



BAN THE BIBLE

I spent the summer reading banned books. Here's what I learned: empathy poses the greatest threat to tyranny. Art is the antidote to numbness. And Torah is the most dangerous book of all.

Yom Kippur, 5783

In the early 2000s, a controversy erupted over a children's book called *King and King*. You may remember it: a grumpy queen is eager for her perpetual-bachelor son to get married. "Very well, Mother," he says with a sigh, "I must say, though, I've never cared much for princesses." After a string of failed first dates with lovely ladies from across the land, our prince finally falls in love and marries... *the brother* of one of his potential princess-brides.

Gay marriage was already legal in Massachusetts when the book came out, but that didn't stop parents there from launching what became a national protest against the book. "They're trying to indoctrinate our children," they argued. The book is advancing a "homosexual agenda" in public schools.

Our kids were very little at the time, but we did the only reasonable thing we could do: we bought 50 copies of the book, and gave them as birthday presents to every classmate for the next five years.

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King and King has been on my mind, given the dramatic surge in book bans across the country - 1,648 individual titles in the past year alone. School board meetings have become a battleground, with seething parents—amped up on the increasingly violent political rhetoric of our time—accusing teachers and librarians of grooming, pedophilia and distribution of pornography. They threaten violence and file criminal complaints... over books.

Look, Jews take books seriously. It was in the Koran that we were first referred to as the People of the Book, a designation we've embraced with pride over the centuries. The central image of Yom Kippur is a book—סֵפֶר הַחַיִּים, the Book of Life, which we spend the whole day praying we'll be written into. R' Jonathan Sacks writes of the astonishing relationship Jews have with our holiest object, a book. "We stand in its presence as if it were a king, dance with it as if it were a bride, and if, God forbid, it is desecrated or ruined beyond repair, we bury it as if it were a relative who had died."¹ When David and I got married, we registered not for kitchen appliances, but for books, and the biggest fight we ever got into was when one of us believed

¹ Jonathan Sacks, *The Power of Ideas*, p. 114.

our books should be arranged by fiction/ nonfiction alphabetical (obviously), whereas the other argued: *by color*. Books matter a lot to us.

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I'm not even sure what I was looking for, but this summer I began to read as many banned books as I could, approaching each one with genuine wonder: What could I learn from these texts, so menacing that they needed to be kept off the shelves?

Of course, some of the most important and formative books I've ever read are on the list: Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye*, Sandra Cisneros's *House on Mango Street* and the brilliant *Homegoing* by Yaa Gyasi, along with, unbelievably, *Anne Frank's Diary*.

Our family prepared for our trip to Poland in June with Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus*, which was banned by a school board in Tennessee that was particularly aggrieved by an image in the book of a dead, partially naked mouse (portraying Spiegelman's mother, a Holocaust survivor who died by suicide), and his use of the word "damn." Subsequently, school districts in both Florida and Texas removed the book as well.

I listened to *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, read by Maya Angelou herself. Even though it's considered among the most influential pieces of American literature, school boards in Alaska and Oklahoma banned it, decrying its "anti-white messaging." This was not the first time the book has been challenged. For forty years, Angelou's words have been considered by some too vivid, too honest, too dangerous for children.

Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian broke my heart again and again. It's a book about a boy growing up on the Spokane Indian Reservation, navigating violence, poverty and racism as he fights to survive. It's poignant and painful, funny and brave. It was banned for profane language and "anti-Christian content."

George M. Johnson's *All Boys Aren't Blue* is beautiful and empathic, pained and joyful, a memoir-manifesto of a queer Black child that's been banned in more than a dozen states. School boards in Florida filed a criminal complaint with the sheriff's department against the book, calling it "obscene and pornographic."

