

Sermon for Yom Kippur
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Temple Beth El of Boca Raton
By Rabbi Daniel Levin

“It’s Complicated...”

In the summer of 1986, after my junior year of high school, I spent the summer in a five-week seminar at Northwestern University’s famous Medill School of journalism. The wonderful faculty of experienced and talented journalists taught me a maxim that changed my life: “If your mother says she loves you, check it out.”

“If your mother says she loves you, check it out.” Get curious. Ask questions. Check your sources. Don’t be satisfied with simple answers. Dig in and do your research.

This adage has guided me my entire life. It led me to work in my college newspaper, and eventually to spend my third year of college at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, where I fell in love with Israel, with Aimee, and with traditional Jewish practice and study.

That year in Israel, I spent most of the year studying at Aish HaTorah – a yeshiva established for what is called “Keruv” – to draw Jews closer to orthodox Judaism. After a while, they lost interest in me. I asked too many questions - questions about God and Torah – about why women were not permitted equal roles in public Jewish life. At first, they welcomed my questions, but when I probed or pushed too hard, they said, “well, you just have to believe.” I wasn’t having it. It was only in Reform Judaism that I was invited to dig as deeply as I wanted, to challenge the consensus, where my curiosity was celebrated and encouraged. And here I am.

But these days, we are not so curious. In 2022, less than half of all adults in the U.S. said they had read a book in the previous year. As Rose Horowitz wrote in *The Atlantic*: “Gambling has become a more common leisure activity than reading a book.”¹ She reports that: “In 1975, about half of 20-somethings said they read the newspaper every day. Today less than 10 percent do. Most Americans now get the news on their phones and laptops, and 40 percent say they prefer to watch or listen to online news rather than read it.” And that, she says, “has come at the expense of devoting sustained attention to longer written works that convey rich and complicated information.”

We are trained to believe simpler is better. K-I-S-S – Keep it simple, stupid. As French Philosopher Edgar Morin noted, for hundreds of years, the scientific world has trained us to look for simplicity, to seek simple laws that explain how the universe really works.² Right answers look simple – $E=MC^2$. The fancy name for this is “Occam’s Razor” – the premise that the right answer is most often the simple answer.

And so, we prefer simple explanations rather than exploring complex and complicated truths. We don’t take the time to get curious, to delve deeper into the

¹ “The End of Reading Is Here,” by Rose Horowitz. *The Atlantic*, August 2026.

² Edgar Morin, *On Complexity*. Translated by Robin Postel. New Jersey: Hampton Press, 2008, pp. 39-41.

historical context to better understand what is happening in our world, or why it is happening.

But the problem is: our world is not simple. Nations and society are not simple. People are not simple. Our history, our belief systems, our emotional constitution and thought processes – not simple. The world we inhabit is complex. Its history is complex. We are complex. And the challenges we face, the problems we need to solve, the conflicts that confront us, all are complex. And simple answers usually can't solve complex problems.

Edgar Morin teaches that complexity demands approaching a question with humility, with patience, with an understanding that there may not be a simple answer to complicated questions, that understanding the essence of something may actually lead to greater confusion rather than to greater clarity. "Complexity," he writes, "presents itself with the disturbing traits of a mess, of the inextricable, of disorder, of ambiguity, of uncertainty."³

We don't like uncertainty. We want things to be clean and neat and clear. But our world is not clean and neat and clear. It's messy and complicated.

Simple thinking doesn't just leave us dumb. It makes us dangerous. In his book *The Death of Expertise*, Tom Nichols describes the Dunning-Kruger Effect, which teaches that the less you know about something, the more confident you are in what you know.⁴ We sit back with our arms folded in smug know-it-all satisfaction, an ugly fusion of arrogance and ignorance.

Simple-thinking spawns a prideful, intolerant self-righteousness and chauvinism, which in turn creates an inexorable need for confirmation and validation. And we go looking for it. We seek out articles, videos, memes, and slogans, television shows, Facebook and Instagram posts, Tik-Tok videos and Reels that confirm how right we are in what we think we already know and believe. And even when, as Jonathan Haidt observes, "facts conflict with our values, almost everyone finds a way to stick with their values and reject the evidence." We would rather shoot the messenger than grapple with the message. We doubt the science, rather than doubt ourselves.⁵

It is in that surrender that extremism is born. You take someone who is a little lost and confused, and you tell them, "Don't worry. I'm going to make this simple for you. There is only one right way – and it's our way. God loves us more, and our book is the only book God wants us to follow. Real people from this place do things this way, believe these beliefs, live like we live, speak like we speak, act like we act. We need to purify ourselves from confusing or contrary ideas. So, we have to root out everything that pollutes, we need to silence anyone who dissents, that those people who are different or disagree are not just different – they're evil and dangerous."

