

*It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.* When Charles Dickens wrote those introductory sentences of *A Tale of Two Cities*, he was, as you may remember, comparing London and Paris. But all summer long I have been thinking of those famous lines, among the best known in all of western literature, in the context of the challenges facing the American Jewish community at this moment in American history. Now this is not the first time over the last 23 years that we've talked about challenges facing our community on the High Holidays. In fact, I don't think that I've ever gone more than a year or two without squeezing it in somewhere on Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur. But over the years when I have spoken about such challenges, I've spoken about inner communal challenges that primarily dealt with the increasing difficulty of maintaining Jewish communal life. Especially amidst the changing backdrop of religious life and demographics in America. When I began my career 30 years ago, the second largest religious denomination in America were Catholics. Now it's non-affiliated. These changing demographics have had a big impact on the American Jewish community, as so many third and fourth generation American Jews have abandoned the synagogue and Jewish communal life, even as survey after survey has shown that they are not necessarily abandoning Judaism. But they are expressing that identity in a highly individualistic way, and taking a distinctly American approach: they want what they want when they want it. And right now, even though as you might imagine, I don't like that, I'm not complaining about that. Yet I think we would all recognize that such an approach is a challenge to the way that synagogues have operated in America. We're like a restaurant that serves family-style. But more and more, the public demands al la carte. And it has been difficult for synagogues to operate on that type of basis. You all know

this, and when you think about it it's painful. There aren't that many fewer Jews in Paramus, River Edge and Oradell than there were 20 years ago. The same can be said for Fair Lawn, Ridgewood, Franklin Lakes, Wayne or just about any other community in Northern New Jersey. But each of them have prepared for far fewer congregants on the High Holidays, which reflects the loss of hundreds of families and individuals who have decided they simply no longer need the synagogue. The surveys say that their sense of Jewish identity is as strong as ever. But that identity does not necessarily include the religious underpinnings that have upheld Jewish life for the last 3,000 years. And there is nothing in either Jewish history or the study of sociology or demographics that should lead anyone to believe that this identity can last more than a generation or two without some attachment to synagogue or Jewish communal life. That's a challenge, and I and the synagogue leadership think about these issues all the time.

But today, I am I'm talking about a different challenge, a challenge that goes to the sense of well-being and security that we have taken for granted in this great nation for generations. I am talking about threats to our sense of safety and freedom characterized by murders at the Eitz Chaim synagogue in Pittsburgh last October and in Poway last May. I'm talking about an increase in both the number and ferocity in hate crimes directed against minorities in general, and Jews in particular over the past several years as both the FBI and Jewish self-defense organizations have documented. There have been so many, especially among orthodox Jews in NYC that we have grown accustomed to them. We've always had security on the High Holidays, but mostly for crowd control, or perhaps to deal with an outraged congregant who felt that his honor was disrespected

because when he arrived at the synagogue he was asked for his High Holiday ticket. Security on the High Holidays was once the stuff of borscht belt jokes. It's no joke anymore. There is not a synagogue in New Jersey that has cultivated better relationships with the town, the county and local law enforcement than the JCCP/CBT. But even we have an armed guard on Friday nights and Shabbat mornings and holidays and every time we have children in the building. 20 years ago keeping just the door locked most of the time was considered cutting-edge. But of course we can't help but harden the facility and spend resources, because your safety is our responsibility. White nationalism, which has always seen Jews as their primary target, has reached a level of influence and danger that we haven't seen in the 1920's, and perhaps even more indicative of the current climate, the ignorance about traditional Jewish sensitivities on the part of the media, elected officials, and even our friends and neighbors is mind-boggling. In August, Governor Murphy fired a government worker for a series of anti-Semitic tweets. But Assemblyman Gary Schaer warned Gov. Murphy about this man's history of anti-Jewish agitation in the community—and Governor Murphy hired him anyway! The same day, the morning's news reported a story of a California High School water polo team who had given a Nazi Salute and sang a Nazi song at a school event, and there was no record of any disciplinary action taken by the school after they found out about the incident. Stories like these no longer evoke the revulsion and universal condemnation they only recently still did. And what to do about all this is harder than ever to determine as too many within the Jewish community perceive these challenges and possible responses only through the lens of their political identities. In other words, their inherent evil is dependent on who actually committed these offenses.

*It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.* We know the statistics. We've seen the reports. It feels different than it did a year ago.

But as I have always tried to teach the congregation, especially in difficult times, we must think critically, not emotionally. Now there is much to be concerned about to be sure. Larger trends over which we will have little control. Things that only Jews, if we wish to, can truly address. Yet between them exists a space in which the battle for our safety and security will be waged, one in which we will need to use intelligence, survival skills, and good name to address. Which is why I feel particularly motivated to talk with you about this on Rosh Hashanah. So if we want to address this critically, let's at least identify the trends that point the way towards a solution.

