

For over past nine years I have spoken often about the importance of a synagogue not endorsing candidates for office. In this era of hyper partisanship, it is more important for synagogue and other religious institutions to talk about issues. I look back on some of the topics that I have talked about on Shabbat and holiday since we gathered on the High Holidays last year. We talked about the policies espoused by then candidates for office, Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. I've talked about the Iran Nuclear Deal. I've talked about abortion. I've talked about healthcare. I have talked about privacy. I have talked about immigration. I can go on and on. But what I have studiously avoided doing is to weigh in on the candidates for office themselves – once elected of course that is another matter – for two reasons which are not well understood by most. The first is that I am not sure that it is a Rabbi's responsibility to tell you who to vote for. I am not convinced that I know more about who is better to lead our nation than you do by virtue of the fact that I am a Rabbi. And the second reason is that, whether you like it or not, it is a violation of Federal law for non-profit tax exempt organizations to endorse candidates for office. This is also an issue I have talked a great deal about. It is not a matter of free speech. It is simply the government's ruling that tax exempt organizations cannot engage in this type of political activity. And it is an important rule, despite the efforts of the Trump Administration to undermine The Johnson Amendment, as it is known.

That's my introduction to my sermon. I start with that introduction so that no one twists my words for their own political purposes. Today I am asking you all to suspend your normal Republican or Democratic or Liberal or Conservative or Moderate or Right Wing or Left Wing views, and simply

hear in my words to you today an attempt at a religious statement. And not the Rabbi using his pulpit in general or RH in particular, at a time when we draw our largest crowd of the year, to make a statement akin to what you might read about in the NYT or the WSJ, or listen to on MSNBC, CNN or Fox.

Today we come not to have our general ideas about the world confirmed but to be challenged, to be nudged if not pushed out of our normal complacency and to rethink our normal patterns of thought and behavior so we might improve ourselves, and the world around us. That is what the High Holiday season is for. That is what it means to think about our responsibilities, the special responsibilities that God has challenged the Jewish people with since He made that covenant with our ancestors three thousand years ago at Mt. Sinai, and keeps us coming back year after year after year. That is what it means to be in a partnership, in a relationship with God. That is what it means to be a member of B'nai Yisrael – literally the community of people who wrestle with the meaning of God, and apply those lessons in everyday ordinary life.

This sermon began on Tuesday afternoon August 15. That day may not mean much, and indeed the date in and of itself is not particularly important. But you will all remember it well. I was on the way back from visiting my mother out in Long Island. It was a wonderful day. Now for those of you who make a trip out to Long Island on a regular basis, to go from Bergen County and out to Suffolk County and back without a stich of traffic is like winning the lottery. And as I was crossing the GWB on the way home, I thought to myself what could possible go wrong now. And

then WCBS news started playing highlights of a strange and bizarre impromptu press conference that the president gave in the lobby of Trump tower about an hour earlier. According to news reports, instead of talking about infrastructure, which was ostensibly what his meetings that day were about, he was asked about the white supremacist, neo-Nazi – Unite the Right rally which had taken place on Saturday August 12 in Charlottesville, VA. I am quite sure that you all remember that day well. Hundreds marching with tiki torches yelling anti-Semitic, anti-black, anti-everything chants that shocked the nation. I am sure that you all remember the violence that took place, which claimed the lives of Heather Heyer, who had come out to protest this hate gathering, this hate gathering on American soil that looked a lot like the run up to Kristallnacht, as well as two Virginia State police troopers, Lt. H. Cullen Jay and Trooper Brooke M. M. Berke, whose helicopter crashed while monitoring the violence that day.

You might remember that the president's initial reaction to the violence was confused, ambiguous and not particularly well thought out. Imagine if our local elected officials would have reacted similarly when 5 Bergen county synagogues, including our own, were attacked back in January 2012. We would have demanded a clear and unambiguous condemnation of these anti-Semitic attacks and the promise that the full power of our law enforcement communities be brought to find and prosecute the perpetrators. But we did not have to. They did that on their own. From the time of the first attack to the sentencing of the two conspirators this past July to 35 year prison sentences, we heard a clear and unequivocal message: the attacks on the synagogues were not only an attack against the Jewish community, but upon the citizens of the State of New Jersey.

