



LeoBaeckTemple

Rabbi Ken Chasen
“With Full Hearts”
Leo Baeck Temple
October 1, 2025
Yom Kippur 5786

At the end of this past January, LBT hosted a midday gathering right here in our sanctuary, in partnership with our interfaith friends at LA Voice, which brought together more than twenty organizations citywide. It featured a diverse group of six storytellers, including one of our own congregants, all of whom had lost their homes or their jobs or their schools in the Palisades or Eaton Fires. There to listen to these accounts was our Mayor, Karen Bass, along with her senior partners in orchestrating the city’s rebuilding effort. My role was simply that of convener, which meant I would offer some brief words of welcome and framing to establish the terrain for the discussion, and then I would turn things over to the storytellers and the Mayor.

Probably much to your astonishment, I tackled that assignment faithfully and was, in fact, brief. I’ll try anything once.

Because so many of our storytellers that day were Angelenos of color, I made sure to conclude by mentioning that with ICE beginning to make the rounds at that time, the interfaith community of Los Angeles was committed to the safety of every local resident seeking to recover from the fires. And with that, I invited Pastora Tona Rios from Baldwin Park United Methodist Church to offer an opening blessing.

Heartrending stories were shared, with the mayor offering support and taking copious notes to review with her team. It was what a city ought to look like after being leveled by a natural disaster.

Early that evening, I noticed that my email inbox was suddenly being slammed with hate messages. No direct threats to me or to the temple, but the hatred and rage was ugly and menacing, and it was quickly multiplying. As I tried to figure out what was causing all this, my phone rang. It was Rev. Zach Hoover, the head of LA Voice, who wanted to make sure I knew I was the lead story on the home page of Breitbart, the radical right media platform that traffics in misogyny, white supremacism, climate change denial, Covid misinformation, and all manner of conspiracy theories.

I quickly opened Breitbart’s home page, and there I was, photographed directly next to Mayor Bass, who is famously reviled by Breitbart’s readership for her joint

crimes of getting caught being a woman and Black while being Mayor. But it turned out she was only in the photo to get the hate boiling. It was me Breitbart was after – the rabbi who had attacked ICE. The comment section underneath already had more than 3,000 posts.

I don't want to say out loud what was in those emails and posts. But it was clear they were already researching me. So we instantly got to work scrubbing my online footprint – ensuring that my social media wasn't accessible to the public, removing my wife's and children's names and images from anything attached to me, hiding my identity, my contact information, and my home address as well as we could. And I absorbed that this was going to be the new normal for me, for us. Speech would no longer be a fundamental right. It would be dangerous.

I was actually more depressed than afraid that night. I sounded in my own head how so many of you have sounded when we've spoken this past year. I could feel the futility rising inside me. I could feel myself being silenced, being intimidated into consent. And I wondered what I could do that would even matter, even if I was willing to weather the danger that would accompany doing it. What would be the point?

This is the spiritual paralysis that I know fills this room – and not because we're upset there is disagreement about what must be done to enforce our immigration laws and secure our borders. That's a responsibility every nation must tackle. The problem isn't the disagreement. The problem is the effort to suffocate the disagreement, to compel adherence. This is where any policy on any issue, no matter how just it may be, becomes indefensible – becomes a violation of the freedoms both our country and our religious heritage exist to protect.

Throughout history, there have been numerous worldwide lurches toward authoritarianism, and we know they are all across the political spectrum. So this experience of futility is not a left-wing or a right-wing thing. It's an authoritarianism thing, so even if you favor many of the policies being advanced presently through antidemocratic means, you should be careful what you wish for, because I doubt anyone here would refute that such lurches never seem to turn out too well for us Jews.

This, I believe, is the dark underbelly of the futility so many of us have been feeling and talking about. We're all used to losing politically every now and then. That comes with democracy, thank God. What we're not used to is judges facing death threats, universities seeing hundreds of millions of federal research dollars rescinded unless they surrender their academic independence, law firms being extorted into paying ransoms to the executive branch, career civil servants with invaluable expertise being cashiered and replaced by political loyalists, media companies being threatened when their programming opposes the White House,

masked agents without clearly displayed badges whisking people – sometimes citizens – off our streets.

These are not Republican or Democratic policy points. Sometimes, it's not about the policy. It's about how the policy is pursued – whether the goal is to respond to dissent or to crush it.

