

Rabbi Ken Chasen
“If Not Now, When?”
Leo Baeck Temple
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Yom Kippur 5783

The Jewish calendar offers us no day of greater soulful solemnity than this day of Yom Kippur, in which we will immerse until the sun goes down tomorrow evening. Of course, some Yom Kippur observances are more solemn than others – when we are called to do this deep self-work in the midst of deeply sobering times.

Would that we could focus upon our inner lives without our troubling outer world distracting us so. And yet we can all acknowledge that our myriad anxieties about the state of our country and our world have crept inward, have they not? That is, they are now a part of our inner life, too, and not talking about it doesn't make it somehow less so.

For most of our lives, even for the most elderly among us, gathering on Yom Kippur in this country, which has extended unprecedented opportunity to the Jewish people, has streamlined the sacred task of this day. Knowing that we were safe, in a land whose virtues and even whose vices were stable and reliable, we understood the spiritual agenda and pursued it unfettered. It was a luxury we only occasionally even noticed, so expected was it.

But that was then, and this is now. We who live in this land have never been bound to one another by less than at this moment.

When I was a child, it was hard to think of what didn't bind us as a nation. No matter how deep the racial, religious or political rifts, our common tether to one another as Americans still felt like it was pretty universal. For me, the surest symbol both of what was and of what is no more is the annual Independence Day Parade in the north shore suburbs of Chicago, where every year I rode my bicycle, decorated with red, white and blue crepe paper strung through its spokes. That's what the parade was for me in the late 1960s and early 70s. This past July 4th, that same parade was where seven people were murdered and 48 others were wounded when a QAnon conspiracist my son Ben's age opened fire with a semiautomatic weapon. Among the murdered was Jacki Sundheim, 63 years old, who was the coordinator for lifecycle ceremonies at my childhood synagogue.

As you surely recall, the tragedy did nothing to unify a grieving nation. It only furthered the split among us regarding America's one-of-a-kind-in-the-entire-world gun culture. It didn't unite us, because it seems nothing can unite us anymore.

Believe it or not, it was not all that long ago when that wasn't true. You may remember that a week and a half after 9/11, President George W. Bush registered a 90% approval rating from Americans, the highest number ever achieved in the history of American polling. You can't get 90% of Americans to agree that it was hot out today, but 21 years ago, 90% of Americans — for an all too fleeting moment — stood with the President of the United States. And of course, we all know that some of the things around which we united as a country at that time proved to be wrong; people of all political persuasions agree on that now, even then-President Bush. But not everything we united for was a mistake, and even when we did err, we did so sincerely seeking to unify and strengthen and comfort one another — and we did so not at a time of universal good feeling, but at the precise moment when most of us felt we were facing the darkest and most dangerous time in our lives... a time not all that unlike now.

But no, there is nothing on which 90% of Americans can agree anymore. The closest we can get to that nowadays is the 74% of Americans, polled just two weeks ago, who agree that our democracy, the foundation for our entire way of life, is imperiled. On this, we can mostly agree. And why? Because since we last marked Yom Kippur together inside this sanctuary in the year 5780, perhaps the most fundamental shared assumption of our lives as Americans ceased to exist — the peaceful transfer of power after an election... the simple acknowledgment of the math regarding who won and who lost.

Regardless of which kinds of political policies we each prefer, we have all lived in an America in which our desired ideology has been defeated at the ballot box. We all know that pain of watching the election of a mayor or a governor or a president who is going to lead us in a direction we are certain is wrong. But it was always a given that the defeat wasn't imaginary and had to be accepted. We have never, until now, lived in an America in which candidates for public office can declare that an election outcome need only be respected if they win.

From the time our children barely can speak, we teach them that they cannot always win and must acknowledge defeat with honesty and grace. We teach Little Leaguers to shake hands at the end of the game, but for the first time in this country's history, those who seek to lead us do not presumptively hold themselves to the same expectation we hold for Little Leaguers.

For us — as Jews, as Americans, as humans — this has consequences far beyond the mere decay of decency. Tonight, I wish to look at those consequences through the lens of one of the earliest, best known and most often cited moral teachings from our rabbinic tradition. It is a lesson from the legendary Hillel the Elder, written two thousand years ago and made timeless by its inclusion in Pirke Avot, the Ethics of Our Sages. It has three component parts: “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?”

