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## WE STAND FOR THE BOOKS—ALL THE BOOKS

A Northwest Washington mid-December scene:

An extended Jewish family has gathered on a Sunday afternoon which in this era means that there are several non-Jewish family members present.

In one corner, people are discussing the latest novels by James McBride and Gabrielle Zevin. In another corner people are discussing the pros and cons of Artificial Intelligence. In yet another, the Barbie movie is being compared with the Oppenheimer epic, while a debate rages in another about the ongoing protest movement in Israel. In the far corner, Hanukkah candles are being set in place while a Christmas wreath is being hung on the outside door. Everyone is animated. The room is alive.

This is a world we can readily picture. It is our world. These are the imagined scenes that have passed through my mind over and over since Louise and I saw the Tom Stoppard play, *Leopoldstadt* in New York several months ago.

The play, for me, was stunning and haunting. I am, in some ways, possessed by it. There is a great deal I would like to say about it but won't because for those of you who have not seen it, I do not want to give away very much. I highly recommend it and should it come to Washington, which I really hope it does, I would absolutely go see it again.

There is a lot there.

So—to give just a bit away, the play is set in Vienna and covers the years 1899-1955.

The opening scene of the play is the inspiration for my own just-shared imagination. The scene—a Jewish family gathering in 1899 Vienna, in the Jewish section, Leopoldstadt.

They are in a beautiful large living room - siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, all in the grandmother's home. In one corner a Christmas Tree is being decorated (with a "Jewish Star" on top!); Herzl's still new book, *The Jewish State*, is being discussed in another; Schoenberg and Mahler in another; the family Passover Seder, still months away, is being planned in another. Even today, this is, in a sense, our world—or the world we have both inherited and re-created here in the United States. It could be any family in any contemporary American congregation. There is joy and optimism--confidence, secure in their acculturation and position in the world.

This opening scene is an invitation to imagine Freud, Adler, Frankl, Wittgenstein, Mahler, Schoenberg, Kreisler, Kafka, Roth, Zweig, Herzl. The list feels endless yet these are just a few of the more familiar names of Viennese Jewish (or Jewish connected) giants in the arts and sciences who left their mark on history. It is staggering in its erudition and contribution to what we call the Human Project.

We, in the audience, who are looking into 1899 Vienna from our year of 2023, sit, enraptured while simultaneously, very much on the edge of our seats, in fear. We sit watching and waiting for the ominous knock at the door that we know is coming.

Since that May afternoon when Louise and I saw the play, I have not been able to get it out of my mind. You can ask Louise. I speak of it when I lie down and when I rise up.

And for me, this represents something new.

This is my forty-first Rosh Hashanah at Temple Micah and I have never given a Holy Day sermon on antisemitism. I have now said the word but wish to say something more—something bigger, yet more elusive. Antisemitism, we know, is always the canary in the mineshaft.

All over the world, liberal democracy is being challenged. The fight in Israel is simultaneously frightening and inspiring. We are very much on the edge of our seats — but we are not in a play. The values and assumptions that underlie democracy, liberal democracy, are under attack. What happens to a democratic society when we lose our collective sense of what truth is, what facts are real? What happens when our civic virtues are eroded and there are no longer "guardrails" protecting our institutions? What happens when groups of people are "othered?"

We know too well what happens when liberalism fails. Our people took and barely survived the “advanced course” to borrow the phrase coined by a member of this community.

*Leopoldstadt’s* opening scene, therefore, brought to mind a question that a dear friend and highly respected colleague asked me very recently in an email:

“You've said many times-- Jews need to be defenders of Enlightenment values. Do you mean by that, at least in part--defenders of true liberalism?”

My answer, in one word, is yes.

For good reason.

Liberalism—the underpinning of liberal democracy, for me, includes the following incomplete list:

A core commitment to human equality and human rights for all people

A commitment to government of checks and balances that insures and protects these rights

A commitment to public education for all

A commitment to tolerance and respect for differing opinions

A commitment to norms of civility

A commitment to public safety for all

A commitment to free speech, free press, the right to privacy, the right to challenge the government to address wrongs

A commitment to a society where such a norm as “I disagree with everything you say but will defend to the death your right to say it,” prevails

A commitment to science as a path to truth

All of this feels fragile in our America. That’s right—all of it.

Furthermore, I tend to see all of these in a symbiotic relationship with my essential Jewish commitments and my embrace of that part of the Western World that was opened by the European Enlightenment.

My Judaism is an Enlightenment Judaism.

Just as the ancient rabbis, in the wake of Roman conquest, destruction and exile, radically re-created their inherited biblically rooted religion, so my Judaism, dare I say, our Judaism, is dependent upon the revolution in thought and values that the European Enlightenment brought to the Western World and forever impacted the rabbinic Judaism that was part of that world.

