



**CONGREGATION EMANU-EL**  
OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK

Rabbi Joshua M. Davidson  
Rosh Hashanah 5778

“The Rebuilding of the Ship”

Dear Friends,

We gather on Rosh Hashanah looking back over the year that was, and ahead to what might yet be. The devastation wrought by two earthquakes in Mexico, and by Hurricanes Harvey, Irma and now Maria concerns us deeply. Our hearts reach out to all whose lives have been upended. Many of us were impacted directly, some severely. Others have family forced from their homes, loved ones who now must rebuild. A few of those survivors have made Temple Emanu-El their port in this season of storms, and our congregation embraces them. Their presence reminds us that here in the synagogue we can discover the courage we possess to withstand life’s vicissitudes, its harsh winds and rains. Here we find support in those seated beside us, the most important people in our lives, those we love, and in our community. And here we draw strength from the values we cherish, the timeless ideals of our ancient faith that we reaffirm at this moment of dissonance in American life.

Have you heard the joke about the two Jews pondering the future? One asks, “So are you an optimist or a pessimist?”

“An optimist,” replies the other glumly.

“So why the frown?” laughs the first.

To which the second responds: “You think it’s easy being an optimist?”

It’s not easy being an optimist in America today. Not with menacing regimes raising the specter of nuclear conflict. Not with ongoing Islamic extremism sighting Western democracies in its terrorist crosshairs. Not with the ascent of nationalist and isolationist movements in Europe and nativist ideologies here at home. Not with too many elected officials more interested in scoring political points than addressing pressing social needs.

No surprise then that Rasmussen pollsters recently reported “fifty-two percent of likely U.S. voters think America’s best days are” behind us.<sup>1</sup> When asked, “Is the country headed in the right direction?” nearly two-thirds of us answer, “no.”<sup>2</sup>

“We live in extraordinary times,” wrote one of our members, “a...moment in American history when political order and dignity as we have known [them have] been cast to the wind.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public\\_content/politics/top\\_stories/america\\_s\\_best\\_days](http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/politics/top_stories/america_s_best_days).

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public\\_content/politics/top\\_stories/right\\_direction\\_wrong\\_track\\_aug28](http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/politics/top_stories/right_direction_wrong_track_aug28).

<sup>3</sup> Dena Kleiman.

Not all will accept this assessment. But it does seem that the navigation markers of honesty, civility and decency have slipped their moorings.

Honesty. In the mid-nineteen seventies, even during Watergate, two-thirds of Americans trusted their elected officials.<sup>4</sup> Today, two-thirds do not.<sup>5</sup> Once, liberal and conservative America fought over public policy; now, we fight over alternative facts.

Civility. Each side pronounces its own rightness, intolerant of dissent. As the *National Review's* Jonathan Tobin puts it: "Politics...[has become] a form of warfare – a zero-sum game in which either giving or receiving quarter from the enemy is [seen as] both weakness and...betrayal."<sup>6</sup>

Decency. Did you catch the exchange between CNN's Jim Acosta and White House senior policy adviser Stephen Miller? When Acosta challenged Miller to reconcile the Administration's support for cutting legal immigration in half with the covenant inscribed on the Statue of Liberty, the pledge that greeted some of our own parents and grandparents and even some of us – "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free" – Miller answered that Emma Lazarus's "New Colossus" was but an ad-on.

What happened to us? What happened to America? What happened that our nation flounders in a sea of intolerance, instability and uncertainty, wrenched from the fundamental anchors of honesty, civility and decency?

"No one can say when the unwinding began," writes George Packer, "when the coil that held Americans together...first gave way...and at some moment the country...crossed a line of history and became irretrievably different."<sup>7</sup>

Those lamenting our nation's current trajectory might suggest the unwinding began last November, but we know that's not true. Yes, the Talmudic adage begins, "just like the leaders, so is the generation;" but it continues, "just like the generation, so are the leaders."<sup>8</sup> Our elected officials reflect only our own concerns, priorities and values.

*We* are the ones who have languished in the battle for our national soul, who now must reassert our faith in the principles of honesty, civility and decency that inspired Longfellow to proclaim: "humanity with all its fears, with all the hopes of future years, is hanging breathless on [our] fate!"<sup>9</sup> *We* as individuals and as a community now must arise to rebuild our "ship of state."

## *Honesty*

"Stand up for truth, and God will be at your side forever," Dr. King once said. We need to stand up for truth, which Rabbi Hanina called God's seal<sup>10</sup> and Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel one of the world's foundations.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.gallup.com/poll/195716/americans-trust-political-leaders-public-new-lows.aspx>.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.people-press.org/2015/11/23/6-perceptions-of-elected-officials-and-the-role-of-money-in-politics>.

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan S. Tobin, "Trump's Moral Equivalence Trap," *The Jewish Week*, 8/17/2017.

<sup>7</sup> George Packer, *The Unwinding: An Inner History of the New America*, p.3.

<sup>8</sup> *Talmud Yerushalmi, Arachim* 17a.

