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Parshat Noach – Get Out the Vote Shabbat
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If Not Now, When - Building Beyond Babel

This Shabbat, we stand on the cusp of New York City going to the polls.
Across our community and beyond, conversations are charged - about sermons and statements, silence and speech, the role of rabbis and synagogues in moments like this.

I have heard from many within and beyond our community this week, voices of fear, of anger, of confusion. And many trembling at all that this mayoral election may herald for our city, for our people, and for this country.

This week's Torah portion, Parshat Noach, offers a frame both ancient and urgent.
It begins with a flood - the world collapsing under the weight of its own corruption - and ends with a tower - humanity rebuilding, striving for permanence and pride. It is a portion about destruction and renewal, about humanity first building for survival and then building for hope.

And it leads us, inevitably, to a teaching that has guided Jewish moral life for two millennia -
the wisdom of Rabbi Hillel that speaks to the heart of this season and this city:

If I am not for myself, who will be for me?
If I am only for myself, what am I?
And if not now, when?[1]

Three questions that hold the tension of an entire tradition - self-concern and selflessness, individual agency and collective duty, the moral urgency that refuses to wait for perfect conditions.

The First Question: If I Am Not for Myself, Who Will Be For Me?

For too long, much of the American Jewish community has ignored this first line of self-preservation. We have excelled at the second line - being for others, standing for justice, lending our voice to the struggles of humanity. We have fought for labor rights, for civil rights, for gender equality and racial equity, for immigrants and the poor. We have often served as the conscience of the nation.

Yet we have sometimes neglected the first question. In our longing to be accepted, to belong, to prove that we could integrate and flourish, we learned to speak for others and to soften our voice for ourselves.
As our sense of safety grew, as our status rose and our fears eased, we sometimes let fade the call to stand, unapologetically, for the Jewish people.

And when we now find elected officials or those seeking leadership echoing the oldest and deadliest tropes of antisemitism, when we hear acceptance of the chant to "globalize the intifada" —an explicit call for the murder of Jews —it is not politics to name it for what it is: a moral emergency, an existential threat. This is the rhetoric that surrounds this mayoral election and it portends a path of shadow for the

[1] Pirkei Avot 1:14

Jewish people.
Silence in such moments is not neutrality; it is abdication. Our tradition commands that we sound the alarm when Jewish life is threatened, that we raise our voices before the floodwaters drown.

As you have heard me articulate over and over, we as American Jews are in a time unlike anything felt for generations. Threats to Jews no longer merely whisper in the shadows but are spewed from the heights vocally and proudly. Jew-hatred seeps again into classrooms and campuses, into cultural spaces and politics, sometimes spoken outright, sometimes masked by language of liberation or justice.
Our children scroll past slurs on screens. Our teenagers learn to hide their Stars of David or to hold their tongues.

My own children have grown up seeing police and armed guards as necessary parts of their Jewish education here at Rodeph Sholom, a stark reminder of what is metastasizing in our midst. Even here, in the city that once felt like the safest Jewish home in the world, we feel the ground tremble with a familiar unease.

This moment demands that we reclaim the first question of Hillel's teaching:
If I am not for myself, who will be for me?

This is not a turn inward; it is a return to our starting principle - a recognition that moral life begins with self-respect. A people that forgets its own worth cannot long defend the worth of others. A community that hides its identity cannot teach courage to the next generation.

Our history reminds us that survival itself is a responsibility. When Noah stepped from the ark into a ravaged world, God stretched a rainbow across the sky - a promise that existence itself was sacred. That covenant became our first lesson in self-preservation. To protect life - our own and others' - is to partner with God in sustaining creation.

Our ancestors carried that lesson wherever they went. When the first Jews arrived in New Amsterdam in 1654, they fought the governor for the right to remain. They fought for burial grounds, for Shabbat observance, for the right to trade and live as Jews. They refused to be invisible.

