

**A Renewed Covenant of Citizenship
Kol Nidre
2017**

Most of what I've learned in life I learned at Jewish summer camp. Well...maybe I'm overstating it a bit. Much of what I learned about being Jewish I learned at Camp Swig, and since I'm now a rabbi, you can do the math. Amidst the verdant trees and rolling hills of the Santa Cruz Mountains, and between meals of institutional fare and burgeoning romantic interests, skilled Jewish educators imparted lessons when we weren't looking.

One of the classic programs involved that artifact of the 60s and 70s: Values Clarification. And one particular version posed the question: *Am I a Jewish American or American Jew?* The

struggle to determine which was the noun and which the adjective tested what was more central to our nascent identities. The answer, as is often the case for Jews, was less important than our wrestling with the question.

Over the last few decades, concerns for Jewish identity have launched a thousand Federation appeals and have inspired an equal number of Sunday School curricula. The Great Adversary was often the bogeyman of assimilation, with a process summed up by many observers: We spent the first 50 years of our time on these shores proving how American we could be, and the last 50 exploring how Jewish we should be.

For all Americans, our nearly sacred civic melting pot is both an ideal and a threat, uniting us in a striving to balance reverence for origins with aspirations toward a shared experience. But somewhere along the way in the last 30 or 40 years, this dynamic tension became strained, and the fabric of our national tapestry began to fray. Many of us retreated into tribes of race, religion, ethnicity, class, gender and ideology, loosening the ties that bind us in this still unfinished experiment in democracy.

Pride in history, culture and narrative is critical to our humanity and sense of self. But a disproportionate, exclusionary regard for one's own imperils the American ideal as it threatens the cohesion of our nation.

The causes of this demographic disconnect are myriad, and there are many who seek to explain it. Its symptoms are evident in the extreme polarization and reckless demonization that passes for today's civil discourse. And it's this retreat into what has been termed "identity politics" that is often blamed for the unprecedented nature of the last election.

Easy or seemingly simple descriptions of cause and effect are as uninformed as they are inadequate. There are many reasons for the last electoral outcome, too much money in politics being chief amongst them. But when surveying the last few decades leading up to our recent contest, it's clear that, for many, the uncompromising quest for particular pride has

supplanted our collective common cause toward achieving the common good.

A recent book by Columbia professor Mark Lilla speaks to these concerns briefly, thoughtfully and provocatively. Less a prescription for change than a point of departure for a national conversation, Lilla holds up a mirror to the failures of his fellow Liberals. And while he provides a remedy for a more successful Democratic politics, his message embraces the fate and future of our entire national enterprise.

Lilla takes us on a short history of the rise of current Conservative and Liberal ideologies. The one thing they share—the one priority and objective they sanctify more than any other: *a near idolatry of the individual*. For Conservatives,

it is the amoral, rugged individualism of Reaganism, spread by the rise of right wing media. And for Liberals, it is the breakdown into exclusive, self-defining identities, cultivated with increasing narrowness on college campuses.

The last election was, in many ways, a repudiation of Right and Left, creating a vacuum filled by a perceived renegade outsider. But in studies of the election and its aftermath, it's clear that our growing tribal identities played a significant role. And it was an appeal to the fears of *that most threatening tribe*, the shape shifting Other, that drove us to our current condition. The consequence, as Fareed Zakaria recently observed, is that the dominance of identity

renders compromise not only inconceivable, but immoral.

We Jews now find ourselves caught in the middle—an empowered elite in the eyes of the oppressed, and a radical outlier in the hearts of “real Americans.” As a proud Liberal, I am heartbroken at how historic partnerships with former allies have shattered on the anvil of identity politics. *Intersectionality*, the mutual support by each oppressed group for all others, has uniquely and unfairly excluded Jews. And the issue that has driven the fatal wedge, eliciting amnesia for the disproportionate and courageous Jewish support for every beleaguered group in America: The State of Israel.

