

It All Depends Upon Me
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I know this is a bit of an odd location in our service to break and to deliver my sermon but I would like to explain to you the reasons behind why I will be calling the next group to bless the words of this morning's third aliyah to the Torah.

There are plenty of reasons that I feel proud of the Reform movement. We stand on, what I believe to be right side of the of the Arc of The Moral Universe.¹ Our leaders advocate for and insist upon the proactive involvement towards positive social change. Our modern means for spirituality, learning and community lead us to respond with our actions in pursuit of what is Just. And, from time to time, I am pleasantly surprised to learn that our leadership took positions that were on the vanguard of positive change long before others caught on.

Everyone knows (or should know) that we were at the forefront of the fight for civil rights. Before others were having any meaningful conversation about it, the Reform Movement worked to establish an authentic place of religious equality for women and our rabbis published platforms defending the rights of all people regardless of sexual identity and orientation way back in 1965.² And, in researching for this morning, I recently learned that it was in 2005 that the Reform Rabbinate published a position paper about the importance to America of moving beyond *any* public display and specifically any governmental affirmation of the Confederate Battle Flag.³ Admittedly, 2005 was way too late to be addressing this but, considering that 12 years later we are still wrestling with this symbol. We continue to earn our place among others who fight to address America's Original Sin: Slavery.

¹ This expression was originally written by the nineteenth-century abolitionist Theodore Parker but made famous by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in his speech during the March from Selma. 1965

² Citation needed.

³ CCAR Position Paper. 2005

The national debate about the removal of Confederate statues led to, and has grown since the events which transpired in Charlottesville. These monuments are complicated symbols of something lying just under the surface of our society. And, while it seems like a simple answer, it is worth asking “what is the purpose of a monument?” Most people would respond quickly with an answer along the lines of, “a monument’s purpose is to help us remember.” But, I think we all understand that there is a lot more here.

In this time of the holidays, I am reminded of the question posed to the rabbis about the horn used to sound *tekiah* this morning. They ask, “which animals’ horns are kosher for use in this ritual?” The response is that any kosher animal’s horn is permissible with the exception being the horns of a bull – lest we remind God of our People’s sin concerning the Golden Calf. Remember, at the very moment Moses was receiving the Torah on Mt. Sinai, our people were down below, lost in their fear and their disorientation and their weak leadership. They set to the work of building – but they were focused on building the wrong thing.

Moses came down and, seeing what they had done, proved the truth of Ecclesiastes when he said, “There is a time for every experience under heaven, a time to build up and a time to tear down.”⁴ In his rage, Moses tore down their graven image and used the material instead to build the tabernacle. In doing so, he turned something evil into something beautiful. We often find the act of tearing down to be the easy part – the statues in many places have already been removed. But, what is not as clear is how we set to the work of building back up.

It is worth remembering that, just as monuments help us remember, so too, they are important in society’s efforts to forget. Our rabbis understood that using a bull’s horn may jog a memory that we would prefer to forget. Similarly, a white supremacist will not tell you that these statues are about racism. Rather he will say they were erected “in the loving memory of our family and fellow Southern Americans.” as Mississippi State Representative, Karl Oliver recently stated. But, a great many of these statues were placed at infamous moments of more recent history. During the darkest days of conflict, in which America sought civil rights for

⁴ Ecclesiastes, Chapter 3. <http://www.mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt3103.htm>

African Americans, these statues were erected memorializing the men who fought *against* these measures of equality. In case there is any doubt left in your mind, Representative Oliver concluded his comments by saying that anyone who wishes to tear down this demonstration of Southern Pride should, in his words, “be LYNCHED!”⁵ With the choice of these words, he makes it very difficult for us to see past the racism and to believe his claims.

Like a history book, the narrative that accompanies a monument is in the hands of its devotees. As they ostensibly seek to recall Southern pride, these monuments are equally adept at whitewashing the pain of slave families torn apart; distracting us from the impossibility of self-respect for those who knew no relationship with hope and obscuring both the actual and metaphoric scars on the backs of the individuals who dared to stand tall. We will remain intractably mired so long as they insist that the war of Northern Aggression was about disrespect for Southern culture. Until we can discuss the messages and the impact of these statues upon huge portions of the country - we will never be able to move forward and to begin to build up a unified 21st century United States of America.

