive in a world of fluid boundaries?**

After all, **[Judaism] is a giant interlocking system of distinctions.....**as well as the means—through prayer and ritual, Torah, and commentary—of highlighting **differentiations between the sacred and profane.** / One Jewish ritual that exemplifies the recurrent Jewish theme of “celebrating distinctions” is **HAVDALAH**. The word HAVDALAH means: the act of separating or marking as distinctive. It is the ceremony that marks the end of Shabbat, incorporating the use of a multi-wicked candle, wine, and a spice box. In the concluding blessing, we acknowledge that God is “*Ha-Mavdil beyn kodesh l'chol, beyn or l'choshech, beyn Yisrael la-amim, beyn Yom HaSh'vii l'Sheset Y'mei HaMaaseh*”, “the One who makes distinctions between holy and secular time,...between the seventh day of the week and the 6 days of Creation.” During Havdalah, which is traditionally recited in a dark room with the lights turned off, illuminated only by a candle, it is customary to make a hand motion that casts a shadow, in order to visibly highlight the distinction between light and darkness, *ohr & choshech*.

The Hebrew verb “*l'havdil*”, which is the root of the word *Havdalah*, can also be found 5 times in the first chapter of the Book of B'raisheet/Genesis, when the Torah describes God's creation of the world. The **Torah's story of Creation begins with several acts of differentiation:**

On Day 1 (1x): the separation of light & darkness

On Day 2 (2x): the creation of the *rakia* (“firmament”), which separates between the sky & the sea

On Day 4 (2x): the creation of the sun, moon & stars, which serve to make distinctions between day & night

⁶ Rabbi Jonathan Lubliner, the spiritual leader of a Conservative congregation in Florida.

After that, the Torah, and Judaism as a whole, repeatedly emphasize the **importance of boundaries**, from the bookended **andle-lightings of Shabbat** to the intricate strings of an *eruv*, from a boy's **bris** to his **bar mitzvah**, from ridding our homes of *chametz* before Passover to the **Four Questions at the Seder, this night is different than all other nights**. This is a **man, no longer a boy**. This is a **woman, no longer a girl**. This is a **holy day, no longer just meaningless secular time**. We are supposed to see and understand, as well as maintain the distinctions between **holy and unholy, kosher & unkosher, childhood & adulthood**.

The **High Holidays** provide other illustrations of boundaries. For example, during the **repetition of the Musaf Amidah on Rosh HaShanah**, a series of **shofar blasts** serve as a border of sorts, demarcating the boundary between each of the 3 sections of the Amidah, *Malchuyot, Zichronot, & Shofarot*. Likewise, the **Kaddish** prayer that we recite repeatedly in different forms throughout the service **punctuates and separates** one part of the service from the other. Just as I have sections in my bookcase for different topics that are divided by bookends or shelves, so too does our service have different sections that are divided by a Kaddish, with each Kaddish having a different nusach melody: The melody of Kaddish that is recited before the Torah service is not the same as the Kaddish that is recited before the Musaf Amidah or the Kaddish that is recited before the Amidah for Yom Kippur Neilah .

And, as you may have noticed, the **Kaddish melodies** that we use on the High Holidays are not the same as the Kaddish melodies that we use on Shabbat; these **nusach distinctions serve to differentiate** between different types of Jewish holy time.

There is also a **boundary to mark the beginning of Yom Kippur**, to distinguish between the time when you are permitted to eat & the moment when you are supposed to start fasting. Now it's a mitzvah to eat a big seudah; and now it's a mitzvah to abstain from eating. / Similarly, at the **end of Yom Kippur**, there is the moment when you are still fasting, and then there is the moment when you can break the fast.

Another boundary within Judaism is the **Eruv**⁷, an enclosure that enables observant Jews to carry items in public areas on Shabbat. While Chabon virulently objects to what he calls “eruvim of intolerance”, an Eruv is actually a **positive symbol of Jewish community**. One year, here at TBA, Sisterhood Shabbat began with an introduction [that was written by Bonnie Farin) that read, “**An eruv operates so that all the people within the enclosed area treat it as their common home. It symbolically demarcates a Jewish neighborhood.** Tonight the Sisterhood of TBA is creating an *eruv* in the sanctuary to **reaffirm our sense of community** as family and friends. By **symbolically turning a public space into a private one**, an Eruv **extends the definition of a home/ private domain**. The Eruv is a statement by the residents of a particular neighborhood, “We are not just a bunch of isolated individuals who happen to live near each other; we are part of the same **community**.” In fact, the literal translation of the word “Eruv” is “intermingling” as in the rabbinic dictum, “*Kol Yisrael **arevim zeh ba-zeh***” “All Jews in the community are intermingled with each other & connected to each other, with a shared sense of purpose and responsibility.” The Eruv is not a separation barrier that is meant to exclude anyone; rather, it is a marker of communal inclusivity and cohesiveness that reaffirms this sense of communal responsibility.

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<sup>7</sup> An Eruv is a **boundary** or **enclosure** that enables observant Jews to carry in public areas on Shabbat. Under Jewish law on Shabbat, it is forbidden to carry anything—regardless of its weight, size or purpose—from a “private” domain into a “public” one or vice versa, or more than four cubits (approximately 6 feet) within a public domain . An enclosed area is considered a **shared private domain**. By constructing an ERUV around a neighborhood, it is considered to be a shared private domain.

Rather than espousing a black & white view of the world such as “**all the walls have got to go**” (as in the sign held by Senator Cory Booker & as in Michael Chabon’s speech at the HUC graduation) or “**all walls are good & necessary**”, I would like to encourage all of us to move away from these type of absolutist statements & opinions. It is possible to be in favor of **some walls** and **opposed to other walls**. It is possible to be in favor of **Israel’s border fence with Gaza, as well as the Israeli West Bank security barrier (along the Green Line), while opposing a wall at the border between the U.S. & Mexico**. It is possible to be in favor of boundaries between the sacred & profane that are highlighted by meaningful Jewish rituals<sup>8</sup>, while **opposing boundaries of exclusion or intolerance that result in making some people feel uncomfortable or unwanted in our community due to their sexual orientation, gender identity, race, or religious background**.

It is possible to be **inclusive and welcoming of LGBTQ couples & interfaith families**, while still **maintaining the integrity of Judaism**. The ideal is to balance the value of **opening doors** with the value of **maintaining boundaries**.

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Sometimes good fences do indeed make good neighbors.

But, sometimes, it is better to break down barriers and boundaries.

Yes, something there is that **doesn't love a wall,**

However, something there is that **does love a wall**

In this New Year 5779, may we all **strive to be more nuanced** in our approach to walls, fences, borders, and boundaries... as well as in our approach to life itself.

Ken yehi ratzon.

I wish you all a *Shanah Tovah u-Metukah*.

⁸ An additional argument in favor of boundaries within Judaism is made by Rabbis Chaim Strauchler & David Wolkenfeld in their article in the September 2018 issue of *Commentary* magazine, “Saving Judaism from Michael Chabon: On a fashionable novelist’s assault on the very structure of the faith” (pp. 42-46). I read this article just after writing my sermon & realize that these rabbis and I have been thinking along some of the same lines. On p. 46 of this article, Strauchler & Wolkenfeld state, “**To hold their form, liquids such as water require containers, i.e. boundaries**. To break those containers isn’t simply “not good for the Jews.” It’s not good for humankind.”