Whatever you may think about government spending or foreign policy or the Second Amendment or the social safety net, you're not used to any of this, because no American government, at least in our lifetimes, has attempted it. And you've noticed that when you honor your civic reflex to take to the streets in opposition to it, you are not only ignored; you are mocked. You are deployed for political gain by those possessing power. This is what has left so many of us feeling powerless, voiceless, hopeless.

There are a lot of people in this congregation who have long track records of public protest – against both Democratic and Republican administrations of the past – and the pride that comes with having participated in social change. Those collective achievements in our national story are a precious part of our identity, which is why protest became our go-to play as Americans. So what do we do when our go-to play no longer works? When it's still good at creating solidarity and banishing aloneness, but nobody in power is listening?

On this day of ultimate honesty, I want to share an observation that I know will be hard to hear. I believe an important part of what is creating that feeling of futility is that we've gotten used to participation in social change being relatively easy and sufficiently safe.

For at least the last half century – since Saigon fell, ending the Vietnam War era – it has required no more from most of us than clearing your calendar, shlepping through traffic, or possibly booking an airline ticket and hotel room to join in protest movements for causes all across the political spectrum. And with rare exception, doing so has not felt especially risky. So most of us have embraced our go-to play as activists only at very little personal expense. It simply hasn't required that much of us to be good citizens. That doesn't mean that some of us haven't made very real sacrifices in opposing abusers of power, and it doesn't mean that the rest of us wouldn't be willing to do so if we must. It's just that we haven't had to take that test, so I'm not sure how much the last fifty years tell us about ourselves in this regard.

When I think about some of the chances earlier generations of Americans took to earn and protect the freedoms we treasure, it is impossible to miss the difference between public dissent in their time and in ours. A beloved member of our congregation who died just last month, Rabbi Jerry Goldstein, was a member of the

St. Augustine 17. In fact, Rabbi Goldstein was one of two Leo Baeckers who were among the St. Augustine 17 – Rabbi Richard Levy, of blessed memory, was also a part of this small group of rabbis who in June of 1964 traveled to St. Augustine, Florida at the request of Martin Luther King, Jr. and joined with the local Black community in nonviolent protest. Said Rabbi Levy when he looked back on the experience, “It was the first time in my life that I had to confront the fact that I might be facing death.”

In the Deep South, Rabbis Goldstein and Levy and their fifteen partners were surrounded by racist thugs frothing at the mouth as they walked hand in hand with Black citizens toward the city’s old slave market. They were threatened with clubs and rocks and broken glass bottles – and their only protection was the local police, who they knew were no supporters. When they were arrested, they were manhandled, even though they offered no physical resistance. In prison, they were threatened with cattle prods. Rabbi Jerry Goldstein was the first-time father of a baby girl at the time. He was a few years younger than Rabbi Goldberg, who is a first-time father now.

I suspect you sometimes wonder, as I do: What does it take for a human being to risk that much for people they don’t even know? I mean, some of you have submitted yourself to arrest, as I have, in an act of civil disobedience – but the experience is downright performative today by comparison to what these rabbis endured. They handcuff you with plastic zip ties, politely escort you to the police station, and sometimes don’t even bother to book you... or if they do, you’re treated graciously and usually freed inside of an hour. So we who engage in civil disobedience today aren’t inviting broken bottles and cattle prods. And sadly, there’s another dissimilarity between then and now – the brave nonviolent protestors of the past trusted they were moving the needle for historic change; we, sadly, have good reason to suspect we are not. That’s why we feel such futility. So what would it take for us, in an era where we’ve seen that real resistance now carries serious risk, to be courageous enough to do the things that actually might protect others and ourselves and our nation?

Some of you were in this sanctuary this past December when the Leonard I. Beerman Foundation for Peace and Justice honored Maria Ressa, the Filipino and American journalist who was awarded the 2021 Nobel Peace Prize for her astonishing bravery in defending free expression under the autocratic regime of self-described left-leaning populist Rodrigo Duterte. The Philippine president strongarmed the court system into arresting her ten separate times after she relentlessly exposed his violations of human rights. Today, Ressa is free on bail, with only one remaining conviction still left to overturn, while Duterte is in the custody of the International Criminal Court awaiting trial for crimes against humanity... that’ll win you a Nobel Peace Prize.