This includes an understanding of Judaism as an intellectual, ethical, artistic, and spiritual quest that must be open not only to our inherited texts of the past but equally open to the culture around us. I cannot have my Judaism without

ongoing ethical prodding,

a compelling aesthetic

and

a prophetic yearning.

My Judaism requires always, the voice of my conscience within. My beloved teacher, Rabbi Eugene Borowitz, sought to teach us all that personal autonomy was essential to a true liberal Judaism.

Rabbi Larry Hoffman, in his usual brilliance simply says this: "Reform invented the idea that authentic Judaism is not doing what our ancestors did, but doing what they would have done if they were still alive today." (URJ at 150 Statement)

Our Judaism rests on the Enlightenment values that imprinted themselves on the European founders of our Reform Judaism.

Defending the Enlightenment means defending the right to a multi vocal society with a crowded public square filled with animated yet respectful debate.

Our public square today, has been radically injured. It is being shredded to tatters by those who do not wish to debate anything.

Arlie Russell Hochschild, in her oft cited 2016 book, *Strangers in Their Own Land*, describes what she calls the deep story of the Left, that is the narrative or picture through which many of us see our country:

“...people stand around a large public square inside of which are creative science museums for kids, public art and theater programs, libraries, schools—a state of the art public infrastructure available for use by all. They are fiercely proud of it. Some of them built it. Outsiders can join those standing around the square, since a lot of people who are insiders now were outsiders in the past; incorporation and acceptance of difference feel like American values represented in the Statue of Liberty.” (p 235)

Hochschild goes on to describe how what she calls “marauders” begin to invade the public square and steal chunks of the public buildings.

She continues,

“those guarding the public square watch helplessly as those who’ve dismantled it construct private McMansions with the same bricks...privatizing the public realm.”

This is our world. A public square under attack and a public realm raided and privatized. Public education, once the very ladder to the middle class is systematically being dismantled as now state funded universities are being censored with the liberal arts being stripped away and professors reading lists being overseen by State Bureaucrats who take orders from the religious right. We live in a country where a 5th grade teacher has been placed on administrative leave for reading the book *My Shadow is Purple* in her classroom while no one seems to care that school districts across the country are severely underfunded. How many stories must we read about teachers buying school supplies with their own money? When does our country simply become embarrassed?

Please don’t think that our Jewish world will be free from a culture that bans books. Earlier this month, a Florida JCC withdrew an invitation to a Jewish writer, Rachel Beanland, whose new novel is set in Richmond in the early 19th century. The writer was asked “to steer clear of some topics.” with the rationale, “this is Florida and our politics around the Black community, the history of the Civil War, and education in general are... complicated,”

The author responded to the JCC by saying, “any presentation I give is likely to address slavery and the rights of women.”

The JCC then responded to Ms. Beanland:

“After much discussion and debate, we have decided that this book is not the right choice” for the scheduled event, adding, “Our decision is very much affected by the current political climate here in Florida.”

After all of this went public, the JCC, of course, beat a hasty retreat and has reportedly fired the employee for “other reasons” who handled the matter. The Center’s management also was reported as saying, that the email’s wording “wasn’t reflective of the actual reasons why the center canceled the talk.”

The JCC then issued the following invitation to Ms. Beanland, “maybe later in the year you could come back to help educate us.”

The author responded with “I told him that’s not really my job.” She said that she then received a second straightforward invitation to speak about the book to which she said “I have no interest in speaking to this JCC.”

This is what happens when our civic values are eroded. The infection—cancel culture--spreads everywhere.

**An aside--** Upon reading of this travesty, I immediately reached out to invite Ms. Beanland to speak at Micah. She will be speaking at Micah on her new novel, *The House is on Fire*, on Sunday afternoon, October 29!!!! Mark your calendars NOW! We want an overflowing crowd in person and Zoom for Ms. Beanland’s appearance with us.

BTW-Everyone in my family including me loved her first novel, *Florence Adler Swims Forever*.

There is, you see, a segment of our nation that is seeking to destroy our future.

I think of John Dewey who wrote,

“Democracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife.”

A simple truth is that liberal democracy requires a crowded public square overflowing with respectful debate.

So, in May as Louise and I left *Leopoldstadt* and walked through always dizzying and enlivening streets of Manhattan, I said to her something like the following:

“In the history of Western Civilization—as we know it—authoritarian regimes always seek to do two things:

1. clamp down and control intellectual, cultural creativity (*Leopoldstadt* Scene 1)

and

2. come after the Jews. (Scene 8)

In some ways—the two are one.

We are the Enlightenment Jews who must rise and defend liberalism. If not us, who?