If I am not for myself, who will be for me? This is an understanding that comes naturally to the Jew – that’s probably why Hillel wrote it first. You see, the rabbinate itself only developed as a product of Jewish exile. When the Great Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans, and Jews were dispersed into other lands, there arose a need for religious leadership in those places where Jews lived within host cultures. Rabbis would provide that leadership, and Hillel’s words would become a necessary reminder that we Jews would need to become watchful self-advocates in a large and sometimes dangerous world.

Our fate as a minority people in varied lands has been uneven throughout Jewish history. Tragically, every culture that was once noted for welcoming us hospitably ended up becoming a house of horrors from which our ancestors either fled or were expelled. America is the latest – and greatest – host of the Jewish people. What factors might enable America to escape the historical pattern, for the sake of our children and grandchildren?

If history is any indicator, our country’s democratic norms will be the deciding factor. It’s not a coincidence that our people has flourished in representative, non-authoritarian regimes – and has run for its life when those regimes have collapsed. None less than Louis Brandeis, the first Jew ever to ascend to the U.S. Supreme Court, wrote that “among the Jews, democracy was not an ideal merely, it was a practice.” And why? Because democratic systems are built upon “submission to leadership as distinguished from authority” – a necessary precondition for embattled minorities to survive under majority rule.

This explains why Jews were involved in the cultivation of democratic norms on this land ever since the 1600s. It was Jonas Phillips, a Jewish veteran of the Revolutionary War, who led the way in petitioning the Constitutional Convention for the inclusion of what became Article VI, granting American Jews the unprecedented right to hold federal office. America’s earliest Jews understood from the very beginning that a system of checks and balances wasn’t just good for national governance; it was their essential protection against the whims of a ruler, who could easily scapegoat them, oppress them, even exile them when politically convenient, as happened routinely in other countries. If you are grateful to be a Jew living in this land, as opposed to the places where your ancestors came from, you have this country’s commitment to democracy to thank for your good fortune.

So when rabbis stand before their congregations and talk about preserving democracy, they’re not talking about politics; they’re talking about Jewish life... your Jewish life and mine.

If you think it's just happenstance that antisemitic speech and acts are on the rise, precisely as democratic norms are on the decline, I can prescribe a good history book or two that will help. As the Jewish Partnership for Democracy – a network convening Jews and Jewish institutions across the religious and political spectrum, from Orthodox to Reform, from conservative to liberal – asserted just this past February: “It is this democratic system and the processes it enshrines, not the outcomes it produces, that protects minorities like the Jewish community and enables this country to pursue the never-ending work of becoming a more perfect union.” That is to say, there will be plenty of time to fight for your favored tax policy or international trade agreement, but when you're a Jew, preserving the system that allows those debates to happen... and to include you... that's Job One.

So when you hear people maligning congressional gridlock and praising authoritarian-style leadership because it “gets things done”... when you hear that only 3.5% of Americans would “switch their vote from a candidate of their own party even after seeing that candidate do or support something explicitly anti-democratic”... when you hear more than a quarter of American Millennials believe it's “unimportant... to choose their leaders in free elections”... when you hear that one out of every six Americans thinks it would be good for the “army to rule” us... when you hear one presidential candidate say he'll accept the results of the election if he wins, and you hear that same candidate's vanquished opponent refer to him as an “illegitimate president” three years into his elected term... when you hear any excuse, any diminution, of a violent insurrection waged upon our nation's capital, you should know you are hearing the sounds of American Jewish life in danger. And if I am not for myself, who will be for me?

Of course, Hillel didn't stop there. He also taught: **“If I am only for myself, what am I?”** Anyone who is a Yom Kippur regular knows that a large portion of our attention on this Day of Atonement is directed toward those who depend upon us to get a fair shake in their lives. Just minutes ago, we repented for: hardening our hearts to those who are suffering, for abusing our power over others, for dishonesty in our business, for succumbing to our greed, and for engaging in exploitation for our own benefit. We generally prefer to leave it at that, feeling that whenever we get down into the weeds of what actual behaviors of ours constitute those violations, the spiritual elegance of this holy day becomes contaminated with the mundane. But our tradition doesn't sanction our preference to speak of such matters only in platitudes. Real *teshuvah* – real turning – requires us to give life to our words on this Yom Kippur by taking action to at least temper our appetite for still more... more power, more wealth, more advantage.

Fortunately, the same democratic norms that serve our self-interest also serve the interests of those in whose oppression we are tacitly or actively complicit. Wrote Justice Brandeis, “To describe the Jew as an individualist is to state a most misleading half-truth. He has to a rare degree merged his individuality and his interests in the community

of which he forms a part.” We do this because we know democratic systems rise and fall upon the premise of equal justice for all, equal opportunity for all. Once it becomes clear that the moneyed will be favored over the impoverished, that the majority will be favored over the minority, be it racial, religious, cultural or gender, the gap between those who have the wealth, the rights, the power, and those who don’t grows to unsustainable proportions, and a democracy descends into a resentment-filled rush to the narrowest, most destructive forms of self-interest. Sound familiar?