In Wyoming, library employees were threatened with criminal charges for stocking books with LGBTQ characters, and a mayor in Mississippi refused to release money for the County Library until *all books* with LGBTQ characters were removed from the library. Heather McGee writes about "how racism drained the pools" when—after receiving desegregation mandates—many towns chose to shutter their public pools rather than share with Black children, even if it meant denying their own children a place to swim. This brand of self-harm is not new in America.

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The stated rationale for these book bans is the need to protect our children's innocence, lest they encounter vulgar language, portrayals of violence, sex and sexuality.

Of course, if you're worried about sex, there's another book that really should be on your radar. It's a classic. It has loads of explicit sexual content—more than any of the banned books I read this summer.

- A guy named Adam and a woman named Eve frolic naked in public, without even being ashamed (Gen 2)!
- Avram pretends his hot wife is his sister, twice, lending her to Pharaoh and Avimelekh to save his own life (Gen 12, 20).
- Sarah encourages her husband to have sex with their nanny (Gen 16).
- Lot offers his virgin daughters to an angry mob of sex offenders (Gen 19).
- Leah and Rachel, sisters, marry the same man, and they fight over who gets to sleep with him which night. Jacob then impregnates both of their handmaids as well (Gen 29-30).
- Tamar dresses up as a prostitute and sleeps with her father-in-law (Gen 38)!
- Potiphar's wife tries to seduce Joseph, then accuses him of attempted rape... (Gen 39).

And that's just the Book of Genesis! Wait until you see what kind of trouble King David gets into...

You're worried about violence? How about a book in which:

- Abel is murdered by his own brother (Gen 4).
- Humanity is so violent and corrupt that God decides to drown them all and start again! (Gen 6)
- Dina's brothers coerce the men of a city into circumcising themselves, then they attack and murder them all (Gen 34).
- The brothers sell Joseph into slavery, and then lie about it to their bereaved father (Genesis 37-50).

Again, that's just Genesis.

Yes, if what you're worried about is sex and violence, vulgarities and profanities, the Bible is your book to ban.

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But of course this was never about the naked mouse, was it?

This was never about protecting the innocence of our children. I'll tell you how I know this: the same political leaders in a fit of rage over dangerous books fight equally vigorously to defeat

efforts to *actually* protect our children, whether from guns in schools, from poverty and hunger, from police violence and sexual violence and the stigmatization of mental illness. Instead of protecting children from real threats, they expend limitless energy trying to protect children from reading narrative fiction about those threats.

I talked to Julie Goler about this, a beloved literature teacher and dear IKAR member. She pointed out that if we really want to protect our children, shielding them from ideas is precisely the wrong thing to do. "Great literature teaches kids difficult things that we'd rather not have our children experience on their own," she said, "but we want them to recognize as they struggle in the world writ large." She argues that when we encounter stories of racism, homophobia, disability, poverty and other struggles in books, we grow in both sensitivity and resiliency.

So what's *really* driving this fervid effort to purge our shelves of the kind of smut one finds in Pulitzer Prize winning novels, memoirs and the Bible?

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To get to the heart of this, we must ask a more foundation question: what is the point of great literature?

Years ago, I heard Angie Thomas speak in a breakout session at the Obama Summit. Thomas is the author of *The Hate U Give*, the story of Starr Carter, a Black teenager who witnesses a white officer shoot her unarmed best friend, a Black high school student. Thomas shared that she learned from one of her teachers that *books are either mirrors, windows or sliding glass doors*. "I want mine," she said, "to be all three."

This formulation helps us understand what we and our children lost when those 1,648 books were banned in the past year:

They lost a *mirror*. An opportunity for self-understanding.

