

# AMERICA NEEDS TO FIND ITS WAY AGAIN

*Race, violence and madness in an election year.*

*How can we reclaim the soul of our country?*

## Rosh Hashanah Day One

A Jewish leadership conference in May brought together a panel of brilliant and renowned scholars to address the question that really could only be asked at a Jewish conference: *What Should We Worry About Next?*

Apparently, the Jews have always worried. Worry is in our legal codes, our liturgy, our literature. Leon Wieseltier pointed out that over the generations we have worried about external threats (all the people who want to kill us) and internal threats (all the ways that we are killing ourselves). We've worried in times of struggle, and we've worried in times of relative calm. "Even when Jewish life in the exile was not miserable," he said, "it was [still] precarious..." so there was always justification to worry about *something*. So basically we can forgive our grandmothers their fears that we'd catch a cold going outside with wet hair. Worry was in their DNA, and it's in ours too.

I start here because I know that we come here today holding worry, maybe even more worry than usual. And I'm worried too. But the good news is: we know worry. We have muscle memory for this one. It's my goal today to turn our worry from paralytic to productive, because there's simply too much at stake today to do anything less.

Here's what I'm worried about this year: I'm worried about the soul of our country.

In 1968 Mayor John Lindsay of New York said: "This is a drifting, angry America that needs to find its way again." It was a time of social and political crisis—civil unrest, racial violence, the Vietnam war, the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy. The country was being torn apart at the seams.

Today, those words ring true once again. This is a drifting, angry America that needs to find its way again.

We are standing at the cusp of a presidential election that will absolutely redefine the culture and the contours of our nation. In many ways, it already has. Regardless of the outcome in November, this election has mainstreamed xenophobia and hostility, enthusiastically surfacing bigotry and racialized hatred that will take at least a generation to heal.

*America needs to find its way again.* I don't know quite what Lindsay meant when he said it. Maybe he held nostalgia for some mythical time in which America *had found* its way, and felt we only needed to figure out how to return there. But I'm not interested in returning to a fabled past. Our country, it seems to me, needs to find its way, again and again and again.

The election of 2016 is not unfolding in a vacuum. It heats up now against a backdrop of violence, both abroad and at home. A snapshot of our broken edges:

How many stories did we hear this summer of black men shot by police—from Tulsa to Charlotte, from Falcon Heights, Minnesota to Baton Rouge? Last week in San Diego. With each death, reverberative trauma pulses through the country; revelations of the extent of the brokenness of our justice system, which treats black men like dangerous criminals, even when their only crime is walking down the wrong street or driving with a broken taillight or selling CDs in a parking lot... *while being black*.

National statistics show that young black males are 21 times more likely to be shot dead than their white counterparts.<sup>1</sup> The crisis is so severe that my friend's church had to put out a video series for young black men called *Get Home Safely: 10 Rules of Survival When Stopped By Police*.<sup>2</sup> Each rule is read by a young African-American child; it could break your heart. Among them:

1. Be polite and respectful. Your goal is to get home safely.
2. Do not, under any circumstances, get into an argument with the police.
3. Do not make any sudden movements and *do not* put your hands in your pockets.
4. Do not run—even if you are afraid.
5. Watch your words, your body language. Remember, your goal is to get home safely.

Stats aside, the story of Charles Kinsey screams the depths of the crisis of systemic racism in this country. A behavioral therapist working in a mental health center, Kinsey ran outside in July to help a 23-year-old man with autism who had run out of the center. Police ordered Kinsey to the ground and then shot three times with a high powered assault rifle, even as he lay there, unarmed, both his hands up in the air. Shot in the leg, Kinsey cried out, "Sir, why did you shoot me?" "I don't know," the officer replied.

And I cannot escape the thought of the black police officer in Baton Rouge, Montrell Jackson, was so troubled by this summer's violence that he wrote about the dilemma of being a black cop and posted on Facebook:

I swear to God I love this city but I wonder if this city loves me. In uniform I get nasty hateful looks and out of uniform some consider me a threat... These are trying times. Please don't let hate infect your heart... This city MUST and WILL get better. I'm working in these streets so any protesters, officers, friends, family, or whoever, if you see me and need a hug or want to say a prayer I got you.