A century later, Cantor Gershom Mendes Seixas, Jewish patriot and preacher of colonial New York, who represented the Jewish people as he helped in the inauguration of President Washington, regularly stood before his congregation and taught that liberty demanded participation. He led prayers for the fledgling United States and told his congregants that belonging required voice. He believed that Jewish dignity depended on engagement. If Jews did not stand for themselves, no one else would.[2]

And so, from the earliest days of this country, to vote, to speak, to participate - these became acts of Jewish self-preservation and faith.

That remains true today.
To step into a voting booth as a Jew, to bring conscience, compassion, and courage to that small square of civic space, is a sacred act of standing for ourselves - for our safety, our security, our continued presence in the story of this city.

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[2] Francis Levy (2006). "Gershom Mendes Seixas and the Making of American Judaism." American Jewish Archives Journal,*58(2), 1–27.*

The Second Question: If I Am Only for Myself, What Am I?

Hillel's teaching moves quickly from self-protection to moral expansion.

The people of Babel, the Torah tells us, worked together - united in language and purpose - yet their unity carried no compassion. Our sages imagined that the builders mourned the loss of bricks but ignored the loss of lives. They built tall towers but shallow hearts. Their dream of oneness became a nightmare of control.

And so God scattered their speech - introducing diversity not as punishment but as mercy.
A moral quest to rediscover our responsibility to one another, to reclaim an understanding of the sacredness of life across difference. Because the world was never meant to sound like one voice. It was meant to hold a chorus.

The Jewish vote - and the Jewish voice - started with our safety.
After first addressing our question of self-preservation, our attention then expands.
What kind of world do we seek to build? Whose suffering moves us to action?
What future do we want to leave for those we will never meet?
This is why the generations of Jewish communities before us chose to build.

We built schools and sanctuaries, hospitals and havens.
We turned the wounds of history into engines of compassion.
These building projects started to serve the existential needs of our own people,
To start with our safety and wellbeing.
But did not stop there, and rose and grew to meet the cries of so many others.
Our covenant expects that self-interest and compassion must be welded together.
One leading to the other.

And anyone positing a position that suggests we wield only one of these ignores an entire pillar of our tradition, and without it, we collapse. We begin with self-preservation and insist it then leads us towards a larger purpose.
This is the heart of Jewish civic life.

The Johnson Amendment was introduced in 1954 by then-Senator Lyndon B. Johnson.
It was not written against religion but against political manipulation of the pulpit.
Johnson had watched tax-exempt organizations funnel money and sermons into partisan warfare and feared that democracy itself would be weakened if churches and synagogues became campaign machines.
So he proposed language to protect both faith and the public square: that any 501(c)(3) non-profit - including houses of worship - could not directly or indirectly endorse or oppose a candidate for public office.

Over the years, enforcement has waxed and waned. Yet the law still stands. It remains illegal for a religious institution or its clergy to use its platform to endorse or defame a candidate during a campaign.[3]

[3] https://www.irs.gov/charities-non-profits/charitable-organizations/restriction-of-political-campaign-intervention-by-section-501c3-tax-exempt-organizations

Our Board of Trustees at CRS unanimously reaffirmed the sacred boundaries of this space. Rodeph Sholom will always speak to the moral issues of our time - yet we will not tell people how to vote. We hold to the Johnson Amendment as a covenant of integrity. This pulpit remains a place of conscience, not of campaign.

The Amendment's purpose was never to muzzle moral voice. It was to preserve trust - to ensure that pulpits could challenge the conscience of a nation without being captured by its politics. Its intention was to protect the independence of faith, so that our prophetic words might speak to everyone, not just to one side.

Few articulated this with more clarity than Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, former Chief Rabbi of the UK. In one of his final interviews, he said:
"The division between politics and religion is absolutely fundamental. It's one of the greatest things Judaism ever taught the world: Don't mix religion and politics. You mix religion and politics, you get terrible politics and even worse religion… I did not allow my rabbis to use the pulpit for political purposes either. …Politics is inherently divisive.… as soon as you make religion political, it too will become divisive. So I have absolutely not the slightest shred of sympathy for anyone who, as a rabbi, tells people how to vote."[4]

Rabbi Sacks' words hold both devotion and warning - devotion to the Jewish people, and warning that when sacred purpose becomes partisan, both faith and democracy erode. He believed that politics divides by design while faith is meant to bind. When the two are fused, both lose their soul.