<sup>9</sup> Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, "The Building of the Ship."

<sup>10</sup> *Talmud Bavli, Shabbat* 55a.

<sup>11</sup> *Pirkei Avot* 1:18.

Each year in Confirmation class I ask our high schoolers, “What are the values by which society should live?” They speak about the Ten Commandments, Judaism’s archetype of universal ethics. I ask the kids to list the ten in whatever order they can. And every year I am struck by one of the first they recall: “don’t lie.”

In fact, the ninth commandment admonishes, “Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor,” but the thrust is the same. While in its narrowest sense, the prohibition forbids false testimony under oath, the injunction is understood more broadly to condemn any misrepresentation of fact. And whether done by our leaders or by the media, deliberately or in ignorance, in jest or to fire up a political base, the effects are the same: the continued breakdown of trust in our nation’s institutions, and the further normalization of dishonesty in public discourse.

The danger in the world is not that liars lie, because liars have always lied. “The danger in the world,” Rabbi Jack Stern once wrote, “is that the rest of us are beginning to receive a message, a message that is morally cynical, a message that what people are doing is alright, which it isn’t; and that it doesn’t matter, which it does; and that everybody’s doing it, which they aren’t.”<sup>12</sup> The danger in the world is that the message is being transmitted to our children.

We need to stand up for truth....

### *Civility*

And for civility.

Last spring in an article titled, “How We Became Bitter Political Enemies,”<sup>13</sup> *The New York Times* reported that more than four in ten Republicans and a similar percentage of Democrats view each other not just in “very unfavorable” terms, but as a threat to the nation’s future. When President Trump negotiated his two deals with the Democratic leadership, one to avert a government shutdown at a time of dire need in Texas and Florida and the second to protect “dreamers” from deportation, members of his own party treated him as a collaborator.

We demonize each other.

Friends of mine hosted a dinner party. As the conversation turned to politics, the temperature around the table began to rise, each guest infuriated by the other’s point of view. The hosts attempted to mediate, but none would listen. The story is all too familiar.

The presidential election threw into sharper relief the fissures we knew divided our country. We must hear in the election’s outcome voices of discontent on both sides reflecting concerns we may not know. Only then will we begin to make room for healthy debate and the possibility of compromise.

Earlier this year, a group of House Democrats and Republicans created a model from which we might learn. They called it the Problem Solvers Caucus. Chairs Josh Gottheimer and Tom Reed explained: “We all...felt...committed to getting to ‘yes’ on important issues.... Everyone had to give a little and endorse provisions that purists in both...parties may not like. [But] this is how American democracy is supposed to work....”<sup>14</sup>

And we can learn from our rabbinic tradition, certainly no stranger to disputes. The Babylonian Talmud records countless clashes between the rabbis over matters of law, the most notorious involving the disciples of Hillel and their loyal opposition, the school of Shammai.

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<sup>12</sup> Rabbi Jack Stern, “Personal Jewish Morality,” *The Right Not To Remain Silent*, pp.295, 298.

<sup>13</sup> Emily Badger and Niraj Chokshi, “How We Became Bitter Political Enemies,” *The New York Times*, 6/15/2017.

<sup>14</sup> Josh Gottheimer and Tom Reed, “Let’s Stop the Bickering and Fix the Health Care System,” *The New York Times*, 8/4/2017.

Yet despite their heated exchanges, the Talmud reports that Shammai's daughters still wed Hillel's sons.<sup>15</sup>

We can disagree. That shouldn't make us enemies. And to restore civility to public life we must at times be willing to compromise.

### *Decency*

But never our convictions or our decency.

In the last six weeks, we witnessed America at its worst, and at its best.

The day after Charlottesville, the Reverend Dr. Calvin Butts invited me to address the Abyssinian Baptist Church together with leadership from the American Muslim Community. The anguish was palpable. They knew what we know. Whether we are Christian, Muslim or Jewish; gay, straight, or transgender; black, white or any shade between – in the face of bigotry, we are all in the same boat.

The White Supremacist and Neo-Nazi rally in Virginia represented America at its worst...as did President Trump's response according racists and anti-Semites the same moral legitimacy as those who stood against them. What an affront to decency!

But then, in the days and weeks that followed, we witnessed America at its best: countless heroic volunteers rescuing those imperiled by Harvey's floodwaters and Irma's winds; citizens reaching out to anyone in need, regardless of gender identity or color, ethnicity or creed.

Like screenwriter Zachary Dearing, who stepped in to run a shelter in Rockport, Texas, recruiting staff, gathering supplies and coordinating with state officials when no one else would.

Like Jim McIngvale, who opened his furniture warehouses to flood victims as he did during Hurricane Katrina twelve years ago.

Like that still-unnamed volunteer from Texas City trailering his boat to Houston. When a reporter asked him his intentions, he answered matter-of-factly, "I'm gonna go try to save some lives."

