

America First

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Among the most consequential words of this most consequential year – were those spoken at the dawn of the new presidency. In retrospect, everything that has transpired and everything yet to unfold, were contained in the first ten minutes of the first speech of the just sworn-in president. It was the concentrated rhetorical energy of the political Big Bang.

On January 20, assembled before what was apparently the largest crowd in the history of inaugural addresses (!), the President charged:

“From this day forward, a new vision will govern our land. From this day forward, it’s going to be only America First, America First.” “America will start winning again, winning like never before.” “At the bedrock of our politics,” said the President, “will be total allegiance to the United States of America, and through our loyalty to our country, we will rediscover our loyalty to each other.”

The phrase “America First” has a troubled past. In the years before Pearl Harbor, the most prominent group advocating non-intervention in Europe was the America First Committee. At one point, up to eighty percent of Americans opposed military intervention. But the America First Committee went further, believing that reconciliation with Hitler was possible and desirable. In that sense, the America First Committee was our own appeasement movement. Not only did it oppose military intervention, it opposed military support for Britain, the only democracy still standing. “It is not the duty of the United States to police the world,” they said.

Like today, the America Firsters of the last century demanded total allegiance. Whoever had a different position; whoever advocated intervention, by definition, did not place America first. If you agreed that we should stay out of the War, you were a loyal patriot. If you disagreed, if you thought that American interests required joining the fight against Nazi Germany, you must have conflicting loyalties.

Thus, what began as a legitimate discussion over the wisdom of American intervention, quickly dissolved into xenophobia, intolerance and anti-Semitism. The slogan “America First” became a club to wield accusations of disloyalty.

The best-known spokesman for the America First Committee was Charles Lindbergh. He accused American Jews of leading the rush to war. With eerie similarities to Hitler’s 1939 Reichstag speech two years before, foretelling the total destruction of European Jewry, Lindbergh said:

“No person of honesty and vision can look on their pro-war policy without seeing the dangers, both for us and for them...They [the Jews] will be among the first to feel its consequences.

Tolerance is a virtue that...cannot survive war...Their greatest danger to this country is in their large ownership and influence in our motion pictures, our press, our radio and our government.”

Today, as yesterday, “America First,” is a cynical slogan. Now, as then, it confuses dissent with disloyalty. Now, as then, it calls for “total allegiance,” a phrase straight out of George Orwell. Now, as then, it considers disagreement unpatriotic. Now, as then, it conflates unity with uniformity. Now, as then, it disunites; it creates division. It seeks scapegoats, leading to xenophobia, intolerance and anti-Semitism. It pits one group of Americans against another. Someone else must be responsible for what the President called “this American carnage” – those who do not place America first. Who might they be? Mexicans, Muslims, immigrants, non-English speakers, Jews, bankers, liberals, the media, academics, the elites, transgendered? Now, as then, America Firsters incline towards isolationist politics, grounded in a pessimistic view of human nature: The citadel is under attack by marauding mobs. We must build barricades, not bridges, walls, not windows.

Does American patriotism require a form of nationalism that discourages multilateral cooperation? Do the needs of others concern us at all? Does America have a higher purpose? We may have different views about the Paris climate accord, but why imply that those who negotiated it and those who support it are purposely putting American interests second? Who thinks that way? Well, you know, the former president wasn't actually born in America. Who thinks that way? Why cite where a judge's parents were born as the reason for his decision? Who thinks that way?

We have seen this before. In times of stress, it might make for good politics. It might even get you elected. German Americans are spies. Japanese Americans sympathize with the enemy. African Americans are only three-fifths Americans. Hollywood actors are Communist sympathizers. Gay Americans are un-American. Catholic Americans' first oath is to the Vatican. Jews are only loyal to Jews. Close the gates. Send the ship back to Europe.

We later regretted what we did. When the storms passed and the skies cleared, we considered these excesses as, themselves, un-American. We have entered another period of American history where fear, dislocation, polarization, and a general air of discontent pervades. At precisely these times we must remind ourselves what America stands for, and what Judaism requires.

America is an experiment unprecedented in human affairs. We have often fallen short. We still have a long way to go. But our aspirations are noble. From the beginning, we defined our purpose beyond the narrow constraints of tribe and territory. Founded on an idea – freedom – and grounded in institutions that limit the power of government to restrict freedom, America proclaimed that all human beings are equally entitled to liberty. Liberty – not blood, race, religion, ethnicity, creed, social status, land or inheritance - liberty defines America. Whoever is committed to that idea is our friend.

It is a Jewish idea. We wrote the first chapter of the right of peoples to be free; a right bestowed, not by pharaohs, kings or rulers, but by God. “Thus says the Lord, the God of the Hebrews: How long will you refuse to humble yourself before Me, Pharaoh? Let My people go!”

Our loyalty is to the American spirit. To be an American is to love liberty. It is to spread liberty to the four corners of the earth. America is a beacon, a torch, the standard-bearer of the highest

hopes and noblest aspirations of Mankind: the last best hope on earth. Abraham Lincoln put it this way:

“It was not the mere...separation of the colonies from the motherland, but that sentiment in the Declaration of Independence which gave liberty not alone to the people of this country, but hope to all the world, for all future time. It was that which gave promise that in due time the weights would be lifted from the shoulders of all men, and that all should have an equal chance. This is the sentiment embodied in the Declaration of Independence,” said Lincoln. “I would rather be assassinated on this spot than surrender it.”

We are obligated to preserve, protect and defend these values. In periods of stress, when we fall short of our own lofty principles, it is more urgent than ever. It is vital now to remind ourselves of, and to educate our children in, the values of American patriotism and Jewish responsibility.