That is the charge we carry here. This synagogue must be a sanctuary for conscience, a gathering place for difference, a reminder that moral depth should not be flattened into singular understanding. My role as rabbi is to strengthen the Jewish people, to urge us into the waters of our enduring tradition, to connect us to the pillars of our people: God, Torah, Israel, wisdom, ritual, justice, Jewish civilization, and to ensure every person feels called and activated to be builders.

And my role, our role as your clergy, is to speak to our ethics and moral urgencies – clearly, directly, resolutely. As a clergy team, we have spoken from the pulpit repeatedly about our unambiguous position on antisemitism, on anti-Zionist rhetoric, and on sharing our support for Israel and our commitment to work of Zionism. There are multitudes of crises that demand our attention, and threaten the safety and security of the American Jewish community. As we have done, we will continue to do: name these for what they are and call our community to action. Our hope is that we will all use our Jewish wisdom tradition to guide our behavior – with one another, and with our voting. But we will not tell you how to vote, as we do not believe it best serves you, our community, the Jewish people, or our nation.

Look around this room - left and right, old and young, new members and lifelong ones - we are the living proof that shared faith can outlast political fracture. We pray in different voices and vote in different ways, yet when the world trembles, we gather shoulder to shoulder. That is what it means to be a sacred community. That is what it means to be Jewish in this city, in this moment.

The Third Question: If Not Now, When?

[4] https://www.jta.org/2020/08/27/ideas/rabbi-jonathan-sacks

Hillel's final question breaks through hesitation.
It calls us from reflection to action, from thought to movement.

For some, we approach November 4th with resolute clarity, decided and determined to do our part in living out our ethics. For some of us, we live now with confusion – about alliances, about belonging, about which moral principles hold priority.

For some we are waiting for the perfect person, or the perfect moment, or the perfect position. And this is why Hillel's words are so vital – we cannot wait. When the floodwaters rise, we are called to build. Now, in whatever way we can, and with whatever options lie before us.

Voting is an act of righteousness - a disciplined covenant with the generations who came before us and those who will follow. It is how we say: I am responsible for building our future.

Our ancestors treated it that way. When new immigrants first cast ballots in America, some whispered blessings. They brought their children to the polls as if to synagogue, lifting them up to see democracy in action. They knew that liberty was not inherited; it was renewed with each generation. They started from the place of centering their own safety, and as they created it, expanded the aperture of attention.

So now it is our turn.
To bring our values – self-preservation, justice, hope - into the booth and into the street.
To center the crises and moral emergencies of this moment,
And let them call us to action.

When we walk to the polls, we walk with those who came before - immigrants who risked everything for Jewish safety, prophets who cried for justice, parents wishing more for their children. They built the scaffolding of this moment so we could stand tall as a Jewish community within it. Each vote we cast says to them: your faith in us endures.

We carry this sequence of questions to fuel our moral behavior:
If I am not for myself, who will be for me?
If I am only for myself, what am I?
If not now, when?

First: Be for yourself – proudly Jewish, unafraid, awake to the threats to Jewish safety.
Second: Be for others - generous, just, intentioned.
Finally: Act now - with courage and hope.

We have inherited a faith that outlasts empires, a language that survived exile, a hope that no hatred could extinguish. Every time we vote, every time we speak, every time we teach our children to stand tall as Jews, we declare that this people rises as builders.

Like Noah stepping from the ark, we face a world still ravaged by storms. We carry no rainbow in our hands, only the bold colors of our choices. Yet in every act of conscience, a covenant begins again.

As the generations before us rose from crisis as builders, we are obligated to do the same. Every vote is a sacred responsibility.

May fear never shrink our determination. May the work of our hands and the words of our mouths build a city worthy of God's blessing.

Shabbat Shalom.