

Sermon for Erev Rosh HaShanah
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Temple Beth El of Boca Raton
By Rabbi Daniel Levin

We Just Might Be Wrong...

Growing up, I loved books. I have always been a night-owl, and as a rambunctious little boy who never wanted to go to bed, my exhausted parents would tell me: “Just stay in your room. If you want to stay up, then you can read for as long as you like. Just, please, stay in your room.”

I loved going to the library with my mom. I loved the musty smell, the quiet that seemed to just cover the place like a warm blanket. And I remember how excited I was to get a library card. It made me feel so grown-up and official. I loved to wander the shelves and pick out the books I wanted, hauling them up to the check-out desk, watching the librarian use that special date-stamp for the return date. It was magical.

As I grew, so did my fascination with books. My parents had a large bookshelf in our family room, and it was filled with paperback novels, our World Book Encyclopedias, and a large National Geographic Atlas of the world.

There were also classics – a hard-cover copy of Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, Thomas Mann’s *Magic Mountain*. And then on the bottom shelf were a bunch of heavy old hardcovers my parents had from their school years when they had studied mathematics and psychology.

One afternoon, as I sat on the floor looking at these old dusty books, one title jumped out at me: *Sexual Behavior In The Human Male* by Alfred Kinsey. I looked around to see if anyone was looking. A few pages in - I was hooked. The language was a little weird, and it referenced a slew of African tribes I had never heard of. And I learned – a lot. I learned that “congress” was not just the representatives and senators in Washington. And then, my curiosity piqued, I looked at the book next to it: *Sexual Behavior In the Human Female*. This one looked even better!

I wonder if my parents ever noticed that those books had snuck off to my room, where I read them late at night after I was told to go to bed. I wonder if they deliberately allowed me to read those books. I wonder if they were parenting me today whether they would have left those books on the shelf for their inquisitive teen-aged boy to discover.

I was taught to revere books and that libraries were like sacred temples. We were never allowed to leave books on the floor. God-forbid a book would be torn or damaged.

It was the Quran that called us Jews “the people of the book”. And in so many ways, our people is defined by our love-affair with words. We come from a tradition that teaches that God created the universe with the Aleph Bet, and that values literacy and learnedness as its highest virtues. It has been a tradition for centuries that at the age of three, one would give a child a slate with a dollop of honey, so that learning would forever be a sweet endeavor. Over the centuries our people amassed an extraordinary library – a storehouse of wisdom to teach us right and wrong, what we’re supposed to do in this circumstance or

that, and the wisdom and guidance to discover who we are, who we ought to be, and how we ought to build a holy society and a relationship with God.

But these days we're not reading so many books, [and fewer and fewer newspapers, and magazines]. More and more, instead of looking at books as treasure maps to insight and awareness, we look at books as if they bear toxic substances in need of warning labels and locked cabinets.

Jill Filipovic noted in a recent article in *The Atlantic* that the pervasive use of trigger warnings has created an environment where frankly, sharing an idea can be traumatic. Around 2016, she notes, Richard Friedman, who ran the student mental-health program at Cornell for 22 years, started students who talked about a fear of being "harmed by things that were unfamiliar and uncomfortable. Some students, for instance, complained about lecturers who'd made comments they disliked, or teachers whose beliefs contradicted their personal values. Friedman worried that students also saw themselves as fragile, and seemed to believe that coming into contact with offensive or challenging information was psychologically detrimental."¹

Fear of ideas isn't just on the college campus. It's everywhere. Here in Florida, new laws restrict what can be taught in elementary schools, middle schools, high schools, and on college campuses. By virtue of just one parent's objection, some school districts have pulled thousands of books off the shelves of school libraries. All of this is done in the name of protecting our children.

But does muzzling a teacher or pulling books off the shelves really protect our children? What are we really afraid of? Parent groups express concern that it can be traumatic for a child to encounter depictions of sex, violence, drug use, or other concepts or ideas before they are ready. But I think what we're really afraid of is what might happen when our kids encounter ideas we don't want them to know.

