

It's hard to believe, since this electoral cycle has seemed unending, but Election Day is now less than four weeks away – just twenty-seven days until the speeches, and the ads, and the debates, and the talking points, and the rallies, and the interviews, and the spectacle are finished and America has chosen its president for the next four years. The race actually began back in March 2015 – more than one and a half years ago – when the first candidates declared and some of us may have been obsessively following political news since then, others may have (understandably!) had other priorities, and others still may have chosen to tune the whole thing out because it has been so ugly and depressing.

So I want to say – whichever of those categories you may fall into – I'm not going to speak about the election today, not really. In general, I try to avoid politics from the *bimah* and in this, my fourth presidential election cycle as rabbi at Or Hadash, have never spoken about an upcoming election at any High Holiday service. It's not that I don't have opinions – believe me, *I do*. But first, there are legal restrictions on what sorts of things clergy may say, and common-sense restrictions on what they *should* say, from the pulpit; and, second, a discussion of the candidates and the issues is not my idea of the sorts of inspiring ideas we need to hear on Yom Kippur, when I've tried to emphasize timeless themes like those of guilt, atonement, and forgiveness.

But this is not an ordinary year, and this has not been an ordinary election cycle. Those are the years when there is a candidate you like and vote for – maybe even contribute to or volunteer for – and there's another candidate you might disagree with, or dislike, or vote against but who at the end of the day offers a sane, rational vision of a future for this country, even if it's one whose policies you personally oppose. This is *not* one of those years, and one of the people on the ballot in twenty-seven days is not a regular candidate. Donald Trump is a dangerous, venal, self-aggrandizing demagogue and our religious tradition – to say nothing, *nothing* of our people's history – demands that we speak out in the face of those who opportunistically seek power and glory for themselves while caring nothing for the people they purport to represent. So I will not be talking about the election this morning. But I will be talking about Donald Trump. And I will be emphasizing a timeless and oh-so-appropriate theme for Yom Kippur: that silence and passivity in the face of demagoguery and hate can never be the Jewish response.

Now I should say that I have been thinking about and working on this sermon for quite some time – long before the airing of the obscene and appalling remarks Donald Trump made about women that surfaced on Friday. It seems that for some this video, with its boasts of sexually predatory behavior, has been the final straw, the unforgivable utterance that pushes his candidacy beyond the pale. But I contend that recording reveals nothing so different or earth-shattering that we did not already know. Frankly, these abhorrent comments are no more disqualifying than literally hundreds of other things he has done and said over the past eighteen months about so many different groups. And while they confirm everything I need to say here this morning they in no way inspire it, because when we talk about Donald Trump we are dealing with a bully, a narcissist, and a demagogue who must be denounced for how he has behaved and the damage he has inflicted on this country.

The classic exemplar of the demagogue in Jewish thought is Korach, a Levite who challenges Moses' leadership in the wilderness, declaring to Moses and Aaron: “You have gone too far! For all the community are holy, all of them, and the Lord is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourselves above the Lord's congregation?” (Numbers 16:3) Like all demagogues, his play for power is couched in an appeal to the common good, voicing and nursing popular resentments as a vehicle to position himself as the answer to them. In the Torah, Moses calls out

Korach's maneuverings for what they are and God confirms the verdict, causing the ground to open up and swallow Korach and his followers. We, of course in our own time, do not have the ability to confirm if someone is a demagogue by having the ground open up and swallow him or her – although you can imagine the page views YouTube would get from live-streaming *that* event! – but the rabbis provide an important insight to help us understand when someone is voicing a legitimate and principled position, as opposed to one just intended to advance his own interests and agenda. In the ancient collection of Jewish wisdom, Pirkei Avot, the rabbis say: “Any dispute that is for the sake of Heaven” – the Hebrew phrase is “*l'shem shamayyim*” – “is destined to endure; one that is not for the sake of Heaven is not destined to endure.” (5.17) The text goes on to cite the case of Korach and his followers as an example of a dispute that is *not l'shem shamayyim*, for the sake of heaven, because Korach was simply using his dispute as a pretext to usurp power, not out of concern for the people's wellbeing.

