Vote Your Voice!
Rosh Hashanah
2018/5759

I remember the late Summer of 1980: Newly earned driver's license in hand, with its promise of independence and mobility; recently returned from my Confirmation trip to Israel and my first time quite so far apart from family; on the cusp of that all important junior year in High School and the gateway to all that lay ahead.

Amidst that potent cocktail of raging hormones and germinating identity grew a passion for politics. Learning about and participating in the political process was more than a longing to become an adult—it seemed like a real, concrete way to make a difference in the world.

Though I was still too young to cast a ballot, I knew that 1980 was quite a wild political season. Ted Kennedy had risen on a wave of nostalgia and crashed again on that bridge in Chappaquiddick. Jimmy Carter had forged a peace in the Middle East but governed a languid economy. And the formerly too extreme Ronald Reagan climbed the ranks of a rising Conservative movement.

For a politically precocious 16 year-old, Reagan was far too conformist and reactionary, Carter too milquetoast and unremarkable, and so I chose to throw my lot behind the dark horse maverick, John Anderson. I learned about his policies, which seemed fresh and distinct from the other two partisan paths. I emblazoned my bedroom window facing the street with his sticky

swag, an act of devotion for which my friends still mock me to this day. And I worked the streets of San Francisco's Embarcadero, spreading the good news to passersby in the Financial District who were, let's just say, a bit less fired up in their civic passions when *noodged* on their lunch hours by an overzealous, lanky teen.

And though there is much that is wistfully funny about my youthful idealism bordering on the naïve, there is also something I wish I could recapture: That first sense of sacred, civic obligation to serve a cause greater than my own; a deep belief in the ability to translate ideals into action in the public square; and an unqualified confidence that elections mattered in determining my fate and the fate of our nation.

It is trite to warn that this or that election is the most important one in a generation. But in looking toward our path to the ballot box in less than 60 days, this cautionary cliché is frighteningly on the mark. We all know *ma nishtana ha-election hazeh*—why this election is different from all others. Our nation--our world--is at a crossroads, and what we choose *to do or not do* in the next two months will profoundly alter the lives of our children and grandchildren.

And yet, there is painful irony between the critical importance of what's at stake and the value many have come to ascribe to voting—especially in a midterm election. In 2016, a presidential contest that historically generates more interest, 40% of those eligible did not vote.

And for those whose future is inextricably tied to this biennial choice, fewer than 1 in 2 18-29-year-olds took the time to punch a chad for the world they'll inherit. In the late 60s, my father, a rabbi in Baltimore, buried young men returning in flag-draped coffins from Vietnam. The twisted logic of 18 year-olds dying for this country, yet unable to vote until the age of 21, led to the passage of the 26th amendment, which lowered the age of eligibility to 18. It is a tragic waste that so many of today's young adults do not embrace a right their peers perished to provide.

If there was ever a time to rise and overcome these trends, *this is that time*! If there was ever a time to insure that *we are registered* and actually

vote, and that *5 of our friends are registered* and actually vote, *this is that time*!

What's also different about this election are the unprecedented obstacles we face. The gerrymandering of districts resembling microscopic viruses for partisan advantage is now the norm. The enduring legacy of the Jim Crow era to suppress minority voters threatens many of the strides achieved through Civil Rights. And the undeniable evidence of sabotage, espionage and cyber-warfare by an international arch adversary has sown chaos and doubt in the integrity of our elections. It is no wonder that many are cynical about the value of their vote, apathetic in their will to vote, and fatigued by the never-ending outrage of it all.

But the total cost of these challenges is more than one vote cast in one election. These challenges endanger the very foundation of our democracy, and thus the enduring freedoms we've come to cherish and depend upon.

And of all the peoples who have benefited from the promise of democracy to secure the strength of our freedoms in this remarkable nation, *we Jews have been abundantly blessed*. When I teach about the more than three millennia history of the our people, I remind them that as 21st century American Jews, we are the luckiest, most secure, most accepted and most established generation of Jews to have ever lived.

The tone for this sanctuary nation was set early on, beautifully expressed in George

Washington's letter to the Jews of Newport, Rhode Island in 1790:

> **the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens in giving it on all occasions their effectual support.—**

And we did indeed give our support, body and soul, to this nation that embraced us with so encompassing a welcome. Our hands built businesses and formed service organizations. Our blood stained the soil of conflict to defend its existence. And we ground the gears of democracy through the political process, as both candidates for positions of power and committed voters to this most essential franchise. It is our

right as good and full citizens of these United States. It is our obligation to secure the stability and the wellbeing of the nation that has given us so much.