But, it would be too easy and we would miss the point if we were to simply sit here on this day and to shake our heads at the shameful efforts of some. For the Jewish community, this season is not a time for finger-pointing – at least not pointing anywhere but into the mirror. Instead, today we perform a *cheshbon*. We look deeply and we struggle to own our personal role in allowing systemic racism, xenophobia, misogyny and hatred to exist while shrugging our shoulders at the shame of it all. When we read the communal *ashamnu* next week, we work hard to own the culpability of the text and the shame we are led to feel. It is not enough to say that “*I* am not racist.” You should probably *never* say out loud that “some of your best friends are gay.” And there is really no moment to emulate the blatant display of racism uttered by America’s toughest Sheriff, Joe Arpaio as he tried to refute the possibility of his own

⁵ Strother, Logan. [Are Confederate Monuments our Heritage or Symbols of Hate](http://www.newsweek.com/are-confederate-monuments-our-heritage-or-symbols-hate-633678). Newsweek, July 9, 2017. <http://www.newsweek.com/are-confederate-monuments-our-heritage-or-symbols-hate-633678>

xenophobia saying, “My daughter has adopted children of various ethnicities—I got a black, and I got a Mexican with down syndrome even.”⁶

Let us be honest and admit that, like the song says, “Everybody is a little bit racist.”⁷ If you are not familiar with the song, click in the link in the online version of this sermon and you can watch it on YouTube – it’s a hoot. It reminds us that we are all products of our environment, our experiences and our societal influences. We are all subject to the messages of our parents, grandparents, teachers and news sources and we are **all** biased. That said, it is up to us to fill the void of Moral Leadership left by our President and to stand up and speak the words that he refused to use: “Those who see this country through eyes filled with hatred have no place in our national narrative. Those who work to destroy the ideals that our founding fathers established are breaking the terms of our social contract and I will not stand for it.”

But here is where it starts to get tricky. This past election I heard many articulate frustration that they could find no candidate who earned their vote easily and without qualification. That is due, in part to the fact that the conversation between platforms had changed unexpectedly.

In a recent Op-ed piece, social scientist Robert Jones suggests using a new way of looking at the divisions within our populace. Whereas, we once disagreed in our opinions of the role and reach of Big Government or upon liberal vs. conservative fiscal positions...today, he says, the country is beginning to align along two new poles that he calls “pluralism vs. monism.” Put simply, many Americans are identifying themselves based on their answer to the question: Should America persist as a society that values ethnic, religious and ideological diversity...or should this country should be a singularity that reserves privileges for the Straight, White Christians? Jones writes that we now have “two divergent narratives about the essence of America and about who gets to share in the experience.”

⁶ Provan, Alexander. The Vigilante. Oct 13, 2009. <https://www.gq.com/story/joe-arpaiio-sheriff-phoenix-mexico-border-immigration>

⁷ Everyone’s a little bit Racist. Avenue Q. <https://youtu.be/RXnM1uHhsOI>

White Christian males have held the seat of power, in fact all the seats at the table of power, through most of our country's history. As women, minorities and immigrants (and yes, Jews) have claimed their representation at that table, it has left the balance of power unfamiliar to much of the country. In 2008, America was 54% white and Christian – today that percentage has dropped to 43%. That has got to be scary for some. In a peer-reviewed study, the Public Religion Research Institute found recently that public sentiment on matters of national identity were shockingly revealing.⁸

Respondents were asked if they believed that the mixing of cultures and values from around the world was extremely or very important to American Identity. Those who answered “no” were overwhelmingly in the sample who also rated a culture grounded in Christian religious beliefs as “important to American Identity”. In other words a very large number of Americans believe that America has no use for anything but White Anglo Saxon Protestant culture. The study went on to demonstrate to us another very surprising truth about the conversations we are uncomfortable having: Asked who faces the most discrimination in The United States, the respondents again broke into two distinct and uncomfortably equal-sized bodies: one who believe that minority groups like African Americans, immigrants, Muslims and the LGBT community face a lot of discrimination and the other group – a *significant* portion of the country – who believe that it is white Christians who face the most discrimination in this country. While the study includes information about respondents' identification with our political parties, my purposes this morning are non-partisan. I have chosen to leave out the details as they relate to political affiliation but my point is sufficiently demonstrated that, regardless of our party registration, the perceptions **of** Americans **about** multi-culturalism in America is the new battleground.

One year ago, I cautioned you against being sucked into the pitfalls of the Cosmic War – of choosing an ideological side against others with whom you have irreconcilable differences of opinion. I could never have imagined where this country would find ourselves today. The

⁸ <https://www.prrri.org/research/lgbt-transgender-bathroom-discrimination-religious-liberty/>

chasm between our fellow citizens has grown wider and deeper than I would have feared and we are in danger of being unable to repair it. In fact, I'm not sure it can be eliminated but I'm pretty certain that the path we are currently on is not the path to healing and repair and that the valley between our diverging American Narratives grows wider with every tweet. It seems to me that what is absolutely essential is our individual insistence that listening to the claims, complaints and demands of the other must begin from a place of compassion – remembering, at all times, that there is a lot of pain in the voice of the one with whom you cannot agree.