Our tradition requires that we unmask and denounce those whose intentions and ambitions are not *l'shem shamayyim*, who seek to accumulate and consolidate power for their own self-aggrandizement... to “build their brand” in the modern parlance. In this country, we have known figures like this – Father Coughlin in the 1930's, Joe McCarthy in the 1950's – both of whom relied on populism, innuendo, and personal attacks to raise their own profiles while destroying the lives of those who opposed them, those whom they sought to marginalize, those who were vulnerable and – more often than not – those who were Jews. In Europe, both Mussolini and Hitler originally rose to power on a cult of personality, and those who could have opposed them were too divided and failed to take them seriously until it was far too late. Now, I am not standing here suggesting that Donald Trump is Hitler; and yet how can we not hear echoes of Hitler's ascent when we see Trump sowing division and playing on people's fears – about immigrants, loss of jobs, terror – threatening to jail his political opponent, and presenting himself as a savior who can solve all problems; of a charismatic leader who presents himself as the embodiment of and answer to all resentments and grievances; who brashly and shamelessly attacks and denigrates any person or group who disagrees with him. How can we not be attuned to this very danger, as we note the broad backing Donald Trump has received from white nationalist groups, how he has emboldened and even incorporated voices from the anti-Semitic alt-right, and has sought to legitimize abhorrent views that were voiced only on the extremist fringes and ushered them into the mainstream.

The Torah's archetype of a wicked and arrogant leader is the Pharaoh of the Exodus story – a man who is not only portrayed as the villain in the Haggadah but who was also a megalomaniac who liked building huge edifices and then not paying the people who did the work! Twice in the opening chapters of the Book of Exodus, Pharaoh – who enslaved the Israelites, enacted cruel and brutal decrees, attempted to defy God, and is held up in Jewish thought as the exemplar of arrogance and evil – is described as “not knowing” – once in chapter 1 when the Torah describes Pharaoh as “a new king... who did not know Joseph” (1:8) and once in his own words in chapter 5, when he rejects Moses' message that God wants him to release the Israelites, declaring: “Who is the Lord that I should pay heed and let Israel go? *I do not know the Lord*, nor will I let Israel go.” (5:2) Midrash ha-Gadol, a medieval midrashic source, discounts the possibility that Pharaoh literally doesn't know who Joseph or God are, since those assertions would be bizarre. So what does the declaration that Pharaoh ‘doesn't know’ really mean, then? It means that Pharaoh refuses to acknowledge, is willfully ungrateful for the advantages and blessings he received both from Joseph – who saved Egypt from famine by correctly interpreting the previous Pharaoh's dreams and stockpiling food – and from God.

Reflecting on Pharaoh's ingratitude, the midrash affirms: "There is nothing so difficult for the world as an ingrate... for an ingrate causes there to be no good in the world." (Midrash ha-Gadol to Exodus 1:8)

A key feature of Donald Trump's character – the essence of who he is that precedes any policies or even behavior – is his arrogance, his entitlement, his ego, his certainty that he and he alone is the reason for his success. This ego is what causes him to build so many tall buildings and stamp his name on them, to lash out viciously against anyone who criticizes him or disagrees with him, to present himself as the savior that can fix all the country's problems. That pride, that arrogance, is clearly part of what some Americans find so alluring: For those in this country who see themselves on the outs, who feel their advantages and opportunities slipping away, the model of someone who succeeds by flaunting the usual limits and strictures, who effortlessly seems to create his own reality through sheer assertiveness and – I use the term advisedly: *chutzpah* – is intoxicating. But as the rabbis understand it is exactly this quality of arrogance – of viewing one's self as self-sufficient, self-made, un beholden – that engenders the ingratitude that "causes there to be no good in the world." In our midrash the rabbis explain that when someone receives and receives but does not give – give in the form of sharing what he has with those who are less fortunate and give in the form of offering gratitude in acknowledgment of that bounty – that person impedes the normal flow of receiving and giving through which goodness is made manifest in this world. Human beings do not exist in a vacuum, but rather in a *shefa*, a current of blessing, and one of the things we do to keep the course open, to keep the blessing flowing, is to express gratitude for what we have received. It is a lesson we strive to internalize on this day when we abstain from food, and drink, and bathing, and sexual relations – from the ordinary pleasures that put our own wants and desires first, reminding us there are things in this world more important than our own fulfillment and self-realization, that we exist not for our ego and desires but *l'shem shamayim*, for the sake of heaven. In the model of the Biblical Pharaoh, this arrogant and entitled candidate rejects the core values of humility and gratitude that are so central to Jewish teaching and to this Day of Atonement.