It is natural that we try to shield our children, and ourselves, from ideas we believe are repugnant, evil, or wrong. We don't want our children to be uncomfortable.

But it goes deeper than that. The fact is we all subscribe to certain beliefs. And we get very disturbed when people challenge those beliefs. A famous 2010 study from the University of Pennsylvania showed that ordinary people often dismiss new ideas, because their uncertainty makes us think, and thinking too hard makes us feel uncomfortable.²

"The risk," Adam Grant writes in his remarkable book *Think Again*, "is that we become so wrapped up in preaching that we're right, prosecuting others who are wrong, and politicking for support that we don't bother to rethink our own views."³

Part of the reason we're so averse to confronting new ideas that challenge our beliefs is that so much of our identities are locked into what we believe. As Jews, we carry deeply ingrained principles, values, and tenets of Jewish tradition. We believe in the importance of caring for the needy, the vulnerable, and the poor. We believe in the pursuit of justice, compassion, and peace. We believe in the importance of cultivating wisdom, awareness,

¹ "I Was Wrong About Trigger Warnings" by Jill Filipovic. *The Atlantic.com* – August 9, 2023.

² "Why Experts Reject Creativity" by Derek Thompson in *The Atlantic*, October 10, 2014.

³ Adam Grant, *Think Again*. New York: Viking, 2021, pp. 18-19.

understanding, and gratitude. We believe that every human being is created in the image of God, that each and every human life is of ultimate and infinite value, and that it is our responsibility to use the gift of life to partner with God in repelling evil, fighting for good, pursuing righteousness, and repairing what is broken in our lives and in the world.

These beliefs come from somewhere. They come from our rootedness in tradition. They come from a commitment to the truths of Torah and tradition from which we did not waver for thousands of years.

But what happens when we cleave to tradition so fiercely that we fail to listen to any other voices, philosophies, truths? So sure that we own a monopoly on the truth become locked in what Grant calls the “Overconfidence cycle”. “Pride,” he writes, “breeds conviction rather than doubt, which makes us prosecutors: we might be laser-focused on changing other people’s minds, but ours is set in stone. That launches us into confirmation bias and desirability bias. We become politicians, ignoring or dismissing whatever doesn’t win the favor of ... [those we are] trying to impress.”⁴ And in our overconfident smug arrogance, we forget that we really don’t have all the answers, and our conceit may actually blind us to the reality that we might not have it right.

This is the season of Teshuva – a season that demands we consider a different cycle – one that begins with humility, that leads us to entertain doubt and open to questions, which asks of us curiosity to consider new possible perspectives, to a discovery of a greater clarity on what is right and good and true.

If we never open ourselves up to new ideas, if we never allow our convictions to be challenged, then we fail in the ultimate test of our humanity. We never wonder if perhaps we might be wrong.

We used to believe it was okay for a man to be married to more than one woman, but by the middle ages, Rabbenu Gershom had ruled that you can’t take a second wife without divorcing the first. We used to believe that animal sacrifice was the only way to commune with the Holy One, but as Maimonides taught in his *Guide for the Perplexed*, just as God led us through the wilderness so that we might gradually accustom ourselves to freedom, so did God provide sacrifice for us until we could evolve to realize a purer expression of prayer.⁵

And in more recent days, we used to believe that only men should occupy the public sphere, and that only men should be given the privilege leading worship or teaching Torah. But as Judith Plaskow taught, “This world of women’s experience is part of the Jewish world, part of the fuller Torah we need to recover.”⁶ We used to believe that gay men and lesbian women should be shunned by the Jewish community. But with the evolution of our understanding of sexuality and gender, and our evolving conceptions of theology and Jewish law, we now assert a different truth - that God is not gendered, and love is not gendered – that it does not matter whom we love, but that we love, and that every Jewish household, no matter whether it is led by a man and a woman, two men or two women, is to be sanctified and welcomed into our congregation and the Jewish community.

⁴ Op. Cit., Grant, pp. 28-29

⁵ Maimonides Guide For The Perplexed, III:32.