My brother-in-law, Larry Weber, another brilliant teacher of literature and writing, describes books as "our clearest means of imagining ourselves." When we recognize our own struggle in the pages of a book, we feel a little less lonely. And that visibility and connectivity can be a lifeline. Of the books banned in the past year, nearly all feature LGBTQ+ characters, protagonists who are BIPOC (Black, indigenous and People of Color), or both. When characters with under-represented identities appear in literature, readers who share those identities are given a chance to see themselves, in all their beauty and vulnerability. Listen to James Baldwin:

You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read. It was books that taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, who had

ever been alive.²

Book bans deny us this mirror. They also take away a *window*. I love Barbara Kingsolver's explanation of how fiction works:

*It lifts you away from your chair and stuffs you gently down inside someone else's point of view. ... A newspaper could tell you that one hundred people, say... have died today. And you can think to yourself, "How very sad," then turn the page... But a novel could take just one of those hundred lives and show you exactly how it felt to be that person rising from bed in the morning, watching the desert light on the tile of her doorway and on the curve of her daughter's cheek. You could taste that person's breakfast, and love her family, and sort through her worries as your own, and know that a death in that household will be the end of the only life that someone will ever have. As important as yours. As important as mine.*³

Literature compels us to imagine not only ourselves, but each other. It opens our hearts to ache for and empathize with one another, to identify with one another's struggle.

And perhaps the greatest loss, when a book is banned, is the loss of the *sliding door*. This is when a story somehow changes us, compels us to exit the closed ecosystem we've been inhabiting and walk differently through the world.

In 1862, a short story was published in Britain about a small boy who dies while working as a chimney sweep. The story so touched people's hearts that it fueled a national movement to end child labor.⁴ That's sliding door literature.

What happens to your view of healthcare and income inequality when you fall in love with a boy growing up on the reservation without access to proper dental care? Or when you read of Starr Carter's experience of police violence, or young Maya Angelou's witness to the humiliation of her proud and proper Momma by racist white children? These stories don't just hurt our hearts, they challenge us to work to eradicate the unjust conditions that fuel the human suffering all around us.

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Stories cultivate empathy, helping us to see ourselves, to see others, and to change the way we live. As Kingsolver writes: "Art is the antidote that can *call us back from the edge of numbness*, restoring the ability to feel for another."⁵

² James Baldwin, WNEW-TV, New York City, 1 June, 1964.

³ Barbara Kingsolver, *High Tide in Tucson*, p. 231-232.

⁴ Peter Bazalgette, *The Empathy Instinct*, ch. 7.

⁵ Barbara Kingsolver, *High Tide in Tucson*, p. 231-232.

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If literature is fundamentally a conduit for empathy, then it stands to reason that book bans are an attempt to block empathy. So we must ask: who benefits in a society in which people cannot feel for one another?

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On the IKAR Europe trip this summer, we visited the Bebelplatz, a large piazza in the heart of Berlin. This plaza is surrounded by magnificent buildings: the Opera, a Cathedral and a University—all symbols of German culture and sophistication.

On that site, in May of 1933, tens of thousands of people gathered as the Nazi German Student Association [burned](#) more than 20,000 books in a bonfire. There were simultaneous burnings in dozens of German cities. 100,000 books were burned that day. The targeted books were written by some of the great thinkers of Europe, many Jewish: Karl Marx, Rosa Luxemburg, Sigmund Freud and Bertold Brecht. They were seen as evidence of an “un-German spirit,” symbols of “decadence” and “moral decay.” This was eight years before the Final Solution, nine years before the liquidation of the Warsaw Ghetto. But it was a harbinger of what was to come.

The memorial that stands on that site today is haunting—a subterranean, empty library—engraved with a warning from Heinrich Heine, written more than a century before the Nazis rose to power: “Where they burn books, they will also burn people.”

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It may have seemed over the past year that the fevered pitch around books was a grassroots, organic movement—parent-activists spontaneously waking up to the dangers lurking in their children’s syllabi. But we must be clear: *this is no grassroots movement*. Book bans rarely are. It is a coordinated effort to suppress the cultivation of empathy, led by a small, well-funded group of far-right organizations. These groups are animated by an ascendant white supremacist conspiracy theory known as the [Great Replacement](#).