Three weeks ago, I received an email from Houstonian Murry Bowden. "There is a great teaching moment underway," it began. "Thousands upon thousands [of] acts of...kindness are on display...initiated by every day people...simply motivated to help....There exists a great deal of empathy embedded in our nation's people. Sometimes it takes a crisis to fully reveal this innate characteristic. But it is highly visible...today, and the inspirational moment should not be lost. As [the South] embarks on its rebuilding effort, I hope our nation can pause, reflect and begin its effort to rebuild civility in our country."

Honesty. Civility. Decency.

### *Middle C*

The pictures of all those flat-bottomed boats riding the floodwaters to rescue the stranded could not help but evoke images of Noah's Ark.

Strangely, in the midrash, the rabbis debate the righteousness of Noah, whose ark saved the world from annihilation. The Torah describes him as a good man...in his generation. "Why the qualification?" the sages ask. Different schools answer differently. One explains that Noah was righteous only relative to the others of his time, a generation wicked and cruel. Had he been

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<sup>15</sup> *Talmud Bavli, Yevamot 14a.*

truly upright, he would have raised his voice against the injustice about him saving everyone, not just himself.

But other rabbis disagree. It's not so easy, they contend, to lift oneself out of the muck and the mire of indecency.<sup>16</sup> We tend to habituate to society's norms. And then it requires an act of will to separate ourselves from them.

Another legend tells of Abraham in the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, whose inhabitants were also sinful and godless. Day after day, Abraham preached to them, pleading with them to lift their hearts to the God of justice and peace. He would not be silenced.

One day a stranger approached him: "You speak, yet no one listens. Why continue?" he asked.

And Abraham answered, "At first I spoke to change them. And perhaps I shall. For now, I speak so they don't change me."

We too must raise our voices against the perjuring, the poisoning, the coarsening of America. We should be proud of those in our congregation who have – including those in positions of influence in business, in media, in law and in government. But all of us must speak up.

Now, it's not easy to be a voice in the wilderness. We must be able to discern against the clatter and the noise and the hubbub that still, small call of conscience.

An elderly gentleman, a retired music teacher, lived in a boarding house. His health was not good, and he was confined to a wheelchair. Each morning a neighbor would come down to his room and ask, "What's the good news?" The old man would pick up his tuning fork; tap it against the side of his wheelchair, and say, "That's 'middle c'! It was 'middle c' yesterday; it will be 'middle c' tomorrow; it will be 'middle c' a thousand years from now. The tenor upstairs sings flat, the piano across the hall is out of tune, but, my friend, that is 'middle c'!"

"The Torah is our 'middle c'," my father Rabbi Jerome Davidson once wrote. "The world may be out of tune, beating plowshares into swords, tolerating hunger in the midst of plenty, allowing the greed of some to undermine the security of many, expecting guns to be brought into schools and politicians to lie. But the Torah will speak of righteousness tomorrow and a thousand years from now."

We know this Torah, this Torah of right and wrong; this Torah of honesty, of civility, of decency. As frequently or as infrequently as we come to temple to hear it, it is a part of us.

The national bestseller *Habits of the Heart*, by three sociologists, a theologian and a philosopher, chronicled the relentless expansion of utilitarian individualism in American life. But against the dialect of self-interest that so often overwhelms public discourse, the authors consistently heard from many they interviewed a "second language"<sup>17</sup> of words like "conviction," "social responsibility," and "integrity." That second language resides in each of us.

*Ki ha-Mitzvah ha-zot*, "For this commandment which I enjoin upon you this day is not too hard for you, nor too remote. It is not in heaven, that you should say: 'Who will go up for us

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<sup>16</sup> *Midrash Tanchuma*.

<sup>17</sup> Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, p.154.

to heaven and bring it down to us, that we may do it?' Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say: 'Who will cross the sea for us and bring it over to us, that we may do it?' No, it is near to you, in your mouth and in your heart, and you can do it."<sup>18</sup>

Scholars attribute these words from Deuteronomy to King Josiah, his admonition to a generation like ours which had also lost its way. A New Yorker cartoon encapsulated their reproof in a single frame. Moses is standing atop Mount Sinai looking dejected and bewildered. "They broke all the Commandments," he says to God. "Can they have some more?"

We don't need more! The ones we have are sufficient, and when it comes to basic ethics we know them well. But as the great cellist Pablo Casals once said: "It takes courage for [us] to listen to [our] own goodness and act on it."<sup>19</sup>

That is what the New Year demands of us. Courage to listen to our own goodness and act on it. To hear in the Shofar's call our 'middle c.' To lift ourselves above the dishonesty, the incivility, the indecency, and choose our own way. And with "faith triumphant o'er our fears,"<sup>20</sup> to rebuild our ship.

May this New Year, five thousand seven hundred seventy-eight, be for each of us a year of health and joy, and for our country, a year of healing and of hope.

Amen.

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<sup>18</sup> Deuteronomy 30:11-14.

<sup>19</sup> Rabbi Jack Stern, "Beyond the Contract," *The Right Not To Remain Silent*, p.278.

<sup>20</sup> Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, "The Building of the Ship."