Those words made all the difference. One would have expected that the president of the United States – ok here is where some people are going to think the Rabbi is going to make some political statement – so again I am going to ask you to resist that because the point of this is not political. So don't, as I practically begged you at the beginning of my remarks, submit my next words to your political labels and litmus tests. One would have expected the president to at least rise to the level of the mayor of Paramus, the Bergen County Executive, the Governor of the state of NJ. But again his initial reaction was confused and in truth, a terrible disappointment and then by Monday, he had made a stronger statement denouncing white supremacy and its fellow travelers. And then, that Tuesday afternoon, that press conference in which he did his best to conflate white supremacists with those who had come to oppose them, and then if that wasn't bizarre and irresponsible enough for you, talk about all the good people who were just there to protest the removal of a statue of Robert E. Lee. Like so many of you did along with millions of Americans, I literally could not believe what I was hearing. Could this president, a graduate of this nation's finest universities, a father of children, among them a daughter who converted to Judaism under the tutelage of one of America's finest Orthodox Rabbis, and grandfather of two Jewish grandchildren, simply not get it? Does he know that the family of his *Mechatanistis*, fled Nazi Germany to get away from the ideological cousins of those whose who marched that day, and was unable to make a simple declarative unscripted statement that Nazis are not nice people, white supremacists are bad for America and that like Ronald Reagan before him, say clearly and unequivocally, I publicly disavow their support, their ideology. But instead, nothing.

I wasn't the only person who thought this was bizarre. I watched hours of news coverage that night. TV news anchors were literally struggling to find the words to explain or contextualize this. But they couldn't because the inability of a president to speak out against white supremacy had not been witnessed by the American people since the 1920's. How was this possible? I remember late that night on CNN the political commentator Van Jones literally could not compose himself as he tried to understand how the president of the USA could speak this way. Mr. Jones spoke about it through the context of him being an African American leader, and his close relationship with his Jewish German refugee Godmother.

I could go on and on and I am tempted to. But I am going to stop because there is not that much more to say. At that moment, Donald Trump had shown who he is. And those people who genuinely believed – again I am not making a political statement so don't get it twisted – that his horrible campaign, his irresponsible rhetoric that began well before he announced his candidacy and has not diminished even to this day could be overlooked because you were concerned about the economy or you were concerned about Israel's security or you were concerned about Iran, or you were concerned about immigration, your general concern about the direction of the country or your future – the president sent you and everyone else a message: he just doesn't get it, and he doesn't get you. If he believes that he provided the appropriate response to a neo-Nazi rally where three were killed, dozens were injured, and the only people who believe that his comments were positive were David Duke and Richard Spencer, then he has failed us. He does not understand the responsibilities of his office, that there is a time when decency, morality and justice must take priority over

partisan political considerations which are certainly significant but pale in importance when Nazis are marching violently through our beautiful cities. Because those who are marching are coming for us, and to be unsure whether we have the unwavering commitment of the president of the US and the leader of the free world to our security is more than just horrible. It is more than just frightening. It is evil and Jews speak out against evil.

Though it's RH, I want to tell you a story from the holiday of Purim. Remember in Hebrew School how you learned that what really set off Haman was that Mordechai, the Jew refused to bow down to him. Now Mordechai refused to bow down to him because after all, he was Jewish and Jews do not bow down to people. Remember that?

But that is not exactly true. The Bible is filled with examples of people bowing to others as a sign of respect, or acknowledging their high office. There is nothing particularly un-Jewish or forbidden about bowing. So why didn't Mordechai bow to Haman? For one simple reason. Because Mordechai knew that Haman was evil, and Jews don't bow to evil. It is that simple. We don't accommodate it. We don't accept it. We don't contextualize it. We don't make excuses for it. And when we do abandon our commitment to stand against that which we know to be evil, wrong, cruel, and unjust, it is the worst form of assimilation, as we cast aside the values that defined us since we first stood at Mt. Sinai, and adopt newer, yet ultimately foreign ones.