About 10 weeks ago, I wrote to the congregation about a fascinating new survey of religious life in America commissioned by the Pew Research Center. Titled *What Americans Know About Religion*, it is a major study of the basic knowledge that Americans have about their own religion, and those of our neighbors. There were several major conclusions of particular interest and importance to the Jewish community. The first is that Jews as a distinctive group displayed the greatest amount of religious knowledge of the twelve different religious groups identified by the survey. I actually sent a link to the survey in my weekly Shabbat message to the congregation, and dozens of you responded by telling me how you did. (Which, by the way, was an average of 11/15, which was higher than the national Jewish average of 9/15, which itself was the highest of any of the 12 major religious groupings taking the survey!). In fact, I have never had as big a

response to my Shabbat messages in all the years I have been sending them to you.

The other point, the more important point considering what we are discussing today, has to do with what the 11 other religious groups surveyed revealed about Jews. Among the findings in this new survey of American religious life was additional proof of something that a similar study of American religious life claimed several years ago. That American Jews are particularly well-regarded in the United States of America.

Without minimizing for a moment the increase in both the number and ferocity of anti-Semitic incidents, Jews are held in high esteem by 70% of Americans in this study. And if 70% doesn't seem all that great to you, at least understand that it is far better than Evangelical Christians, Catholics, Muslims, Atheists, and pretty much everyone else. That may be cold comfort after Pittsburg and Poway, but the facts don't lie. In fact, what the study shows is that the more people know about Judaism, and even more importantly, the more they actually know Jews, their level of appreciation skyrockets. Yes—skyrockets. The most negative attitudes about Jews and Judaism are held by those who know the least about Judaism and know the fewest amount of Jews. In our time, our threats are primarily from white nationalists and Islamic radicals and their leftist allies and enablers. And we must contend with too many angry, uneducated people whose rage accompanies the negative views of Jews. But we have largely won the battle that previous generations of Jews have waged for acceptance in America that goes back to the first 23 Jews who arrived as refugees from Brazil in 1654. We have a fight on our hands, to be sure. But in this struggle we are not alone. Something your parents and grandparents

could not say was true. As the saying goes, “to know us is to love us.” And we are respected, powerful, and if not always loved, at least liked more than any other faith in America. So now the question is what to do about this, and how to use this positive news to address the very challenges, the real challenges with which I began my remarks today?

I’d like to suggest several things.

The first is to resist the temptation to subject both the perils and possibilities that we face in our nation to our own partisan political views. Just as there is no partisan approach to science or math, there is no partisan approach to solving the threats that face American Jewry. So I want to speak directly to republicans and democrats today. We must not, if we are Republicans, ignore the divisive rhetoric, bad policies, and injustice that emanates from that segment of American political life because we believe that the Democrats are worse. And I see too much of that. We should be grateful for the support that the Trump administration has publicly demonstrated towards Israel. Yet we must not ignore how this administration has sought to make Israel a wedge issue in the upcoming elections. This is a terrible mistake. If we are Republicans, we cannot ignore the recent unprecedented attack on American Jewry represented by President Trump calling American Jews disloyal if they support Democrats, especially when if you parse his words carefully, he was saying that Jews who would vote this way are being disloyal to Israel. That is not a statement that any president of the USA should make, yet too few in the Republican Party criticized his rhetoric. The argument at the time, if you may recall, was whether those words were anti-Semitic! And the truth is they weren’t. But they were wrong headed, irresponsible, unnecessary, and

designed to inflame an already heated political reality at a time when American Jewry is feeling vulnerable.

Now Jewish Democrats also have a lot to think about, because the space for the president to make those remarks in the first place was created by the complete abdication of responsibility by the Democrats, especially the leadership, who have consistently failed to call out, reprimand, or discipline those in the party who have introduced anti-Semitism literally into the halls of Congress. Their refusal to address seriously those who's social media posts and provocative rhetoric have made a mockery of traditional Jewish sensitivities, and their spineless reaction to attempts to mainstream the BDS movement that is predicated upon lies about Israel and justifying Palestinian terrorism and Jew hatred has been building for several years, so we need to see recent controversies not as aberrations, but part of a larger trend that Democrats ignore at their own peril.

And this is particularly important because anybody who follows American politics knows that no matter who the Democratic nominee is, at least 70% of American Jews will likely for that person. So we need to exact a higher price for our support. Let's not waste our time by pretending otherwise, or embracing the Republican fantasy that this will be the year that Jews abandon the Democratic Party. I'm simply stating the facts that have existed for the last 80 years. Historically, Jews are among the most loyal constituency to the Democratic Party, second only to African Americans. And we have received nothing lately for that loyalty. So let's tell the truth. The Democrats have let us down, and that needs to change. Or eventually there will be a major realignment in American Jewish orientation.

