

Democracy: Apply Liberally
By Rabbi Weiner
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The High Priest awakens at dawn. He solemnly puts on the vestments dedicated to this holiest of days, Yom Kippur, preparing himself for his highest duty. He walks through the Temple courtyard and approaches the central sanctum. He stands before the Holy of Holies and asks for forgiveness from a gracious God for himself and his family. Now, he is ready to represent the entire people's plea for mercy.

He lays his hands on the head of a goat, as commanded by God, and confesses all the sins of the people. This symbolically, if not magically, transfers the community's faults onto the beast. The sacrifice is dedicated to the mysterious Azazel, a place or being that is the site or source of demonic power. The animal will be led out to a rocky, unforgiving area in

the wilderness to be set loose to fall to its death. Thus, evil will be exiled from the midst of the people for the coming new year.

It is a strange, archaic, but deeply powerful and purging ritual. The Torah recounts it amongst the many kinds of sacrifices Aaron and the priests offer for Yom Kippur. And yet, its bizarre nature belies its resounding force down to our current moment.

On its face, it's a kind of crazy and primitive act better left to the annals of history and scholarship than serious consideration today. At best, there is a sure and sacred value to this concrete visualization of our limitations and the need to transcend them. At worst, this account has laid the groundwork for some of the most violent and damaging events in human history.

In later, Christian translations of the Torah, the word “scapegoat” was coined to describe the object of this ceremony. Thus, was born a word and concept that describes millennia of pain, suffering, and persecution. These afflictions were borne by civilization’s most vulnerable to rationalize the failures of the powerful and relieve them of the guilt that might have changed them for the better.

How excruciatingly ironic that the very term and idea emerging from the Jewish people’s most central practice on its holiest day was twisted against us. For we have served as history’s most enduring and universal scapegoat. We are the bane of other’s faults and failures, the object of blind ignorance and deliberate delusion, the easy mark for the mighty, the manipulative, and the malevolent.

Anti-Judaism, and later, antisemitism, is amongst humanity's most toxic and timeless hatreds. It morphs and mutates and metastasizes to provide justification for our seemingly eternal victimization. It is a pathology of soul and society, requiring little fact, consistency, or rationality to gain purchase.

We have been condemned for spreading disease and disrepute as the lowest denizens of the gutter. Yet at the same time, we are indicted for our influence over the powerful to move nations and exploit leaders. When there was a need to fear the foreigner, *we were there*. When there was a reason to suspect an internal fifth column, *we were there*. When they blamed all ills on capitalists, cosmopolitans, and internationalists, *we were there*. When communists,

anarchists, and revolutionaries were the greatest threat, *we were there.*

In essence, as fears of The Other arose—or when the dynamics of dueling powers in a country required a bogeyman to rally against and distract from those who truly bore the blame—we Jews have always provided a ready, easy target.

And while that may feel to many like a feature of our distant, depressing past, recent events, movements, and ideologies have conspired to make us, again and again, a convenient and obvious target. In our increasingly polarized world, in which left and right, of color and white, rich and poor, stand at opposing, irreconcilable ends of the spectrum, the two extremes bend into a circle, meeting at the intersection of Jewish culpability.

To the more vehement amongst newly empowered communities of color, we are part of the white supremacist structure, warranting more contempt in that we seek to use our history to hide our privilege. To fascists and true white supremacists, we are worse than the “dusky” hordes that threaten them. For we are behind minority and immigrant discontent, using them as puppets to replace “real” citizens and to undermine the divinely ordained status of Aryan purity.

And for those who still feel even a modicum of discomfort in trotting out the tired and trite bigotry of their grandparents, there is the convenient repository of all Jewish “evil”: The State of Israel. For some, an overt, wear-it-on-your sleeve despising of Jews as Jews—it’s *understandable* but still rings politically incorrect in polite company. A demonization of Israel that defies all context, history, and reason: *That will fly*, even at the

poshest celebrity parties and most refined campus cocktail soirees.

But the critical bulwark against this rising, shape-shifting, and cyclical virus has been for the last three centuries the political system of Liberal Democracy. And its haven has been our very own United States of America, which continues to be its imperfect, striving, yet most successful representation in human history.

This philosophy, expressed through the ideals of the Enlightenment and realized through political Emancipation, enabled us to emerge, bleary-eyed, from the darkness of Europe's ghettos to sit equally at the banquet table of civilization.

When exported to these shores, American Jews have been and continue to be the most successful, prosperous,

safest, and freest Jews to have ever lived. And as the State of Israel rose from the ashes of the Shoah to work the fertile soil of our ancient homeland to birth a modern nation, America's post World War II commitment to rebuilding Liberal Democracy gave the fledgling nation its wings.

And therein lies the most recent crisis of concern in today's America: *Liberal Democracy itself is under attack from all sides*. We Jews have always been history's canary in the coalmine: *As go the Jews, so goes that nation*. But it is especially true today, as rising, renewed antisemitism reflects growing assaults on the principles that sustain this 250-year experiment in self-government.

These attacks are more troubling now in that they arise from both the radical, authoritarian right and the illiberal, influential left--though rightest leanings have always proven

more dangerous. These attacks threaten three key tenets of American exceptionalism and Jewish wellbeing: The centrality of the individual, the sacredness of free speech, and the primacy of reason.