Our Enlightenment Judaism stands on two things-

1. A very few self-evident Truths

Human dignity

Freedom

Opportunity for all

And

2. A passion for searching for truth—science, philosophy, the arts—these are all paths for searching for something more—discovering something more about the human condition.

These encompass the great optimism of a true liberalism with its promise of freedom and the unleashing of all human potential and its recognition that what we call Scientific Truths, are true until they are not. Science grows and learns.

This is what human progress is about—the ability to learn.

This is an insight of the Jewish experience. We live with few certainties and many questions. We are open, searching, tentative. There is always one more commentary, one more thought, one more book. We are always searching for truth. Our library is overflowing.

The Bible's own story of revelation along with a particular line of commentary seems to capture the uncertainty that is at the very heart of our Jewish Human Project.

Moses has come down from Sinai with the Ten Commandments and seen the Israelite hordes worshipping the Golden Calf. Moses roars into the camp. Enraged, Moses destroys the tablets of Commandments and then destroys the Golden Calf which he burns and melts and makes the Israelites drink it. Finally, he gathers his army of Levites and kills 3000 Israelites.

It is all there—Exodus Chapter 32—a biblical scene if ever there was one.

Now it is time for Moses to go back up to Mt. Sinai to encounter God once again. He again seeks those commandments. He now has to carve out the stone himself. God is not simply giving him more. This time however, Moses wants more.

This is a different Moses. He has destroyed and killed. Moses wants reassurance from God that this all will make sense. Moses wants a guarantee—what we might call certainty. Moses asks God for Moses to be allowed to see God's face.

We know the answer—God says, “no!”. No one can see God's face and live. God allows Moses to see God's back.

In other words—no certainty—we get hints but no guarantees. Moses pushes on with hope but no promise.

A 19th century midrashic text suggests that Moses is seeking truth but is offered in response a search for truth. The midrash compares this to a mishnaic text: “A



single hour of repentance and good deeds in this world is more delightful than an entire lifetime in the World to Come.” (Avot 4:22)

An insightful commentary on this text reads:

“They said this because one who arrives at Truth, and thus to the life of the World to Come, is now at rest from all striving, having arrived at the desired destination; and when one works toward something of supreme value, the striving itself is a greater good than the reward yielded.” (Arnold Ehrlich, Mikra Ki-Feshuto, commentary to Exodus 33:23)

Michael Gelven, a contemporary philosopher comments on this biblical text and commentary with the following:

“There is the suggestion in this ... story that only an infinite being can possess truth, and that ... (to see God-*DGZ insert*) is to forfeit one’s humanity.”

In other words, being human is about search and growth but never final certainty.

[ IN YOUR SERVICE SHEET, I HAVE INCLUDED THE FULL TEXTS HERE. I INVITE YOU TO CONSIDER THEM AS A KIND OF ROSH HASHANAH AFTERNOON DISCUSSION GUIDE.]

You see, a search for truth forms the very heart of the Jewish narrative. It is essential to what we call the Human Project.

The search for truth is likewise the bedrock of academic freedom. The book banners of this era are denying American students a true and complete exploration of our American past.

When state school systems forbid truthful examination of our nation’s history including chattel slavery and Jim Crow racism, we are in a dangerous place.

Books on the Holocaust are being banned in some libraries and school systems. Holocaust deniers are having a field day.

This is what happens when a president says after murderous American Nazis march that there “were very fine people on both sides.”

America is not in a culture war as if we are arguing about what kinds of movies are better comedies or thrillers, “The Barbie Movie” or “American Prometheus.”

We are fighting to turn back American Fascism. It is that simple. We are fighting to turn back American Fascism.

This is our fight.

Our Judaism doubts all authority. This is our DNA back to Abraham who smashed the idols and Moses who was challenged by his own people at every turn.

We are allergic to absolutes that are dictated to us. Our Judaism loves questions and tentative answers—no matter how unpleasant.

Yehuda Amichai says all of this as only a brilliant poet can:

**The Place Where We Are Right (Ha-Makon Sh’bo Anu Tzodkim)** by Yehuda Amichai

*From the place where we are right*

*Flowers will never grow*

*In the spring.*

*The place where we are right*

*Is hard and trampled*

*Like a yard.*

*But doubts and loves*

*Dig up the world*

*Like a mole, a plow.*

*And a whisper will be heard in the place*

*Where the ruined*

*House once stood.*

Amichai is teaching us about civilized conversation in the public square, about a vibrant questioning culture.

How about that for a bumper sticker or a t-shirt?

“America, a vibrant, questioning culture”

On Rosh Hashanah we strive to re-create and renew ourselves as well as the world around us. Our prayerbook reminds us that God renews creation each and every day. Let this Rosh Hashanah come to remind us that every day, as inheritors of Enlightenment liberalism, we renew ourselves in co-creating this vision for our world.

