



**Rabbi Joshua M. Davison**  
**Congregation Emanu-El of the City of New York**  
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“The Best Chapters”

I cannot recall the American Jewish community so bitterly divided. As the debate over the Iran deal intensified, the rhetoric degenerated into charges of war-mongering from one camp and appeasement from the other. We do not condone the incivility, but we do understand its genesis. For many, how best to keep Iran from the bomb represents nothing less than a question of Jewish survival.

This is not a sermon about Iran, but it is a sermon about our future. Jewish survival matters to us. Ever since God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac on Mount Moriah, we have agonized about it. Though our forefather voices no apprehension in the Torah passage we read tomorrow/this morning, according to the commentator Rashi doubt consumes Abraham as he conducts his son to the mountaintop. God had promised him that his offspring would become a great nation<sup>1</sup> and that through his family all the families of the earth would be blessed.<sup>2</sup> The summit looming in the distance, Abraham reveals his anxiety: “We will see what will become of God’s promise,”<sup>3</sup> he says.

Thousands of years later, here we are, pondering the same question: “What will become of us?”

*Answering Assimilation: Creativity, Warmth, and Relevance*

Recently the editors of *Commentary Magazine* invited me to answer: what will be the condition of the American Jewish community a generation from now? “Dear Joshua,” their letter began. “For world Jewry, it may be the best of times: Jews enjoy unprecedented freedom and, for the first time in two millennia, a state of their own. Some even claim that [before] long there will be more Jews on...earth than there were before the Holocaust....

“Or,” their note continued, “it may be the worst of times....[A politically divided] Israel lives under constant threat and likely an existential threat from an eventual [nuclear

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 12:2

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 12:3

<sup>3</sup> On *Bereshit Rabbah* 56:2.

Iran]...The Jews of Europe and elsewhere are increasingly subject to [acts and voices] of anti-Semitism....And in the United States...our near total acceptance by the wider society might portend a catastrophic triumph [as] the freedom American Jews enjoy is also a freedom...to free themselves from Judaism.”

The seeds of that “catastrophic triumph” – assimilation – were sown two centuries ago. When Emancipation unlocked the ghetto gates welcoming our great- or great-great-grandparents to fields of endeavor previously inaccessible, and the Enlightenment shined the light of historical criticism on biblical texts, tremors of secularization jolted Judaism’s foundations. And today, writes Rabbi Lance Sussman, “Secularization...continues to erode the religious basis of American Jewish life. Every major historical study of Judaism...indicates that American Jews are comfortable with their ‘Jewishness’ but increasingly distant from Judaism as a...faith.”<sup>4</sup>

According to the Pew Research Center, ninety-four percent of American Jews take pride in their Jewishness, but twenty-two percent also label themselves “not religious,” what sociologists term “nones”<sup>5</sup> – n-o-n-e-s. Synagogue life defined by worship, study and membership will not engage the rising numbers of Jews – including the grown children of many devoted (often bewildered and disappointed) temple members – who now join congregations only if they find them personally meaningful.

Mordecai Kaplan wrote his most influential work, *Judaism as a Civilization*, in response to similar circumstances in which American Jews were living in the 1930s. Then too Jews were assimilating. Kaplan understood that Judaism encompassed not only ritual, but also the cultural and social aspects of communal living. His response was to reconstruct American Jewish life to include these additional outlets through which communities naturally express themselves,<sup>6</sup> including literature, the visual arts, theater, music, food, philosophy, history, and politics.

But Kaplan also understood that at the heart of every people lies a nucleus of beliefs<sup>7</sup> without which that people will not endure the passage of the generations. For Jews that is Torah. We survive only if we teach it. And because the journey of each Jew is unique, how we teach depends on whom we teach. To the learned, we must offer Torah steeped in two millennia of scholarship. To those newly discovering it, we must make it relevant and accessible.

Increasing numbers of Jews now appear regularly on our doorstep curious about the traditions their parents or grandparents once set aside. And countless others representing a growing racial, ethnic and cultural diversity are also knocking looking to explore the beauty of Jewish life. Many have already entered. We embrace them, as we embrace non-Jewish spouses who support their husbands’ and wives’ Jewish lives and non-Jewish parents who are creating Jewish homes and raising Jewish children.

In an era when even Jews can choose Judaism or reject it, Judaism’s survival depends on our creativity, our warmth, and our relevance to concerns both personal and global.

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<sup>4</sup> Lance J. Sussman, “Keeping the Glass Half Full: Reinvigorating American Reform Judaism,” *CCAR Journal: The Reform Jewish Quarterly*, Spring 2011, p.28.

<sup>5</sup> Pew Research Center’s Religion and Public Life Project.