While it's another sermon entirely, there is broad disagreement amongst us about the policies and politics in Israel. But the vast majority of us support Israel's security and right to exist. And yet, in the eyes of many immersed in identity politics, that is a deal breaker, and thus we are justified to press: *Ma nishtana ha-medina hazeh?* Why is the State of Israel different from all other nations? Why are the standards for behavior different, its compassion and outreach ignored, while the tyranny and genocide of other regimes is excused and exonerated?

Israel derangement amongst many on the Left transcends reason, history and fact. It has morphed too easily into a related, but distinct psychosis: Anti-semitism. And it is experienced

most directly by those on the front lines of the identity wars: students on our college campuses.

How many emerging Jewish student leaders have been challenged or excluded for an alleged inability to vote fairly, *not because they are overt Zionists*, but because they are simply Jewish?

How many well-intentioned Jewish students, inspired by their parents' progressive campus convictions, have found themselves in gatherings purported to support Black, Moslem or LGBTQ students, only to confront unrelated calls for BDS or even Holocaust denial?

The costs of an all-consuming identity politics are not abstract, not merely the fodder for political debate and election postmortems. They

impact and change real lives, and they imperil the viability of our imperfect union.

I join with Lilla in the unqualified demand that our nation confront bigotry, discrimination and inequity. As I will discuss tomorrow in Bellevue, our nation has much repentance and repair to do with the African-American community amongst many historically oppressed peoples.

And I genuinely appreciate that, as a White Man, even as a Jewish White Man, I continue to benefit from a dominant status within a protected class that has come to me easily and at the expense of so many. *This legacy must be addressed—these wrongs made right—these denied people made whole.*

But identity politics *over-all-else* only serves to balkanize us, to irreparably divide us, to deny our ability to talk to one another let alone understand one another. And for those of us who care deeply that the power and policies of government should confront and address the needs of the most vulnerable, we need to win power in order to implement those policies.

To do that, we need to appeal to more and more Americans of all reasonable and well-intentioned beliefs, values and affinities. We need to speak to hearts and minds, inspiring an empathy and identification with the ideals to which we all aspire and the dignity we all want and deserve. The Civil Rights movement was successful, not because it narrowly focused on

the travails of Black Americans alone, but because it spoke to the dream of all Americans—one in which none can be left behind if we truly want to move forward together.

We are more than a loose confederacy of disparate tribes thrown together by circumstance and necessity. As Lilla posits, we must reclaim the notion that we are a nation of citizens. *“We the people”... are in this together.* As citizens, we share a vision, accept mutual responsibility, embrace noble sacrifice, are devoted in our duty, committed to common principles, and dedicated to securing inalienable rights for all so that our nation shall live up to its highest principles. As Franklin Roosevelt inspired us nearly a century ago: “...this Nation is not merely a Nation of

**independence, but it is, if we are to survive,
bound to be a Nation of interdependence...”**

**That notion of citizenship, in all that it entails,
is closely entwined with our tradition’s concept of
brit—of covenant. This eternal promise and
compelling pact binds each of us, and all of us, to
God and to one another. For our response to
mitzvot, to God’s commands, does not bring gain
to God, but rather enriches others as it sanctifies
the self.**

**The civic values of individual dignity,
equitable justice, personal empowerment and
natural rights—the staples of citizenship--emerge
from covenant and its most fundamental
expressions in the Torah: That we are all created
b’tzelem elohim—that each one of us possesses**

inherent value; and that from that realization, we are obligated to one another, and thus compelled to act for one another, bearing in heart and mind those 3 iconic words: *Ve'ahavta l're'echa kamocho*—to love, relate and respond to the other as we love, relate and respond to our own needs and hopes.

There's one more bit of Americana that speaks to our need to transcend unrestrained identity politics. It's also expressed by three little words found on things as mundane as our currency, this time from the Latin: *E Pluribus Unum*—Out of Many, One—wisdom echoed in the prayer we offered this evening, Shema. For just as God is multi-faceted yet absolutely singular, so too, are we, as a nation, far greater as the sum of

our diverse parts than we are in the diffusion of our individual needs.

May our nation continue to endure and thrive, not through uniformity but through unity, not by the pressing of personal grievance but by the pursuit of the common good, rising above that which divides us to secure that which binds us as one nation, under one God, moving forward together to meet our best, deserved destiny.

Amen.