This mandate, this responsibility, this *mitzvah* to vote as Jews in America is also informed by our tradition. If politics is morality made real in the public square, then we possess a wealth of values to inform and inspire the call of the ballot box.

Even in early rabbinic times, when democracy was something more Greek than Hebrew, Rabbi Yitzhak taught that: *"A ruler is not to be appointed unless the community is first consulted*."

And I see other inspiration in the central act of this service—the *Sounding of the Shofar*. The

blessing recited before reads: *Blessed are You Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe, Who Makes Us Holy with mitzvot, and commands us <u>lishmoa kol shofar</u>—to hear the voice of the shofar*.

In a few short words, two key acts of this season come to symbolize the larger hopes for our lives and for our world. The first word, *lishmoa*, like the *Shma* prayer, requires us to *hear*, to *listen*, to *truly take to heart* the voice of others as we do God's voice. And *kol shofar*, the voice of the shofar, that singular and searing sound of conscience and call to action, is a voice whose power lies in our willingness to amplify it in the world.

For if you care about the fundamental need for facts as a basis for a shared reality: *Tekiah--sound the voice of your shofar*. If you value truth as a noble pursuit toward a higher wisdom: *Truah--sound the voice of your shofar*. If you strive to, in words of Torah, *serve and secure* the earth as stewards of this God given gift, a habitable planet we hope to bequeath to our grandchildren: *Shvarim--sound the voice of your shofar*. And if we are to be pursuers of justice as God longs for us to be, impressing right and equity into the social fabric of our fraying culture —*Tekiah G'dolah—sound the voice of your shofar--* from the lush forests of the Olympic Peninsula to the warm sands of Miami Beach.

And in words so profound and poignant that we will read them on Yom Kippur morning; words that define the very essence of our bond with God and work in the world, we are challenged: ***U'v'charta b'chayim l'ma'an ti'chiye ata v'zareicha*** **—*Choose life so that you and your offspring may live*.**

For of all the free will choices that we make in our lives, the simple and the sacred, the act of voting is as simple to do as it is sacred in its expression of your vision, of God's vision, for a better world.

***<u>Let me be clear</u>*: *This is not a partisan plea—this is our duty as Americans—all Americans*. It is a common call of citizenship incumbent on us all. And perhaps a recommitment to this blessed,**

civic act holds the key to reaffirming the bonds we continue to share.

Every 4th of July, something meaningful and moving takes place at Monticello, Thomas Jefferson's home. In so many ways, it is an appropriate setting, reflecting our founder's contradictions as both slaveholder and architect of our grand experiment in democracy. It is a contradiction inherent in the American experience, a journey of moral peaks and valleys, but one of an unqualified upward trajectory, of the imperfect striving for the ideal.

Each Independence Day, a group of aspiring citizens take their oaths of naturalization at Monticello to become fully endowed Americans. One of them, Kelebohile Nkhereany, came here

from Lesotho, Africa when she was 13. Her mother brought her for a better education and a better life. It took her almost 40 years to become a citizen, in many ways amplified by her desire to vote, to contribute fully to the nation that has given her so much. She shared:

"… I want to participate in the political system in a fair way. There're a lot of bills that have been passed, a lot of legislation, and I benefited from it. I felt like it's time for me to participate…I also realize that if I'm not voting, I won't be able to go to Albany, go to City Hall, go to Washington, and talk to the public officials, because I don't vote. If you're voting at least you're saying I support something… And to me I feel so honored and so blessed that I can say I'm contributing to X

because I believe in what they're doing. That's what it's all about: Being a citizen means being engaged, and really for me it's important because in Africa some people become leaders forever and ever and I don't think that's fair. Here you get an opportunity to at least pick someone that is choice. You can have a choice, and you can cast that vote."

How strange, and yet how inspiring it is that we often only truly appreciate the rights we have when seen through the aspiring eyes of others.

When it comes down to it, in the face of apathy and cynicism, against the forces both foreign and domestic that seek to deny this basic right or destroy our trust in this most critical act,

***voting is an act of faith*. And we are nothing if not a people of faith.**

The words of the great sage Maimonides continue to speak to Jews in 2018 America: *Ani Ma'amin—I still believe*. *Ani Ma'amim*--I still believe in the ideals for which this nation stands. *Ani Ma'amim*--I still believe in the triumph of good and right and life over hate and fear and darkness. *Ani Ma'amim*--I still believe that I have a voice—a voice that resounds in sweet harmony with the voice of God, if we would only sound it loudly and clearly and well. *Ken y'hi ratzon*. May this be God's will. Amen.