A week later, Montrell Jackson and two other officers were gunned down in an ambush targeting the police, a retaliation for the killing of Philando Castile and Alton Sterling.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.propublica.org/article/deadly-force-in-black-and-white>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wqJ-psD9vJw>

...and even still, for all of this systemic failure, it is a black football player's act of civil disobedience—kneeling during the national anthem to protest racial injustice—*that* is the great internal threat to America today? Even as his jersey is burned on the internet, this man has used his fame to shake a nation out of its denial, to redefine patriotism not as chest-thumping and flag-waving, but as loving your country enough to fight for it to live up to its own promises.

*America desperately needs to find its way again.*

Even being suspected of carrying a gun seems to be the equivalent of a death sentence for a black man in America. And meanwhile, gun manufacturers and lobbyists continue to churn out propaganda to promote and protect our gun culture. Did you know that gun sales have skyrocketed this year—up by more than 30%? That's big business for the folks who profits off the 35,000 Americans killed each year with their products. After each mass shooting, there is a spike in both gun sales and stock prices. And yet, in classically American illogic, we're expected to believe that there is no connection between gun proliferation and gun deaths, and therefore there's absolutely nothing we can do to stop it.

A few months ago the New York Times did a comparative analysis of gun violence rates between the United States and many other developed countries and, not surprisingly, found that our country is an "extreme outlier."

"In Germany, being murdered with a gun is as uncommon as being killed by a falling object in the United States. In France, China, New Zealand, England, one is about as likely to die from gun violence as someone in America is to die from falling from a ladder.<sup>3</sup>

*Is this what we want America to be?*

In America, to challenge the right of a mentally unstable man with a history of beating his wife who may be on the terror watch list to purchase an AR-15 is nothing short of un-American. Meanwhile, every consumer product in the country—from teddy bears to toasters—is regulated by federal health and safety standards, but to hold the gun industry similarly accountable would be a grievous undermining of our Constitution and a threat to our democracy.

*America needs to find its way again.*

At the same time, Americans' central and consuming obsession—terrorism—has led to harsh and unrelenting attitudes toward Muslim Americans, draconian policy proposals around immigration of people from majority Muslim countries, and dehumanizing language about refugees—many of whom happen to be fleeing the very terrorism we so despise. What happened last month in New York and New Jersey was undeniably terrifying, and it could have

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/14/upshot/compare-these-gun-death-rates-the-us-is-in-a-different-world.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/14/upshot/compare-these-gun-death-rates-the-us-is-in-a-different-world.html?_r=0)

been much worse. And yet, *most* terror attacks committed in the US since 9/11 have been carried out by radical anti-government groups or white Christian supremacists. Those attacks have killed more than twice as many people as attacks by radical Islamists, according to the New York Times.<sup>4</sup>

*America needs to find its way again.*

In America today, people no longer read articles written by or engage in conversation with people who don't agree with them. Twitter and FB have become the play-space of marauding cyber villains, spewing their racist, anti-Semitic, Islamophobic, misogynistic venom. I recently looked up one of the people who went after me on social media for posting an article that moved me. He had called me a whore, a Nazi and some other choice words that I can't repeat in this holy gym... I guess I was curious to know what someone who uses language like that looks like. Honestly, he looked like a nice, normal guy. His profile picture was with a smiling woman, presumably his wife, and two cute kids. But none of that stopped this guy from trolling for progressive Jews on FB and then unleashing holy hell on them. I wrote the guy a private note, "Got your message," I said. "It looks from your profile like you have a sweet life. It might be better for everyone if instead of dumping poison on people you don't know, you read a book to your kids or take your wife out to dinner?" I didn't hear back.

Fear is high. Tolerance is low. Empathy is non-existent.

Voyeuristic reality television is our new political reality. In the winter, one studio head said, "It may not be good for America, but it's damn good for [the network]." He went on to call the presidential campaign a "circus" full of "bomb throwing," which he hoped would continue. You know, for business' sake. Six months later, business is booming but we have become a nation of anger, vulgarity and fear, division, distrust and despair. We are afraid of otherness. Foreignness. Differentness. We have forgotten how to listen. Words like "hope" and "change" feel hopelessly naïve and outdated.

One moment over the summer captured it perfectly. After days of apocalyptic speeches, one of the party's national conventions culminated in the crowd cheering "Yes YOU can! Yes YOU can!" Did you catch that moment? In the space of less than a decade, the shift in American consciousness has been profound. From *yes WE can*—an expression of community, shared responsibility, hope and moral imagination to *yes YOU can*—an expression of desperation, radical disempowerment, and the need for a big hero to save us, for what could we possibly do to help ourselves?