The Purim story also provides instructive insights into Donald Trump – perhaps *too* instructive. Some of you may remember that this past Purim I dressed up as Donald Trump – complete with the slogan "Make Shushan Great Again!" The idea had originally come to me back in January, when there was a wide-open field of Republican primary contenders and Trump's campaign still, I hate to say, seemed like a lark. Trump was an easy target – the buffoon-like King Achashverosh of the Purim story, who thinks so much of himself but is in fact a pompous windbag and amusing fool. The problem is that as Purim drew nearer, Trump started seeming less like Achashverosh and more like Haman – the wicked adviser who sought to divide the population of Persia, singling out the Jews as "a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of [the] kingdom; their laws are divergent from those of every people" (Est. 3:8), much like the divisive comments Trump has made about Muslims living in this country here today. Haman, whose pride and ego lead to a burning hatred that caused him to target an entire people because of Mordechai, who would not bow down to him. Can you imagine what Haman would have Tweeted about Mordechai at 3 in the morning? It was hard to hold both those aspects of Trump – the buffoonish, ridiculous Achashverosh and the evil, scheming Haman – at the same time, although I tried. The deeper truth I realized only later – in fact that Tzvi pointed out to me – is that Achashverosh is every bit as dangerous as Haman: as a leader without principles, who is unable or unwilling to exercise his authority he creates a vacuum at the top which others can easily and cynically manipulate. A leader who

abdicates any responsibility – who says he doesn't care if other countries develop nuclear weapons or that he may not honor America's obligations under existing treaties – creates the perfect environment for those who want to take advantage of the chaos to advance their own agendas. In keeping with the Purim story, what started as farce unsurprisingly morphed into something far more sinister.

But perhaps the Biblical figure with whom Trump resonates most is Laban, the wicked uncle of Jacob who exploits his nephew's desperation to enrich himself, who cynically twists words and facts time and again to manipulate those who depend on him, all the while protesting his innocence and virtue. Laban is the paradigm of what the rabbis term a '*leitzan*' – a scoffer or a cynic. This word, *leitzan*, may sound familiar from the Ashamu prayer, where we confess: "*latznu* – we have scorned." Laban, the *leitzan*, substitutes his daughter Leah for Rachel on the wedding night after Jacob has labored seven years to earn Rachel's hand; when challenged he disavows responsibility for the subterfuge and instead blames Jacob for not understanding that Laban had never intended to honor the terms of their agreement: "It is not so done in our place, to give the younger before the first-born." (Gen. 29:26) Laban plays fast and loose with the facts, twisting words to mean whatever he wants them to mean: essentially substituting his own preferred version of reality for the truth. This description, unfortunately, should sound familiar to us all.