The night the white nationalists marched in Charlottesville in 2017 chanting “*Jews will not replace us*,” I watched in astonishment as the news anchors reported that they were shouting “*You will not replace us*” when I knew I heard what I heard. Like many of you, I wondered: What do Jews have to do with this? I don’t want to replace you! Well, we spent the next couple of years learning precisely what the Jews had to do with this. Thanks to the groundbreaking work of my friend Eric Ward and others, we all learned of the centrality of antisemitism to white nationalist ideology.

It's possible that the Jewish question was so perplexing and so personal that it overshadowed the bigger question: *Why are you so worried about being replaced?*

The Great Replacement posits that white people are being replaced by immigrants, Black people, Muslims, and other People of Color, and the Jews are of course the puppet masters responsible for orchestrating it all. This idea lived on the fringes for years. Today it is increasingly mainstream and increasingly violent, stoking terrorist attacks in America and abroad over the past few years.

Those who submit to this thinking see their world order—white, Christian, heterosexual, cisgendered, patriarchal—as fragile and endangered. They don't simply fear they'll be replaced by a new work force—their jobs will go to migrants, for example. They worry their *identity* will be replaced. Their dominance, their hegemony. There's a *war on Christianity!*, they say. A *war on the nuclear family! War on free speech, the police, masculinity, red meat!*

They lean on the rhetoric of war because they believe their way of life is under attack!

And it seems they believe that in war, victory goes to those who coarsen their hearts toward the enemy.

Remember that the very essence of good literature is to renders another's heart visible to us. Art *humanizes* the other, a great threat to the simplicity of a worldview that relies on the dehumanization of the other. Expansive, empathic thinking poses a mortal threat to the supremacists' dark ambition.

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And so, on this Yom Kippur, I must bring before the committee that banned *Maus*, *Gender Queer* and *The Kite Runner* my proposal for the Bible to be banned, once and for all. Not for its explicit sexual and violent content—because I don't believe you really care much about that. Clearly not because I'm averse to religion, as some Bible banners before me have been. But because I am certain that if what you *really* want is to protect your children from cultivating empathy toward those on the margins, those who struggle and suffer under the weight of oppression, this text is not only unsavory, it's downright dangerous.

The very premise of this book is that ALL human beings are created in God's own image and deserve to be treated with dignity and love.

..that our diversity—not our uniformity—is a testament to the greatness of God!

..that God hears the cries of the oppressed and acts to overturn empires until liberation is achieved.

...that the work of redemption is not yet done—and will not be done until all are able to enter the Promised Land.

What book could be more dangerous?

This book is a *mirror*. Look at the Prophet Yonah, whom we'll read this afternoon: the reluctant prophet, desperately fleeing the call to become himself. He is petty and small, even when the world demands of him big things. Malbim (a 19th century, Ukrainian rabbi) essentially suggests that Yonah suffers from Preacher's Kid Syndrome—he just wants to be left alone to forge his own path. Who can't see themselves in this boy's struggle?

This book is a *window*. I want to remind you why we blow shofar on these holy days. In the *Song of Deborah*, one of the oldest Biblical texts, we read the story of Sisera, the Canaanite commander who ruthlessly oppresses Israel for twenty years. Through courage and ingenuity, the Jews finally defeat Sisera, and we expect to read of a great celebration: *they're free, at last!* But instead, the point of view shifts to Sisera's mother, gazing out her window, awaiting her son's return from war with a dread in her heart that every parent can relate to. '*Why is his chariot so long in coming?*' (Judges 5:28) she asks, in desperation.⁶

Tradition teaches that Sisera's mother's cries that night—when she realizes she'll never again see her son—are simulated in the blasts of the shofar on our holiest days. Yes, the most iconic Jewish sound is an echo of our enemy's mother wailing after we defeat him. Kind of makes you think.