Think it can't happen? Ask the Jews of England, who's traditional home in the British Labor party has been eviscerated by the Jeremy Corbyn, it's anti-Semitic, Hamas loving chairman who has not only made no secret of his pernicious views but has done all he can to mainstream them throughout the party. And the few brave Laborites, both Jew and Gentile who have consistently opposed him and exposed his Jew hatred have not been able to turn the tide, leaving the Jews there lonely abandoned, and as fearful for their future as any community in Europe. That is what happens when anti- Semitism in a political party is ignored, contextualized, or rationalized. It grows like a poisonous weed until it takes over everything.

The second suggestion has to with what I call reaffirming our commitment to bipartisanship to secure larger communal needs and concerns. I truly believe that our community's former adherence to this goal is being challenged these days by the hyper partisanship I just addressed, and how it affects the way we perceive and evaluate expressions of hostility. For months years I have been warning anyone who will listen that support of Israel must remain a bipartisan concern of the American Jewish community. It must transcend our normal political inclinations because Israel deserves that and only we can insure it. But more and more, I realize that the same approach must characterize our approach to communal safety and security. Future generations will not forgive us if we fail to criticize either party, whether we support them or not, with equal vigor if they jeopardize our security our future in this nation. Or praise them when they work to increase our security. We will make a mistake of historic proportions if we fail to build and maintain relationships with politicians of both parties who are supportive of our larger communal concerns because



we disagree with their individual domestic policies. We must make our case to all who hold office. This has been the key to our advancement throughout the post war effort, even as the percentage of Jews among the population declines. And the Pew Report proves that if we do, we will have the support of the majority of the American people, who respect us, hold us in esteem, favor Israel in her conflict over its enemies, and who understand that ultimately, an attack upon one community by elected leadership is truly an attack on all.

Today is Rosh Hashanah. One of the great themes of the New year, as taught by our Rabbis, and hopefully reinforced by our liturgy, is that this is a time to be challenged, to be nudged if not pushed out of our normal complacency and to evaluate anew 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.

As I share these serious thoughts with you, I am concerned that many of you will be convinced that I'm trying to make a political statement. So I want to assure you that I am not. I have not told anyone how they should vote, or which candidates to support. I would never do that and indeed I've written publically how this is actually a violation of federal law. But what I am trying

to convince you is that the current political climate that has been created by voices in both parties is threatening to the Jewish community. Only by rising above our deeply held political beliefs and honestly evaluating the policy and leadership that our favorite party brings to these issues can we hope to affect change. It takes no courage for a Republican to criticize a Democrat, or vice versa. That's what we used to call in the South "like shooting fish in a barrel". That is the only way we will realize the hope that the new Hebrew year will be a better one for American Jewry than the previous one. Because these are the best of times and the worst of times for us simultaneously.

So my last suggestion has to do with the only thing that has the potential to strengthen Jewish life no matter what occurs in the halls of power. It has to do with the power of Rosh Hashanah to not only set an ambitious goal for the New Year, but create the motivation to actually achieve it. The most important thing we can do to strengthen and fortify Jewish life in America is to live our Jewish lives fully, and as the Pew Research proves, loudly. When our non-Jewish neighbors and friends see us proudly asserting our identity and our values, when they know who we are and do not hide our faith from them, they respect us. In a nation where someone named Barak Obama could be elected President, somebody named Goldberg or Schwartz need not cower in fear. That was the world of our grandparents and even to some degree our parents and it would be irresponsible, and a betrayal of their struggles, to forget how their perseverance paved the way for us. Yet too many have used the freedom and sheer amount of wonderful choices that are available to us at this time in American history to

abandon a commitment to Jewish communal life. So I humbly ask you to recommit to Jewish organizations, donate to authentic Jewish causes and most importantly of all, make the synagogue the priority that it has traditionally enjoyed for the last 2,000 years. It is the synagogue that preserved our faith during periods of oppression and the synagogue that can help us navigate the possibilities and perils of 21st Century America. It is the synagogue, where people gather together for prayer, study, and socializing, which encourages us to actually live our Judaism in the neighborhoods in which we live. You've heard Rabbis make this plea before. Let this be the year we answer the call, for there is so much at stake. These are the best of times and the worst of times. Jewish political power and the esteem with which we are held by our neighbors have never been higher. Yet at the same time, the threats are real. So let's use the freedoms, the power, and the respect that we possess, to build a future where some day this rabbi can begin a sermon by simply saying "*It was the best of times.*"

And may we all say Amen

L'shana Tovah. A healthy Happy New Year to all.