And now is the season that we begin to turn it around.

The president's unforgivable failure to forcefully condemn white supremacy was terrible. But even as we condemn this abdication of responsibility, I want to challenge everyone who is here today to really think about when we abdicated our responsibility to fight against evil – the only difference being is that our failures are only witnessed by a small audience. The prayer book in the section of the service that we are about to confront challenges us to think about the ways where we have fallen short. So right now and throughout the rest of the afternoon, I want to challenge you to think about when you made judgments about someone because they were of a different race, or religion, or gender. When you dismissed their God given human dignity and lost sight of our common humanity because of the language they spoke, the clothing they wore, or that the gender they have chosen is different than the gender assigned to them at birth. Think of how many time you have either verbally articulated or mentally thought the words "those people" and attributed to them not the value of their beliefs and opinions, but rather imposed upon them your own fears, your own bias, and your own frustrations and sadness. There may have been one million reasons to do so, but today, this Day of Judgment, we acknowledge it was wrong, which is a nice way of saying we were wrong. And we cannot absolve ourselves of our own failures by concentrating solely on the mistakes of others. That type of honesty, of confronting the record of our behavior is the essence of the High Holiday experience.

We are human beings who have been created with free will and the ability to learn from our mistakes, and even mistakes of others. That too is the essence of the High Holiday experience. We are human beings who have been created with free will and thus the ability chart out a better path for

ourselves than the one upon which we have been wandering until now. That is the entire theology of the HH season. Yes I'd like to talk about Israel, or the Erev in Mahwah, or Healthcare, or a million other issues which are so important. Our Judaism has so much wisdom to help guide us as we make hard decisions about our national future, and navigate a rapidly changing America. I would have much preferred to talk about the state of Jewish life in America, Jewish education, the challenges and opportunities facing us as non-Orthodox Jews living in a time of unprecedented demographic change. Yet as important as those issues are, there is an even greater responsibility this year. If I have learned one thing this year, it is how easy it is for us to accommodate evil in our own lives and then if that's not bad enough, get used to it. I have taught my children, I have taught my adult education classes and even in my sermons to the congregation over the past 22 years that if life has taught me anything, it is that a human being can get used to anything. A human being can get used to anything. So every once in a while we need to ask ourselves, exactly what it is we are willing to get used to? And whether we are happy with what that statement makes about us. And when we acknowledge that we should NOT be getting used to something, we need to press that reset button. My personal reset button came on August 15, 2017.

And here is what our tradition says to do on the day we hit the reset button.

You've heard that our goal during the HH season is Teshuvah – repentance. That wonderful idea that human beings are capable of change, of growth, of doing things differently. Except for monotheism the



idea of Teshuvah might be the most original and influential idea that Judaism ever shared with the world. Our Rabbis teach that this is literally built into the fabric of the world. Against a backdrop and religious ideology of fate and determinism, our ancient Hebrew forbearers said that yesterday's influences, as important as they are do not dictate tomorrow and we are capable of learning from our mistakes, incorporating the wisdom of others and building a better future for ourselves and everyone else. That is what Teshuvah is. But Maimonides teaches that our real goal is actually Teshuvah G'mura, which I define as complete and utter Teshuvah and it's explained in the following way. It means having recognized our error, apologizing for it if appropriate and or making restitution if appropriate is good but only partial Teshuvah. Teshuvah G'mura is a realization that sooner or later we are going to be in a position to make the same mistake again, the one that hopefully we have determined not to do. We are going to find ourselves in that very same position, only this time we rise above it. We will act with greater integrity with greater appreciation for the humanity and dignity of the other. We will recognize that in the past we might have chosen what today we acknowledge is evil, but now we are going to act like Jews and all that our tradition demands of us. That's our goal. No more excuses.

A Roman once asked the great sage Hillel, "Teach me the entire Torah while standing on one foot." Hillel responded, "That which is hateful to yourself do not do to another."

Will you join me in making sure that this is the religious message that we teach to each other, to our children and our neighbors in the New Year, and practice it every day with all of our heart, soul, and might.

L'Shanah Tovah.