*America really needs to find its way again.*

Half the country is pretty sure that the other half has gone completely mad. And that's true whichever half you find yourself in, (let alone the fact that our half is actually right).

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/25/us/tally-of-attacks-in-us-challenges-perceptions-of-top-terror-threat.html>

It may be that every generation needs to determine what America we want to live in. We certainly do today. And while a lot is on the line in November, this is not only about a presidential election. This is about the people of this country actively engaging in reshaping the culture of our nation.

We're here today because Rosh Hashanah is our time to look in mirror; to contend with who we have become and dream again of who and what we'd like to be. We do this personally, taking a self-audit of our behaviors (what held me back this past year? What patterns were destructive? Where did I take up too much space? Too little?). We do this in our relationships (who did I hurt? Who hurt me? Who have I neglected to see? Honor? Prioritize? Thank?). And we do this more globally, looking at our families, our communities, our country, the Jewish people and the world. *Ma anu* is the banner language of these holy days. What are we? Who are we? Who do we want to be? And, perhaps most importantly, what are we willing to do about it?

In other words, *how am I—and how are we—going to find our way again?*

Let me offer this framework:

Many Americans today are consumed by two primary concerns, both brought about, to some extent, by globalization. First, the fear that in a new global economy, with the outsourcing of production and the fast and furious development of new technologies, they have been left many behind. Job loss and lack of opportunity have left many with a lack of purpose and a general fear that the world has moved on without them. Second, the fear of global terrorism has left many feeling profoundly vulnerable.

In other words, two core, driving fears in our country today are the fear that I can't provide for my loved ones and the fear that I can't protect my loved ones. Both are real and serious, and both must be addressed with urgency, resources and great sensitivity.

But rather than deal honestly and responsibly with these growing fears, they have been exploited by a politics of pessimism, which has turned legitimate concerns of marginalization, irrelevance and emasculation into a fear-mongering politics of division. Rather than address root causes, fear has been hijacked and transformed into anger, resentment and distrust of others *who are equally vulnerable*, if not more so. Let us call this what it is: gutter politics. Gutter politics forces our gaze downward, plays to our worst inclinations, and threatens to destroy the fabric of our country.

What can we do now?

Shortly after crossing the Sea on their way out of Egypt, the Israelites are attacked by Amalek – an army determined to destroy them. As Joshua leads the Israelites in battle, Moses ascends a nearby mountain, overlooking the valley where they fight. With all the strength he can

muster—remember, he’s no spring chicken at this point—he holds up his hands to the heavens. And as he does, his people start to prevail over their enemies. But eventually he grows weary and his hands grow heavy. As his arms lower, Israel starts to falter. So Moses’s brother Aaron and his companion, Hur, stand beside Moses and support him—one on each side—keeping his arms steady and raised high throughout the day until the Israelites defeat their enemy in battle. (Ex 17:11-12)

What’s going on with Moses’s arms? Is this magic? The Mishnah (Rosh Hashanah 3:8) offers the following interpretation: Moses’s raised arms would keep the people’s heads up, casting their gaze toward the heavens and reminding them of the sovereignty of God, which would inspire them to fight harder for the good. In other words, *it’s not magic... it’s leadership*. With the simple upward gesture of Moses’s arms, he strengthens their resolve so they don’t become consumed with grief and fear and anger, but instead, remember to dream, to think expansively, to know that this is not the end. Moses’s raised arms mid-battle draw the people’s gaze upward, giving them the strength of heart and body to persevere.

I love the idea that the job of a leader is to remind people to look up and imagine what’s possible. Many have said that Shimon Peres, z”l, was that kind of leader. Even well into his 80s and 90s, he always looked to the future, dreaming new dreams, forging new relationships, thinking about what could be, rather than being paralyzed by what is.

My friend, Micah Goodman—a scholar at Hartman—points out that this is the perfect message for us on Rosh Hashanah, a day dedicated to lifting our gaze to the heavens to catch the first sliver of light from the new moon. Remember, every lunar month starts from the depths of darkness, just as the first trace of light from the new moon becomes perceptible. Micah says moon watching—searching the sky for hints of light—becomes our great national project, an invitation to the people to look up, precisely at the moment that darkness might otherwise draw us down.

Moses and the moon. Both summon us out of a politics of pessimism, instead inviting us into a politics of aspiration.

A politics of aspiration is not foolish or naïve; it is not a sign of weakness. It’s about building a fundamentally different culture—one that is honest about what is broken and inspired by what could be healed. This is how *America begins to find its way again*.