<sup>6</sup> Eugene Borowitz, *Choices in Modern Jewish Thought*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, p.104.

<sup>7</sup> Eugene Borowitz, *Choices in Modern Jewish Thought*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, p.107.

*“You Have To Speak Louder”*

When Pew asked American Jews what was most essential to their Jewishness, fifty-six percent responded Judaism’s concern with equality and justice in the wider world, twice the number who identified Jewish community, three times the number who answered Jewish ritual.<sup>8</sup> *Tikkun Olam* as we call it, a commitment to mending the world’s brokenness, which Emanu-El has long pursued with unsurpassed devotion, commands a sense of purpose for which every generation yearns. But as David Brooks observes, while “everyone is born with...a need to feel that life is in service to some good...young people...are [especially hungry] to find ideals that will give meaning to their activities,” and link themselves to organizations that demonstrate a larger purpose. This is true across America’s religious spectrum. American nuns for example – n-u-n-s – have long emphasized the Catholic Church’s social mission over doctrine and dogma, and until recently were scrutinized by the Vatican for it. But Pope Francis, whom we soon welcome and who embraces their theology, shut down the investigation. He heard his nuns; we should hear ours, affirming the synagogue as moral touchstone challenging society to act upon its best vision for itself. We do not set our ethical course to society’s prevailing winds; we stand in the face of those winds. “Judaism is a religion of protest,” says Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, protest “against the world that is, in the name of the world that...ought to be.”

Elie Wiesel tells of a student who approached him after an address. “Your words were interesting,” the young man said “but irrelevant. I have other fights than yours. There is a protest I must make against President Nixon more important than all the words you spoke.”

Wiesel responded by poking the student in the chest with his finger, “And you are going to protest against the President of the United States? Do you know how many millions voted for him? Now tell me, who voted for you? Who gave you the right to make such a protest? Who gives you the right to stand up and speak out?”

Wiesel recalls, “I kept poking him in the chest with my finger and I kept [repeating], ‘Who gave you the right?’ [‘Who gave you the right?’] until his face [reddened with anger]...And then I stopped. I put my hands on his shoulders and I said, ‘Now I’ll tell you who gave you that right. Jeremiah, Isaiah and Amos gave you that right. The Prophets gave you that right.’”

Last month a longtime congregant walked into my study wanting to know why I hadn’t spoken out on a number of pressing issues. I responded, somewhat defensively, that indeed I had spoken about racism and gun violence and ISIS and Iran. “Well the world doesn’t seem to hear you,” she shot back. “You need to speak louder!”

We need to speak louder...about race, about the deaths of unarmed black men in Ferguson and Baltimore, Cleveland and Staten Island, and the massacre at Charleston’s Emanuel AME Church. Fifty years after the passage of the Voting Rights Act new

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<sup>8</sup> Pew Research Center’s Religion and Public Life Project.

efforts threaten to disenfranchise African Americans. And the disparity in America between blacks and whites in education, jobs, health care, housing, social mobility and policing remains a moral catastrophe, and an affront to Judaism's fundamental belief that every human being of every color is stamped in God's image.

We need to speak louder about immigration and a system in desperate need of repair. If we, an immigrant people who know the experience of quotas and closed borders, are rightly aghast at the refugee crisis in Europe, how can we seem so inured to immigrant tragedies at home? One of the most eloquent spokesmen for immigration reform has been our own Robert Morgenthau who reminds us that compassion and security are not divergent interests. "If we cannot be our brother's keeper," he wrote recently responding to the detention of thousands of families seeking asylum, "let us at least be our brother's brother."<sup>9</sup>

We need to speak louder about guns, which kill thirty-three thousand Americans a year, one every sixteen minutes.<sup>10</sup> Since 2011, gun fatalities have increased six percent with mass shootings nearly tripling.<sup>11</sup> As our member and former mayor Mike Bloomberg once declared, "The people who want to run this country need to tell us their plans to stop the bloodshed." "Without a vision, the people will perish,"<sup>12</sup> Proverbs warns. So what's the plan?

We need to speak louder about religious fanaticism: ISIS, Al Qaeda, the Taliban, and their barbarism; Boko Haram's massacres and enslavements; Europe's radicalized Muslims and their assault on Jews and Western ideals; but also violent Israeli nationalists and their obscene attacks on Christian churches and innocent Palestinians which is terrorism in every respect.

And even as Israel confronts moral decay within, we need to speak louder about perilous threats to Israel from without: anti-Semitism in Europe, the United Nations and on college campuses; the boycott-divestment-sanctions movement; and Iran, which to this day calls for Israel's annihilation. As the President and Congress move forward with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, they must guarantee Israel our financial, military and diplomatic support; combat Iran's patronage of Hezbollah, Hamas and Assad; and remain vigilant that Iran doesn't get what the deal's architects promise us it won't.