In her commencement remarks at Vanderbilt University in 2023, she gave plenty of the kind of advice you would expect from someone who had stared down an authoritarian trying to shut her up and put her away: Draw the line for your values. Embrace your fear. Beware of the mob. But she added a few thoughts you might not expect: You have to believe in the good... that people are basically good. Look for your friends. Look for your family. Hug each other. Enjoy the moment. Find love.

Ressa was crystal clear that we don't muster the resolve we need to do what saves us and others while drowning in the details of our dismay. We discover and rededicate ourselves to what gives our lives meaning by *immersing* in what gives our lives meaning. You want to know what will embolden you to take a few risks in your life to honor your values? Stop watching MSNBC or doomscrolling on your phone, and go experience some beauty. Make your loving relationships more loving, and you'll yearn to help someone you see being persecuted feel loved. Wrap yourself in the timeless beauty of art or music, and you'll restore your faith in human potential... and then you'll take a chance to fulfill it.

It may seem counterintuitive that the kind of people who take the risks with their very lives that Maria Ressa and the St. Augustine 17 took are unswerving optimists who believe in life's beauty and humanity's beauty, even in the darkest times. But whenever I have encountered such people, that is their common refrain. That is the part of their "why" – why I risked so much, when others generally don't – that catches you off guard and deeply inspires. They cultivate light when it is dark, so they aren't paralyzed by the dark. They rob it of its power to paralyze. And then they do the things that save others.

A new book was published this year about Rabbi Leo Baeck, who was, as you may recall, the Chief Rabbi of Berlin when the Nazis assumed power. As a Jewish dignitary, he was offered multiple opportunities to save himself by fleeing. He refused every time. As late as 1939, he escorted a trainload of Jewish children to England... and then headed straight back to Germany. This ultimately landed him in Terezin, where survival was a daily achievement. You are doing your Yom Kippur soul-searching sitting in a temple named for such a person.

The new book is written by Paul Marcus, a leading supervisory analyst who studied Baeck's life in order to teach its psychological lessons. Marcus describes how Baeck's practice had always been to study a page of Talmud each morning, and also to read one act from a Greek play in the original Greek before beginning his daily duties. During the Nazi years, of course, that practice would have to change – but perhaps not as you'd guess. No, he didn't abandon his studies nor his lingering in the timelessness of Greek theater. He just woke up at 4 am each day so he could carve out time to stay the same human he had always been, even under Nazi rule.

This, Marcus argues, points to how ordinary people can behave in extraordinary ways when the need runs highest. He writes: “What shines through from the stories of the ‘righteous ones’ is that they epitomized what many would view as a praiseworthy form of life, one characterized by radical autonomy, integration, and humanity.” Instead of being engulfed by the darkness all around them, these rare souls demonstrate an “art of living” that elevates love and beauty above fear and cynicism. It is an orientation that those seeking to compel obeisance don’t see coming and for which they have no antidote.

Baek surely developed his art of living from his deep knowledge of our tradition, which teaches it through countless prayers and blessings and practices. The one I want us all to ponder on this Yom Kippur comes straight from our High Holydays liturgy: *“V’yei-asu chulam agudah achat la’asot r’tzon’cha **b’leivav shalem**”* – we become one with humanity, no longer alone and terrified and consumed by the dark, when we animate the values we’ve spent our lives as Jews cultivating with *leivav shalem* – with full hearts, complete hearts, made tender, even when things are hard, by love and beauty and belief in the human story and our place in it.

This is how we refuse to flee. How we escape the futility. How we find the clarity to take the risks for someone else at greater risk. How we stay the same human beings we have always been, now that those human beings are being put to the test to see if we’re for real.

Are you up for living with a *lev shalem* in this new year? Are you ready to lift yourself up from the despair by turning back toward what makes life beautiful – and then making that your life story, even at the cost of sticking your neck out to defend it in troubled times? If you want to be, but you’re not sure, that’s a pretty honest answer. But I’ve got some good news for you. You’re already doing it just by being a part of this congregation.

This past April, we were approached by the law firm representing Rumeysa Ozturk, the Tufts University graduate student you all remember from that chilling video. She was walking to join her friends to break her Ramadan fast when she was surrounded by six ununiformed people in facemasks, who within seconds had confiscated her phone and backpack and soon would cart her away to what she would discover was government detention. Onlookers repeatedly asked, “Why are you hiding your faces?” as she was cuffed and led away.