The real problem with a *leitzan*, the rabbis tell us is that he or she undermines the standards, norms, expectations, and ideals on which a just society is based. The 13th century ethicist Rabbenu Yonah writes: "...[the *leitzan*] mocks the poor, telling himself that their failure to achieve wealth is attributable to inferior understanding and lack of exertion. In so thinking he blasphemes the Maker of the poor and the rich, for everything proceeds from the Blessed One." (*Sha'arei Teshuvah* 3.175) The insolence of the *leitzan* and his apparent ability to flaunt society's strictures without consequence call into question the very institutions that hold society together. In spiritual terms, these are commitment to actions that don't pay immediate or obvious dividends, such as compassion, caring for the poor, standing against oppression and with those in need. They are core values of believing in the underlying goodness of the world and the need for sacrifice and integrity even when it seems to fly in the face of our immediate material gains. In socio-political terms, these are qualities like belief in fair play, in people shouldering their civic responsibilities – say to serve in the military when called, or pay taxes to contribute to the common good – and the fundamental fairness and decency of our democracy. When Donald Trump repeatedly alludes to voter fraud and a 'rigged system,' he is ridiculing and mocking the very idea that we should trust and accept the outcome of our elections. In doing so he wades into profoundly dangerous territory, undercutting the very foundations that allow us to function as a society. It is with this vast destructive force of the *leitzan* in mind that the Talmud (B. Sotah 42a) states that there are four classes of people who will not receive the Divine Presence in the world to come – those who gossip, those who lie, those who flatter others to gain favor, and *leitzanim*: the cynics and scorners whose very essence is incompatible with the ideals, reverence, and humility that we strive to cultivate in ourselves – on Yom Kippur and all year round.

And I need to say on this Yom Kippur morning: nothing that I have to say about Donald Trump and the ethical and spiritual dangers he poses to our country gives me the slightest bit of pleasure to enumerate. Considering his arrogant behavior, cynical actions, and hateful words, I am hard-pressed to find a single admirable, positive, or redeeming characteristic in him. And this is deeply disturbing for me because it is a day when we are supposed to strive to see the goodness in others, to extend the benefit of the doubt, to forgive those who have hurt and wipe

clean the slate. And I would like to do that, but I'm not there, because the man is causing too much grievous damage to this country I love.

But besides that, I feel a profound sadness; because Donald Trump has fired the imagination of a significant part of the electorate, has brought abhorrent views that existed only on the extremist fringes into the mainstream, and has set the stage for a strain of xenophobia, grievance, and selfishness that will continue to simmer in this country long after the ads, interviews, and rallies have faded from the news cycle. Trump's rhetoric of entitlement and resentment have clearly resonated deeply with his core enthusiasts, and a larger group of supporters that may not fully endorse the divisiveness is also clearly willing to overlook it. Hillary Clinton referred to Donald Trump's core supporters as 'irredeemable,' an assertion that gives me as a rabbi deep pause, especially on this day which is dedicated to atoning for and redeeming those dark and fearful parts of our selves. I reject Clinton's assessment; I do think redemption is possible even for those who have embraced his hateful rhetoric. But the passion with which his message has been embraced, not just on the darkest fringes, shows how far our country still needs to go, how much must still be achieved before we live in a society that wholeheartedly embraces fairness, diversity, and dignity.

What we must recognize, on this day that calls us to examine our shortcomings with unflinching honesty, to sincerely atone and seek forgiveness where we have fallen short, is that Donald Trump did not create the circumstances that made his candidacy so compelling, although he exploited them expertly. His rise would not have been possible without the all-too-human flaws – the suspicion, resentment, and fear – that exist in all of us. Trump tuned into, unleashed, and channeled the base impulses that incite us as a nation to give voice to our worst, rather than prompt us to embody our best. And the burden to undo the spiritual damage his candidacy has inflicted, to assert and strengthen the core values and principles that make this country so precious, falls to us all. We begin by voting, but the real work will take place after Election Day as we seek not to gain a political, rhetorical, or strategic advantage over those with whom we disagree, but to overcome Donald Trump's toxic brew of division, dissent, and derisiveness by recommitting in words and actions to the core foundations of this country: a commitment to civil discourse, tolerance, rule of law, and fair play. "For on this day shall atonement be made for you, to cleanse you; from all your sins shall you be clean before the Lord," states this morning's Torah reading (Lev. 16:30). May this day with its promise of renewal and redemption point the way for the work that must be done, and give us hope, strength, and resolve to overcome difference and rebuild connection and shared purpose. When we work toward this precious goal, we will make America not only great, but good.