Now I imagine – no I'm certain – some of you are objecting: this isn't Judaism; it's politics. To which I respond: this is Judaism at its most authentic. As much as the rabbis addressed matters of the spirit, they also and often primarily grappled with pressing societal concerns.<sup>13</sup> They did not retire from the public square and neither should we.

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Morgenthau, "Shunning the Huddled Masses: Stop Locking up Moms Seeking Asylum," *The New York Daily News*, 6/4/2015.

<sup>10</sup> Nicholas Kristof, "Lessons from the Virginia Shooting," *The New York Times*, 8/26/2015.

<sup>11</sup> New Yorkers Against Gun Violence.

<sup>12</sup> Proverbs 29:18.

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Heinemann, "The Nature of the Aggadah," tr. Marc Bregman, in Hartman and Budick, *Midrash and Literature*, p.49.

That congregant was right. And because Temple Emanu-El's voice matters, we mustn't be afraid to raise it.

*"A Great Cathedral"*

Having served and led the New York Jewish community for one hundred seventy years, we must rise to today's challenges with the same courage and boldness, asking ourselves: How will we shape a Jewish response to the critical issues of our time? What example will we set that synagogues become more relevant? What role will we play in making the Jewish community more welcoming?

We have begun to answer. To the thousands of Jews in New York in their twenties and thirties including many of you and many more of your children our *Saviv* program extends an array of social, cultural and ritual activities. For the scores who contact us every year seeking to explore Jewish life we offer a dynamic course of study and mentorship. For temple members who cannot leave their homes we are installing video feeds to stream them our services and events. New caring community initiatives support congregants struggling with loss and loneliness, aging without family near, or serving as caregivers for loved ones.

Because we are, as Martin Luther King reminded us, "tied in a single garment of destiny" with other faith communities, we engage in regular fellowship with Christians and Muslims. And because we can ignore neither the immigration crisis at home nor the refugee crisis abroad, we host training sessions for the Immigrant Justice Corps, which provides "legal assistance for immigrants seeking citizenship and fighting deportation";<sup>14</sup> and from our Philanthropic Fund we have contributed to the Jewish Coalition for Disaster Relief to aid the hundreds of thousands of migrants entering Europe from Africa and the Middle East.

Together, renewing old commitments and embarking on new ones, we will write the next chapter in Emanu-El's story. Together...for we need your creativity, your energy, your support, and your presence. Celebrate with us on Shabbat as we experiment with an updated Union Prayer Book, and fill the majesty of Classical Reform worship with the warmth of congregational participation. Learn with us at Skirball from artists and authors, scholars and policy makers. Volunteer with us on *Mitzvah Day* or Thanksgiving or in our Helping Hands Program for homebound congregants. Meet other members through the Men's Club, the Women's Auxiliary, or Club Sixty-five. Bring your children or grandchildren to a nursery school, religious school, or young families' event and show them what the temple means to you. Your presence signals your belief in what we are, your faith in what can become.

The pioneering psychiatrist Roberto Assagioli offered a parable of three stonecutters building a great cathedral. Each in turn was asked about his work. The first replied simply: "I am cutting stones into blocks, a foot by a foot by three quarters of a

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<sup>14</sup> Justicecorps.org.

foot.” The second also answered matter-of-factly: “I am earning a living to provide for my family.” Then the third stonecutter lifted his voice in reverence and joy, and declared: “I am privileged to be building a great cathedral that will stand as a holy lighthouse for a thousand years.”<sup>15</sup>

That holy lighthouse is Emanu-El. And this is our privilege and our purpose! To light a beacon of Jewish life! To embody Jewish learning and living and meaning at its best. To kindle an *or lagoyim*, a spark of hope in a dark and troubled world. And to shine a course home to all who would join us.

Together we will carry forward our congregation’s magnificent legacy placed upon us by the generations before us. Then when *Commentary Magazine* asks, “What will become of American Jewry?” We will answer, “Look here! See Temple Emanu-El, embracing and creating, engaging with its members and the world!” And when Abraham asks from Moriah’s peak, “What will become of God’s promise?” We will proclaim, “We are God’s promise,” if we wish to be.

A New Year has begun. A New Year of new hopes and new dreams for ourselves and our temple. A New Year of new strength for the trials of our lives and the challenges of our time. A New Year to celebrate our story – all we have accomplished and why we matter – knowing the best chapters are ours to write.

Amen.

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<sup>15</sup> Rachel Naomi Remen, *Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories that Heal*, p.161.