She was not given a reason for her capture. She was accused of no crime. What it turned out she had done was co-write an op-ed in her school newspaper that expressed views related to the war in Gaza with which most of us, myself included, disagreed.

A couple weeks later, her attorneys emailed me to ask if Leo Baeck Temple would sign onto an amicus brief objecting to the violation of her constitutional right to express herself freely, no matter how we felt about the things she chose to say. I explained, of course, that this wasn't a decision a congregation's rabbi could make on its behalf, especially not when it involved publicly opposing the illegal actions of a government that proudly speaks of its intention to use its vast powers to punish its perceived enemies. So I approached our senior lay leaders with the request, and in their deliberation, one of them said that all the reasons not to sign our temple's name onto that brief were the reason to sign on. Soon, there was a consensus, which was ultimately backed by all of our officers.

In the entire United States, a grand total of just twenty-seven Jewish organizations, only eight of which were synagogues, committed their names to defend Rumeysa Ozturk while she languished in ICE detention in south Louisiana, suffering from asthma attacks. But when she was freed after her six-week imprisonment, we knew that we had been a part of making it happen... and so, by extension, were you.

I'll be honest – I really didn't know what our temple officers were going to do with that request. Joining that brief was sure to attract media attention and make a target of ourselves not only with the government but also with those in the Jewish community who would rather silence anti-Israel speech than counter it. But we were asked. And it was comforting to discover that we had a little *lev shalem* left in us after all.

You, too, are likely to be asked – by a neighbor, an employee, a student of yours, maybe someone who helps in your home or cares for your kids. And in that moment, you're going to find out a lot about your belief in the human story and your place in it. You'll see for yourself that while we may find some much needed camaraderie – beauty even – in public protests in the year 5786, we are not likely to change too much of what this government chooses to do that way. Our old go-to play is too easy and too safe for an executive branch that isn't interested in our opinions.

So it looks like we're going to have to do this the old-fashioned way. We've spent our entire lives admiring people like Leo Baeck, like Maria Ressa, like the St. Augustine 17 – praising them for their uncommon courage, born from belief in humanity, shepherded by full, loving, principled hearts. In 5786, we'll have to decide if we are willing to do more than just admire them. And if we want the answer to be yes, we'd better start right now, on this day of return to ourselves, on returning to the meaning of our lives, the light in our lives, instead of allowing their darkness to own us, to render us compliant, while we blame them.

I understand this is unsettling to think about. But *im lo achshav, eimatai...* if not now, when? These dark cocoons we are building for ourselves, that we're trusting to keep us safe in the vain and inhumane hope that they'll only persecute them, not us – it's your cocoon, and the surrender it signals, that actually makes things futile. Return to your art of living – return to the same person you've always been – and you will know the answer to what you can do.

The legendary founder of Judaism's Mussar movement, Rabbi Israel Salanter, taught that "the greatest sound in the cosmos is that of someone changing himself and growing from it." From darkness back to light. From despair back to belief. From ugliness back to love. And then to bravery. Let this be the beautiful noise of this new year.

The Beautiful
Words and Music by David Wilcox

I'm looking at the paintings in this great museum
The news of one more shooting made me long to cry
I'd love to work for justice and for peace and freedom
But right now I need a refuge that is quiet and dry
So I come to see the beauty when the world is tragic
An umbrella stops the rain but it won't dry the sky
This play of light and shadow is transcendent magic
And it changes the whole universe, at least inside

In the ocean deep, when these waves are steep
Every hope I keep betrays me – it's the beautiful that saves me

So I'm walking past these priceless works of famous artists
But in between their canvases, it's cold white wall
These painters found a crucible for their catharsis
But they knew that no rendition could contain it all
I'm fearful of the riptide in the sea of sorrow
And I don't have any faith to make these waters part
And if I venture out there I would drown a martyr
And it feels so overwhelming, I can barely start

In the ocean deep, when these waves are steep
Every hope I keep betrays me – it's the beautiful that saves me

The woman at the coat check hands me back my raincoat
"Stay warm out there," she smiles, and looks me in the eye
I take her simple kindness like we're in the same boat

And we all need some protection from the storm outside
We are underneath the cloud of all this dark emotion
But I'll make it through the storm because I've warmed my heart
A wooden hull can rest above a deep dark ocean
And a window into beauty is a place to start.