And of course, this book is a *sliding door*, doggedly demanding that our own experience of heartache, oppression and humiliation leaves us with a *mandate* to grow in empathy toward those most vulnerable:

וְגַר לֹא תִלְחָץ וְאַתֶּם יְדַעְתֶּם אֶת־נַפְשׁ הַגֵּר כִּי־גֵרִים הֵייתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם:
*You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the soul of the stranger,
having been strangers yourselves in the land of Egypt. (Exodus 23:9)*

This is the dominant thread of the Torah, reconnecting us *repeatedly* to our people's most foundational moment of powerlessness—enslaved in Egypt—so that we feel kinship and solidarity with those who continue to suffer.

But then look at Isaiah, whom we just heard moments ago: Sorry, folks, he cries, but sacred kinship is simply not enough. What I need is for you to build a just society! To care for the poor, the widow and the orphan. Feed the hungry. Protect the vulnerable. Your gestures of religiosity, your expressions of sympathy mean nothing to me if your heartache doesn't translate into moral action! I don't just want empathy, I want *transformational empathy*. *Walk through that door!*

If you're going to ban *Beloved*, then surely you must ban the Bible. For this may be, in fact, the most dangerous book of all.

⁶ Rosh Hashana 33b.

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And by the way, these culture warriors, these protectors of empire know how dangerous this book is. Generations ago they *did* ban portions of the Bible—but only from the hands of the oppressed. They excised the most dangerous parts of our story for the Slave Bible, fearful that enslaved people would find fuel for their righteous struggle for liberation in the Israelites’ journey to freedom. And when Nat Turner was captured after inspiring a rebellion of enslaved people in 1831, in his hands was his dogeared [Bible](#), a constant companion and source of spiritual strength. From that point forward, enslaved people were forbidden from even reading the Bible without a white censor present. The ruling class has always understood the power, the danger of this book.

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This is not to pretend, of course, that the Bible is some benign, saccharine, feel-good text. I know what it means to be in relationship with a book that breaks your heart; sometimes Torah breaks mine. Even still, even when this text evidences a painful lack of sensitivity to the nature of power, violence and the human heart, our response is not to ban the text, but rather to wrestle with it. To talk about it, to translate and interpret it. To find meaning, even still.

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In 1995, Toni Morrison gave an address at Howard University called “Racism and Fascism.”

“Let us be reminded,” she said, “that before there is a final solution, there must be a first solution, a second one, even a third. The move toward a final solution is not a jump. It takes one step, then another, then another.”

I’m not a Holocaust alarmist, as you well know. But it is *willful negligence* to ignore the echoes of the past in our present.

In the spring, the Tennessee State House passed a bill requiring public school librarians to submit all book titles for approval. The lawmaker who authored the bill was asked what should be done with the books removed from the shelves. “I would burn them,” he said.

This is America, 2022.

This book banning craze is not just a phase, a political ploy before the midterms. It’s a hint of where we’re headed, an admonition: a dangerous movement is gripping our nation and many parts of the world, a movement that has the strong force of precedent behind it.

But this movement only succeeds if we go numb.

Aside from doing everything we can to keep those who hold this dangerous ideology out of power, it’s obvious what we must do: the greatest response to a movement that depends on

calloused hearts is to make our hearts tender toward one another. If art is the antidote to numbness, then we must read and write, make art and music, wonder and learn. When we do, we will find not only access to one another's world, but a greater understanding of our own. I learned that from a book I love, the most dangerous and wonderful book of all:

וְאַהֲבַתְּם אֶת־הַגֵּר כִּי־גֵרִים הָיִיתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם:

Open your heart with love for the stranger, for once, in Egypt, you were a stranger too.
(Deut 10:19)

Shanah tovah, and may we all be written into the Book of Life.

Some re/sources on banned books in America:

1. An updated [list](#) of the books being banned or challenged.
2. [Research](#) on the book ban movement and books being targeted.
3. Additional [articles](#) cited ([NY Times](#), [Guardian](#) & [Washington Post](#)).