Our tradition holds the sanctity and uniqueness of the individual as fundamental. From the very first verses of Torah, we learn that we were created *B'tzelem Elohim*—in the image of God—each of us possessing a spark of divinity. The rabbis expand upon this ideal, going so far as to say that one who saves a single life, it is as if they have saved the world.

As the ancient world sacrificed human life to the whims of the gods and their self-interested priests, Judaism issued a clarion call for the value of each person. And this notion made its way into the hearts, minds, and pens of the humanistic founders who forged us into a nation.

And yet, the subsuming of the individual to the exalting of the group has become the defining lens through which much is judged today. Reactionaries see a bowing to the authority of the strong man as preferable to the messiness of representative government. And uber-leftists see group identity and the structures emerging from it as core to who we are as human beings, rising above even personal merit, commitment, and achievement.

These views denigrate both natural law--our inherent value as human beings by virtue of our birth-- and the Torah—our inherent worth by virtue of our place in God’s Creation. And both threaten the future of this nation and our place in it as Jews.

God created the world with speech: *Y’hi Or—Let there be light*—and there was light. God was further revealed to us in a

text, appealing to both our intellect and our spirit. Torah speaks to us in a language that was as accessible as it was demanding of constant interpretation, legislation, and expansion. For Jews, words are a gateway to truth and a dialogue with its ultimate Source.

Our nation's founders cherished the freedom to speak as integral to a healthy society. It is a messy and trying right, especially in providing space for the most toxic views. But the risk is worth the challenge—at least, that used to be the standard.

From campus codes equating speech with violence, to the cancel culture ruining lives for thechutzpah of sharing unpopular views, chilling the debate that is essential to discourse; from state legislators who ban the teaching of the tragic truth of our history to the lock-step surrender of one of

our political parties, pressed into the pushing of lies and corralled into the crafting of conspiracies. Our new, National Inquisition against the freedom to speak the truth from objective fact and shared reality endangers perhaps the greatest quality of our democracy, faintly echoing the Spanish version that terrorized our ancestors.

And finally, reason is regarded by our tradition as God's greatest gift to humanity, the capacity that distinguishes us from the rest of nature. Reason compels an obligation to care and act for the betterment of all. Again, the notion of *B'tzelem Elohim*—our creation in God's image—was strongly rejected as merely physical, but rather understood as both our moral sense and our intellectual power.

Extreme wokeness on the left and emerging fascism on the right command loyalty to tribal ideology over the critical

use of reason. When we encounter the world, observe its ways, assess its condition, and engage it thoughtfully, deliberately, and justly, we must do so embracing the full marketplace of ideas.

It is precisely the rank enthusiasms of the extremes that our founders fought in their reasoned rebellion against monarchy and fanatical faith. And it is precisely these perverse passions that inspired Abraham to respond to the call of a singular God to embark on a revolutionary journey of mind and spirit against the material corruption and moral slavery of paganism.

Regard for the individual, the right to speak freely, and reliance on reason—these pillars of the American experience are both borne from our tradition and secure our place here. They are reciprocal gifts—the ideals of Judaism helping to forge

a nation offering unprecedented welcome to Jews. And threats to any of these ideals are threats to us all.

My father remembers a 5th grade assignment to write about his family. He interviewed his grandfather Joe—my great-grandfather--a classic immigrant with a classic immigrant story. He recounted to my father his first day in America, when he was 17 or 18. He was unsure of his age, for birthdays were not well known in the shtetl, and Joe only knew he came into this world on the second candle of Chanukah.

He remembered how overwhelming the streets of the Lower Eastside were to a young greenhorn—the cacophony of horses and carts, hawkers of wares and street vending grocers. Think of that scene in Godfather 2 when Vito Corleone first comes to America—with a kosher gloss over the Catholic

shrines. When Joe met a *landsman*—perhaps someone from his village—he felt a bit more at home.

Like most, Joe became a sweatshop worker, married my great-grandmother Ruchel, and started a family which included my grandmother Yetta. Yet tragedy struck as it did for many in 1918. Baby Moishe, Yetta's brother, died in that flu epidemic. With grief and horror, Joe remembered carrying Moishe's lifeless body through the streets of New York to where victims were housed.

The family was shattered beyond imagination and desperately needed a new start. They connected with Tanta Ita, an aunt living in California's Central Valley, and embarked on a 3-day train ride to yet another Promised Land. They settled, opened up a tailor shop, and eventually moved to San

Francisco, broadening the business into Spindel's Cleaners and Tailoring on Balboa Street in the Richmond District.

Only in America could two Jewish, greenhorn sweat shop workers be blessed with two opportunities to rebuild their lives. They raised three children, who would in turn raise 9 grandchildren, all of whom are college graduates and professionals. It is a story of moxie and grit, freedoms provided, and freedoms embraced.

Each grandchild received a memento—a hanger from Joe Spindel's Cleaners and Tailor shop. For indeed, all of us—down to me and to my children—hang our hopes and dreams upon the gifts of opportunity, possibility, and freedom that America's liberal democracy afforded us.

In these troubling, tumultuous times, let us use this annual embrace of self-assessment toward self-improvement to

redouble our commitment to the ideals and institutions that define us as Americans, secure us as Jews, and sanctify us as beings forged by a caring, compassionate, and hopeful God.

Amen.