To counter the destabilization of the past year, we have spent the past month collecting stories of hope from the community. Our intention was that compiling stories of hope just as storm clouds of pessimism and intolerance rolled in would be more than a sweet exercise, but instead an act of revolutionary love—an act of defiance against a set of cultural and political norms that have come to define our country. My sense is that *our country begins to find its way again only once we find our dreams and our humanity again*.

Here are a few stories from the past few months that give me hope:

Look at Ezekiel, our nine-year-old open-heart surgery pin-up model, who came out of his third surgery this summer only to show up three weeks later for the first day of Limudim/ Religious School. Where that kid finds his strength, God only knows, but he and his folks and his brother are some of the most extraordinary people I have ever met. Abigail, his mother, writes: "What was once called a 'defect incompatible with life' has instead turned out to be the single greatest portal I have ever known to gratitude, love, prayer, community and joy... To God, I truly bow my head, trembling with awe and gratitude for the blessings."

And did you read what Annette shared, about her father? A survivor of the Warsaw Ghetto, her dad is now 93 years old and has seven great grandchildren. "When someone can experience profound evil, and endure extreme pain, suffering, and loss but, nevertheless, live to experience the joy of loving offspring who are thriving in the world--this gives me hope!" I have to admit: that gives me hope, too.



Maybe you saw the stunning photograph of Ieshia Evans at a protest against police violence this summer. There she stands, in the middle of the street, composed and serene, in a long sun-dress as two police officers in riot gear arrest her. She is 35 years old, an African-American nurse and mother. This quickly became one of those iconic protest photos; for me and so many others, it is a source of great hope. That someone could hold such presence as she confronts the reality of systemic racism... this woman's spirit crushes the politics of pessimism. No force can defeat that measure of dignity. I pray that Ieshia's son grows up in a world in which he will not fear walking down the street; his worth and humanity questioned by none.

Sadly, aspirational politics are hardly the hallmark of Washington, but there are of course some brilliant exceptions that deserve to be celebrated. This year, Senator Chris Murphy of Connecticut led the way in demanding serious reform to our nation's gun laws. He shared the story of Dylan Hockley, one of the 6-year-old students from Sandy Hook Elementary, with the nation: "Dylan was a little bit special," Murphy said, so he had an aide working with him, an exceptional teacher named Anne Marie, whose job it was to help Dylan feel safe in school so that he could learn.

When word of the shooting spread, all of the parents of kids in the school gathered at the local firehouse awaiting information. Senator Murphy was sitting with Dylan's mom. She later told the Senator that in the moment that she realized her son was not coming home, the first thought that went into her head was, "I need to find Anne Marie so that I can find out what happened to Dylan in his final moments." Then, in an instant, she realized that Anne Marie wasn't coming home either because there was no way that Anne Marie would've left her child to die alone.

We later learned that when the gunman began shooting in that classroom, Anne Marie could have made it out the door. But instead, she ran toward little Dylan and wrapped him up in her

body, so that the last feeling that child felt before he died was not terror and not hatred but love. Senator Murphy said it does not take courage to stand on the floor of the Senate and demand change. It takes courage to manifest love in a time of warfare against our greatest values. That gives me hope.

For the sake of that teacher, for the sake of that child, for the sake of all of those parents. For the sake of Alton Sterling's son, Cameron, and Philando Castile's little girl. For the sake of Dallas police chief David Brown, who lost five members of his force this summer, six years after his own black son was killed in a shoot-out with police. For the sake of all of them, and all of us, it's time to do something productive with our worry. It's time to cut out the jokes about buying condos in Canada and use our worry to double down on our commitment to help America find its way again.

Get on buses. Canvas. Do voter protection work at polling places. Learn about the 17 propositions on our ballot, because they will affect the lives of real people. Make a commitment to vote not only now, but in the mid-term elections. Every time. Because we lose our right to complain about what's so broken in America if all we do is worry and complain and then opt out of the electoral process that might fix it.

It's time to reclaim the extraordinary promise of this country. We are a nation built on lofty ideals about justice and equality—ideals that didn't come close to being met by our founders who penned them, but which nevertheless stubbornly and perpetually lift our gaze toward the promise of a better America.

If you think we're here to bring an annual guilt-offering to the Jewish God of Institutional Religion, you are wrong. We are here to remind ourselves of who we are, and who we are called to be. We are here to dream together about what we can build, and then to go get busy building. *This* is how we begin to find our way again.

*Shanah tovah—*