³ Op. Cit. Morin, p. 5

⁴ Tom Nichols, *The Death of Expertise*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017, pp. 43-44.

⁵ Op. Cit. Nichols, p. 69.

The great philosopher Isaiah Berlin wrote, “Happy are those who live under a discipline which they accept without question, who freely obey the orders of leaders, spiritual or temporal, whose word is fully accepted as unbreakable law; or those who have, by their own methods, arrived at clear and unshakable convictions about what to do and what to be that brook no possible doubt. I can only say that those who rest on such comfortable beds of dogma are victims of self-induced myopia, blinkers that may make for contentment, but not for understanding of what it is to be human.”⁶

As Simon Sebag Montefiore notes, historically this has led humanity down extremely destructive paths to social Darwinism, eugenicism, ultra-nationalism, totalitarianism, and fascism. These ideologies spawned horrifying movements of ethnic cleansing, mass murder, and genocide, resulting in the displacement and murder of millions upon millions of people.⁷

Antisemitism is the oldest product of simple thinking. Since our expulsion from our native homeland in Judea two thousand years ago, Jews were always the people who were different, who weren’t from there, who didn’t wear the same clothes as everyone else, who didn’t worship God like everyone else, who didn’t eat the same food as everyone else, who didn’t speak the same language as everyone else. And so, when something went wrong, it was simple: it must be the Jews.

Rather than try to investigate what was causing the spread of plague and disease – it must be the Jews. Rather than try to understand why the economy was struggling – it must be the Jews. Antisemitism worked because people weren’t looking for understanding – they were looking for someone to blame.

As Dara Horn writes, it was convenient for a society to simply define Jews as whatever evil they wanted to overcome. “If capitalism was evil, Jews were capitalists; if communism was evil, Jews were communists. If a society was nationalist, Jews were globalists; if globalism was celebrated, Jews were nationalists. ... If a society was racist, Jews were an inferior race; if a society was anti-racist, Jews were racist.”⁸

“Free Palestine” – it’s become a ubiquitous chant echoing across college campuses, concert stages, and award ceremonies.

“Free Palestine.” It sounds so simple. Who wouldn’t be for a free Palestine, or for freedom for any oppressed people? With photographs showing massive destruction in Gaza, statistics that declare more than 74,000 Palestinians killed since the war began, allegations of the deliberate targeting of civilians, assertions of genocide, we want answers. Simple answers.

But maybe it’s not so simple. Maybe it’s complex – really complex. To those who satisfy themselves with simple slogans, I ask. Are you curious?

⁶ Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* edited by Henry Hardy. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013, p. 14.

⁷ “The Atrocities That Shaped The Modern Middle East: interview with Simon Sebag Montefiore” – *The David Frum Show*, September 16, 2026.

⁸ Dara Horn, *The Final Solution To The Jewish Question*. New York: Avid Reader Press, 2026, p. 35.

Are you curious about the statistics you read – of those 74,000, how many were soldiers and fighters? Does a high death toll automatically mean there was genocide? Who's writing the stories you read – do they have an ulterior motive? Are they telling you the truth?

Are you curious about the history of the Gaza Strip, and the history of the people who live there? Are you curious about the complexity of a conflict that dates back hundreds if not thousands of years? Are you curious about all the different threads of religious upheaval, intolerance and persecution, colonial conquest, nationalistic aspirations, displacement and warfare that form the Gordian knot tying these two peoples together?

Are you curious about the history of Zionism – about how for two millennia our people nurtured an irrepressible dream of returning to the land of Israel, the birthplace of our covenant with God and of Jewish civilization?

Are you curious about the history of Islamism and the Muslim Brotherhood, who preach that that once any land comes under Islamic rule, it must remain under Islamic rule forever, and who see the State of Israel as a cancer that must be excised through *Jihad*, a holy war to liberate that “oppressed land”?

Are you curious as to why Hamas condemns anyone who advocates for co-existence with Israel as traitors and collaborators?