Our freedom is a commodity we cherish, and justly so – but as a society, we are resisting any reasonable calls to limit our personal freedoms for the sake of the greater good – to ensure that everyone has *enough* rights, protections, money, power. Those limits are what sustain democracies; they’re what make citizens trust their democracy. Back in 1965, a time when Americans were very much leaning into our democracy, CEOs earned around 24 times the amount of the average worker. By 1980, it was 42 times as much. In 2021, CEOs earned 299 times the amount of the average worker... and trust in the system is collapsing.

Don’t believe me? Here’s a tiny but illustrative example that’s close to home. This is my ticket stub from Game 1 of the 1988 World Series. I brought it tonight for two reasons. First, because about a million people will tell you they were there when Kirk Gibson hit that homer – I’ve got proof. And second, because the price of the ticket is \$40. Now, that’s in 1988 dollars, but when you put that through an inflation calculator, the ticket costs \$100 today.

Nobody will be going to this year’s World Series for anything close to \$100 – and yet in 1988, the owners and the players and the networks and the advertisers all felt they could earn their keep without pricing all but the wealthiest fans out of the experience. Today’s America – in far more ways than just baseball, in far more ways than just money – is becoming a sport for the select few. We repented for that earlier this evening. If we fail to turn our words tonight into actions when we vote, when we hire, when we invest, when we consider the needs of those who look or love or live differently than we do, we will violate both of Hillel’s first two teachings, and increase the risk to ourselves and our embattled nation.

Which brings us to Hillel’s third teaching: **If not now, when?** You know, the one thing about being a rabbi... we are held accountable by the fact that there will always be a public record of what we said and when we said it. This is not a sermon, frankly, that I really ever wanted to give – but giving it too soon would have been unhelpful, unduly alarming, destabilizing. I pray I haven’t done that. But this is not a sermon that can be given be given too late, either. If not now, when?

Yes, we who live in this land have never been bound to one another by less than at this moment – and that is perilous for the American experiment and our place as Jews

within it. But I do not believe I am giving this sermon too late. And when I ask my teachers and mentors and colleagues and friends, my partners in faith leadership from different backgrounds and traditions and lived experiences – especially those who are older and have longer memories than I – they don't think it's too late, either. There is plenty of reason to hold fast to hope – to convert hope into commitment to revitalizing our vulnerable democratic norms. If not now, when?

And so we've spoken the words tonight. We said what needed to be said, what our tradition wisely calls upon to say. What, now, will those words look like in *your* life in this new year 5783? What will you do to demonstrate your commitment to restoring the fraying rope that still tethers us to one another in this country which has been so good to us? What personal self-interest will you be willing to suspend in order to front-burner the preservation of this great democracy? What inconvenience will you welcome in order to be a part of a healing? Who will you attempt to mobilize to participate in our system, to believe that it matters? What will you be willing to lose on, so that others will have their chance to win – so that we might all win?

Tomorrow morning, Rabbi Berney will share some very tangible actions you can take with our community to bring the prayers we've spoken tonight to life in this country – for our own sake, for the sake of our human family, for the sake of this nation which has earned our devotion and needs it very badly right now. But that's just the part we can do together. This Yom Kippur, for every one of us, is for looking deep into our souls, and asking what this national moment, precarious like none we've known before, demands of us... demands of you.

Those of you who have joined us for our weekly Shabbat Table Blessings on Zoom are familiar with our tradition's formula for parents blessing their children. The words come from the Torah, first spoken by Jacob: "*Y'simcha Elohim k'Ephraim v'chiM'nashe*" – "May God make you like Ephraim and Menashe," who were Jacob's grandsons, not his children. It's curious that in his parent's blessing, Jacob doesn't choose to reference any of his own children, not even his beloved Joseph. Why Ephraim and Menashe? A midrash suggests that it's because Jacob foresaw that his descendants would end up dispersed among many peoples, and because Ephraim and Menashe grew up in Egypt, they were to be our models for sustaining Jewish life and values in lands that might confront perils and become spiritually hostile.

Y'simcha Elohim k'Ephraim v'chiM'nashe – may God make you like Ephraim and Menashe... in this land that needs us as much as we need it.