Recently, one of my rabbinic colleagues shared that she is not afraid of speaking uncomfortable truths to her congregation. She's not afraid of losing her job and she's not afraid of those who would storm out of the community in protest because she believes, in her heart that the values of America's multiculturalism are values that are central to Judaism. What she does fear, and here she speaks my own sentiment, is hearing, from someone in the congregation that she truly likes and values, something that would prevent her from maintaining a relationship of respect.

I have heard this same fear from so many of you in so many different ways. You have told me that: You have to take a break from Facebook because the polarization of views is making you too upset. You have told me that there are friends with whom you have agreed not to discuss politics anymore for fear of destroying what remains of your relationship. I know of many individuals who feel they cannot attend family parties anymore so as to avoid dangerous conflict and irrevocable damage. Obviously, if we are at this stage, then the damage is already a reality; This is both a tragedy and a portent of very dark times ahead.

In an unexpected twist, I almost feel grateful for the extreme nature of the events in our country – sometimes it is only just when circumstances are so powerfully obvious, that we realize our response is demanded. I think of the moment in the book of Esther, when Mordechai tells the Queen that it is up to her to approach the King and to intervene on behalf of the Jewish people. “Perhaps,” he says, “it was for just this moment that you were created and brought to the palace.” As Michael Marmur points out: Mordechai is suggesting that her

life has meaning precisely because it is lived against the backdrop of ominous political events. The Talmud concretizes this responsibility with the words, דבר זה תלוי בי – This matter is dependent upon only me!⁹ We are meant to remember that, at some moments, there will be nobody around to look to for leadership and the role will fall to none other than us.

So, I have a charge for you this year – and it applies to you whether you're conservative in your views or liberal. Whether you are affiliated with either party or no party. Do not shy away from the hard conversations. Listen carefully to the words and to the emotion of the other without judgment, with only compassion – even if you don't think they are showing much compassion themselves. Find new ways to express your views that will get beneath the details of the argument and which will communicate the values that you believe are at stake. The Jewish way through this chapter of our country's growth is Sacred Engagement with the other.

We find ourselves, now ready for the fourth aliyah to the Torah. Ready to hear from those who've earned the right to bless its reading. I am prepared to invite those individuals to rise, in their place, to receive our respect in their commitment to working towards making this country healthy again.

To those who have already had or will commit to having a conversation with somebody on the other side of the nation's debate with whom you feel you can engage; to those who wish to try to really understand (not to agree with) the feelings of the other, would you please rise? Ushers, would you please make your way through the sanctuary and distribute coins to those who are on their feet. If you feel inspired by my charge but do not yet know how you're going to go about healing such pain in our country, would you please rise to receive your coin? For those on their feet - One side of these coins reads, אימתי, לא עכשיו, – *Im lo achshav, eimatai* – If not now, when? You who are standing are the ones who understand that you, personally, are our only hope of stemming this cold civil war in our country. And you understand that there is no time to waste and that this is the application of Torah in the real world.

⁹ Located in the Babylonian Talmud, Brachot 32b and based upon the Ordination Charge of Rabbi Rick Jacobs to the new rabbis of the class of 2012. <http://blogs.rj.org/blog/2012/06/06/dvar-zeh-talui-bi-this-thing-depends-on-me/>

If you have not felt ready to stand yet, you, too, will get a coin on the way out of the sanctuary at the conclusion of the service. *You* should begin by reading the other side which says, “דבר זה תלוי בי - *Davar Zeh Talui Bi* – This matter is dependent upon none other than me.” There is nobody else to help – it all depends upon you! Then, when you can accept that this is true, you’ll flip the coin and know that the time is now.

The coin is small enough that you are meant to keep it in your pocket. You’ll find yourself in a moment that is ripe with potential – and the weight of the coin in your pocket (or its message in your mind) is intended to lend you the courage you require to be brave. To take on an interaction whose success will be measured – not by the level of material agreement achieved, by the degree of humanity displayed. When you’ve proven to yourself that you can meet my challenge, feel free to pass the coin on to someone else who needs it more than you – be certain to explain to them what they are meant to do with it.

And now...

Ya’amod kol Hoz’kei lev l’aliyah la’Torah! – all those of strong hope and brave heart who have earned the right to bless the reading of our sacred call to action on this holy of Holy Days!