Are you curious as to why it is that since Israel's withdrawal from Gaza in 2005, instead of building Gaza's economy and infrastructure, Hamas spent years and years and billions of dollars building weapons of war and a tunnel system larger than the London Tube?⁹

Are you curious as to why Hamas launched its attack on October 7, with the goal of slaughtering as many people as possible, why they trained their fighters to film the atrocities they committed, why they kidnapped more than 250 innocent people, including elderly men and women and infant children? Do you wonder why they prohibited the Red Cross from visiting any of them at any point in their captivity? Why they tortured them and starved them?

Are you curious as to why they chose to fight from apartment buildings, schools, hospitals, and mosques? Why Israel dropped millions of leaflets, sent millions of text messages and placed millions of phone calls to warn people away from their intended targets?

Do you ask yourself not if it is moral to fight such an enemy, but is it moral *not* to fight such an enemy? And do you wonder how it could be done in a way that might minimize civilian casualties?

Do you wonder about the people who live in southern Israel, about all the efforts they made over decades to promote peace and coexistence? Do you wonder how they can

⁹ Ahmed Fouad Al-Khatib, *Hamas and Its Two Million Hostages*. London: Jewish Quarterly Review, 2026, pp. 24-25.

return to their communities and rebuild their homes – on the border of a land where the enemy who slaughtered your neighbors, your friends, and your family still refuses to disarm and commit to peace?

It's complicated. It's complex. The suffering of innocent people in Gaza is tragic. Only a hardened heart doesn't break for the wretchedness of their plight. But the solution is much more complicated than shouting, "Free Palestine." Holding that complexity doesn't make you weak. It makes you strong. It makes you thoughtful. It makes you wise. It makes you a better partner in knowing how to make a difference.

The sad part is that the well-meaning celebrities, college students, and protesters who don keffiyehs and watermelon pins shouting "Free Palestine" are of no help to the people they claim to champion – for in spouting their simple-minded ignorance, claiming they have no problem with Jews, just with Zionism and the State of Israel, they prove themselves untrustworthy to help solve the real problems facing the real people living in that real place.

None of us is immune from the luring temptation of simple thinking. All of us sometimes wallow in self-satisfied ignorance, quick to judge without fully exploring the complexity of what we think we know? How often is it that we lean into simplicity rather than pushing ourselves to be curious?

We too can fall prey to the same pediatric theologies and simple-minded bigotries that breed the very hatred we ourselves have weathered for generations. We too get lost in our own narrow-minded myopia. We too forget to be curious.

Do you ever wonder what it's like to be a Palestinian or Israeli Arab? Do you wonder about their own historic connection to the land, to the hills their families farmed for hundreds of years, and cities like Jerusalem they have called home for generations? Do you wonder what it feels like to live in a land where landlords refuse to rent you an apartment, where the national anthem invokes the hopes of a people not yours, where the ruling parties of the government refuse to include your representatives in their coalitions, where your fellow citizens tell you, to your face, your people is not a people? Are you curious how it feels like when radical settlers establish illegal outposts on your land, when they rampage through your towns and villages, setting fire to your cars, your businesses, your homes, torching your fields, your crops, your trees, and your groves, knowing that if you call the police they will not come, or worse, they will defend and protect those attacking you, and if you try to defend yourself, they will take you to jail, or perhaps even shoot you?

To hold complexity means I accept that there are no simple answers to this incredibly complicated and complex conflict. To hold complexity means I can love Israel passionately while also condemning the extremist fanatics whose actions betray its foundational values and ideals and profane God's holy name. To hold complexity means I can support the right of the State of Israel to defend itself and subdue the enemies who seek her destruction, and still agonize for the plight of the innocent people behind whom they hide, caught in the crossfire of a war they never sought, who simply seek a hopeful

future. To hold complexity means getting curious, asking questions, checking sources, never being satisfied with simple answers, digging in and doing your research.

In a time of ever-growing obliviousness, let us choose to become more aware. In a time of ever-growing arrogance, let us choose to be more humble. In a time of ever-growing apathy and indifference, let us choose to be more curious. In a time of ever-growing callousness, let us choose to be more compassionate. In a time of ever-growing simple-minded ignorance, let us choose to delve deeper into understanding complexity.

For it is in that complexity we discover the living God. It is in that complexity that we discover who we truly are, in that complexity that we learn what we should strive to be, and in that complexity, we finally see what we are called upon to do.