Defending liberalism means defying the book burners who are really book burners.

It means opposing those who want to limit questioning

It means allowing speakers of all sorts to speak on our university campuses-- To shut down free speech on a college campus because you disagree with the speaker is unconscionable.

In short,

Liberalism means defending an open mind.

Defending the spirit of inquiry that is the Jewish way of being in the world

In discussing this with our teacher, Rabbi Hoffman, he wryly commented that in the Talmud, Shammai wins the argument some of the time.

Defending liberalism is the Jewish mandate of our time because it embraces the right to think differently.

Seven years ago, Louise and I spent several days in Berlin. As I prepared for the trip, I read the Amos Elon classic, *The Pity of It All: A Portrait of the German – Jewish Epoch 1743–1933* where I was introduced to the great German Jewish writer, Heinrich Heine who, according to Elon, had to convert from Judaism in

order to be published. After converting, again according to Elon, he is wracked with guilt.

Why do I tell you about Heine?

My most powerful Berlin memory is the memorial to the Nazi Book burning—which was done in the great plaza in front of the Humboldt University Library. In the plaza, one looks down into a window cut into the pavement. Through the window one views a library room filled with empty shelves—enough shelf space to hold 10,000 books. The number of books that Hitler’s henchmen burned at that very spot on May 10, 1933. Engraved into the pavement around the window peering into this tragic memorial are the Heinrich Heine’s immortal and prophetic words from 1797, “Where they come to burn book, they will come to burn human flesh.”

In our era, we are seeing, where they come to ban books, they are coming to ban people.

Always—those that hate—come for the books.

The authoritarians out there inevitably hate books, intellectual curiosity and creativity and, therefore us. We are, after all, the People of the Book—I might say—people of many books.

To close with words that I always love from Archibald MacLeish.

“There is not a single police state of any ideology which does not confess by its Berlin Walls, its nets of concentration camps, its prison hospitals for the “insane,” its censorship of books, its silencing of mouths, its suppression of minds, that it is afraid. And what it is most afraid of ... the free man, the free mind, it cannot conquer...”

This year—5784—let us defend books, learning, questions, science—an open public square.

Ask a question and then ask another.

And should *Leopoldstadt* come to Washington, go see it. It will keep you pre-occupied and asking many questions.

Shannah Tovah! Shabbat Shalom!

## SERMON TEXTS

Exodus 33

Then Moses said, "I pray You, show me Your presence!" And He said, "I will make all My goodness pass before you, and will proclaim the name of ADONAI before you;" ...But God said, "You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live!" Then ADONAI said, "Stand *there* on the rock...I will put you in the cleft of the rock and cover you with My hand until I have passed by. "Then I will take My hand away and you shall see My back, but My face shall not be seen."

Arnold Ehrlich, *Mikra Ki-Feshuto*, commentary to Exodus 33:23

**"You shall see My back but My face shall not be seen."** If there is an esoteric meaning to this phrase, I am not privy to it, because I am not part of the divine inner circle. What I see in it reflects the words of a German sage (Gotthold Lessing) who wrote the following: "Were I to have stood in the presence of God, whose right hand was holding Truth, and whose left hand was holding The Search for Truth, and were I to have been given the choice of one or the other, I would choose The Search for Truth." A similar thing was said in Mishnah Avot (4:22): "A single hour of repentance and good deeds in this world is more delightful than an entire lifetime in the World to Come." They said this because one who arrives at Truth, and thus to the life of the World to Come, is now at rest from all striving, having arrived at the desired destination; and when one works toward something of supreme value, the striving itself is a greater good than the reward yielded. It is just the same with the matter of knowing God and God's ways: were a person to be able to ascend to the highest rung bar none, what would that person do subsequently? Therefore, a human cannot see the face of God; only God's back is shown to the God fearing, so that they will study, search out, and infer things about God's face from that back. Thus they will strive all their days to know God with a full and clear knowledge, and that striving is their reward.

Michael Gelven, *Truth and Existence: A Philosophical Inquiry*

The story is deeply paradoxical. For if Lessing genuinely desires the truth, then is he not disingenuous in turning down the offer of truth itself? If I desire gold and someone offers me gold or a stake in a gold claim, I would take the gold. By

denying God's offer of truth Lessing seems to be denying any meaningful sense of a search for truth. Why search for truth if, when offered it, one turns it down? Yet this fable of Lessing's suggests a deeper insight than mere frustration with someone who does not know what he wants. **There is the suggestion in this little story that only an infinite being can possess truth**, and that to accept the right-handed offer is to forfeit one's humanity."