⁶ Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again At Sinai*. New York: Harper & Row, 1990.

“There’s a fine line between heroic persistence and foolish stubbornness,” says Grant. “Sometimes the best kind of grit is gritting our teeth and turning around.”⁷

Is our job really to protect our children from discomfort? Or is it our job to prepare our children to be open to doubt, to relish curiosity, to be willing to reconsider and rethink what we always thought was true. Is it not our job to teach our children to be strong enough and resilient enough to handle the complexity of the world they will grow to inherit?

Roshi Joan Halifax, a teacher of Buddhism, writes: “All too often our so-called strength comes from fear, not love...” We throw up walls to protect ourselves from ideas that seem scary and foreign. But what we need to build are not stronger outer walls, but softer, resilient hearts. “Vulnerability,” writes Brene Brown, “is the birthplace of love, joy, trust, intimacy, courage – everything that brings meaning to our life... The definition of vulnerability is uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure. But vulnerability is not weakness; it’s our most accurate measure of courage.”⁸

The key to building a safer and stronger society is not banishing ideas that make us uncomfortable or that we find offensive. It’s building the inner strength to question those ideas, and the resilience to grow stronger from how they challenge us. Jill Filipovic writes that, “Thriving requires working through discomfort and hardship. But creating the conditions where that kind of resilience is possible is as much a collective responsibility as an individual one. If we want to replace our culture of trauma with a culture of resilience, we’ll have to relearn how to support one another.”

Because our people embedded debate and dialogue into a larger culture of learning, our people has proved remarkably resilient through ages of persecution. And what has made this country of ours so remarkably strong is an ethos that enshrined freedom of thought and expression in its foundation and pillars. Generation after generation, when forces rose in America to quash new ideas, we pushed back to ask: “Have you no sense of decency?” We ensured that voices were not silenced, libraries were not closed, and books were never banned.

Rudine Sims Bishop wrote: “Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience.”⁹

Neil Gaiman, author of the frequently challenged novel *Neverwhere*, among other books, stated that fiction “build[s] empathy... You get to feel things, visit places and worlds

⁷ Op. Cit., Grant, p. 229

⁸ Brene Brown, *Braving The Wilderness*. New York: Random House, 2017, pp. 147-154

⁹ “Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors” in *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom*, Vol. 6, No. 3., Summer 1990.

you would never otherwise know. Empathy is a tool for building people into groups, for allowing us to function as more than self-obsessed individuals.”¹⁰

I’m fairly confident that Kinsey’s studies on sexuality were not age-appropriate for me in my early teen years. But rather than scar me, or terrify me, or make me promiscuous, my foray into Kinsey’s studies made me more curious, and open, and aware. I learned that sex was not dirty, or scary, or bad, but sacred and holy, an expression of real trust, intimacy, and love.

Reading Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, so often on the list of books banned by schools, opened my eyes to the horrors of slavery, and how sexual assault and rape are crimes of unimaginable cruelty and evil. Indeed, it was a book that scared me, that scarred me, and made me ashamed, but also sensitized me to the horrific realities of American slavery, to the awful potential of humanity’s inhumanity, realizations that I would never have realized as a white, Jewish boy growing up in modern suburbia.

It helped me realize how evil are hatred and prejudice, how important it is that we learn to see the image of God reflected in the eyes of the other – whether that other is someone whose skin is a different hue, or different nationality, or different religious belief, or a different gender, or different sexual orientation, or different economic class.

Encounters with new ideas expand our consciousness, and if we cultivate enough humility and vulnerability, can show me where I was wrong, how I need to change, to grow, and to evolve into a wiser, better version of myself. This is what the shofar is calling us to do this Rosh HaShanah.

So in this new year - Open a book. Open your mind. Soften your heart, open your soul. And perhaps, with enough humility and curiosity, we will finally begin to write the Book of Life God has always wanted to read.

¹⁰ Neil Gaiman, "Why Our Future Depends on Libraries, Reading and Daydreaming," theguardian.com, Oct. 15, 2013.