The rabbis teach: “In a place where there are no men, strive to be a man.” In modern terms: when the atmosphere all around you is brutal, insensitive, degrading, dehumanizing – stand up and speak. Stand for principle. Make a difference. This is what our synagogue has dedicated itself to with greater urgency in the past year. Hundreds of you have participated. Many of you contributed resources allowing us to be our best communal selves. We have made a difference in the world, and have fortified our own moral health. And we intend to continue doing so until we are satisfied that America is the best she can be.

Beyond anger, beyond even outrage, I perceive sadness in our country. Americans are sad. It goes beyond policy disagreements. It cuts deep, to the heart. The day after the President’s infamous Charlottesville press conference, even conservative commentators openly wept on television. “Cry, the beloved country.” People are stunned and afraid, experiencing a level of anxiety they have not felt before. They worry for the soul of our country, mourning its lack of moral leadership. Even basic competence can no longer be taken for granted – an alarming condition given the unstable state of the world.

Americans are disappointed, even embarrassed. It is confusing nowadays to be an American abroad. On our refugee relief mission, I stood at the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin, in view of the Reichstag, and it was devastating to think that it is the German Chancellor, not the American president, who is the world’s foremost champion of human dignity today. In all my 58 years, I have never felt and never thought this, no matter who the president was and what party he represented. America is the leader of the free world, a burden we have willingly assumed for our own interests as well as humanity, itself. This has been our bipartisan assumption since World War II at least.

In the mid-20th century, Republican presidential candidate, Wendell Wilkie, said:

“The cloak that binds America together is woven of strong, yet delicate fabric. It serves to shelter alike the rich and poor, the native and foreign-born, Jew and Gentile, black and white. Let no one tear it asunder, for we do not know where we shall find its like again.”

The American fabric is strong, yet delicate. Let no one tear it asunder. Nothing is permanent in human affairs. Everything changes. Everything human is fragile. We thought that the expansion of civil and human rights was one-way history; that we could never go back! It has become apparent to us again in the past month that in some ways we are still fighting the Civil

War. The debate over Confederate statues is, fundamentally, about what kind of America we want.

There were many reasons for the Civil War – but the driving force – was slavery. Confederate Vice President, Alexander Stephens, stated it openly in 1861, three weeks after Lincoln’s inauguration:

“[The] foundations [of our new government] are laid, its cornerstone rests, upon the great truth that the Negro is not equal to the White man; that...subordination to the superior race is his natural and normal condition...He...is fitted for that condition which he occupies in our system...It is best, not only for the superior, but for the inferior race that it should be so. It is, indeed, in conformity with the ordinance of the Creator.”

That was the Confederacy: secessionist, seditious and supremacist. That was the system defended by Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson. Removing their statues does not mean, as our president tweeted, that the “history and culture of our great country [is] being ripped apart with the removal of those beautiful statues.” The Civil War is part of American history and culture but not the beautiful part. We should not venerate or honor those who defended a repulsive, abhorrent and discredited worldview, especially today, when racists, White Supremacists and Nazis coopt Confederate symbols.

It is not a question of political correctness. It is not a question of erasing American history. It is not a desire to see the American project fail. It is not to bring America down. It is to raise America; to acknowledge American history: To confront our past and to build a better future.

It is the Jewish way. Slavery was our first experience. Our first memory is Moses freeing the slaves. Our first task is to vanquish the taskmaster, not to build monuments in his honor.

How would Jews react if our country built statues to our people’s persecutors? I will never forget my feelings of revulsion in Kiev seeing a statue of Bohdan Khmelnytsky – the Cossack leader who massacred tens of thousands of Ukrainian Jews, burning three hundred Jewish villages to the ground. The destroyer of our people granted a place of honor in Kiev’s central square.

And speaking of our people: Did anyone think that that an atmosphere of intolerance would bypass Jews? Did anyone think that threats against mosques would not eventually lead to threats against synagogues? Did anyone think that “some very fine people” marching with White supremacists and neo-Nazis would spare their wrath for Jews? Did anyone think that some “good people on both sides” would materialize on the hate-mongers side as well? Jews are so complacent that many of us, in particular the younger generations, do not consider ourselves a minority group at all. We assumed that anti-Semitism is a thing of the past?

There is no past when it comes to anti-Semitism. There is only eternal vigilance. Have you studied history? Have you read the story of our people? Have you reflected on human nature? What have you learned: That we can mark the doorposts of our houses, and that the angel of death can pass over us: That the creeping shadows of intolerance can bypass Jews, leaving only us – and a few “good” racists basking in sunlight?

It is the opposite: we are usually the first affected – not the last. It is not a question of whether any public figure is anti-Semitic. Rather, the question is are we, wittingly or not, creating,

permitting, or encouraging an atmosphere of intolerance, giving aid and comfort to Jew-haters? They said it themselves: They feel as if they have a friend in the White House.

Anti-Semitism is a dagger in the heart of liberty: because it is never only about Jews. Jews are the canary in the mine. We are often the first to suffer but never the last. When the canary dies, it reveals a toxic and lethal atmosphere that no living being can endure. Anti-Semitism is poison; it destroys the living tissues of the body politic. There are no “good” anti-Semites. There are no “very fine people” among the haters.

Hatred against Jews never stops with Jews. Bomb threats against Jews; hate speech against Jews; desecration of Jewish cemeteries; internet and social media trolling of Jews – these are precursors – warnings - that something is rotten in the state.

The idea that Jews anywhere – let alone in the United States – cower in fear, their lives and livelihoods threatened by hate-mongers is deeply unsettling and unnerving. We vowed: Never Again. It was a solemn oath: Never again would Jews hide – fretful and anxious - isolated and exposed to the mad passions of the mob.

All Jews are responsible one for the other, teach our Sages. When one Jew feels pain, all feel pain. When one Jew suffers, all suffer.

Stand up and be counted. Do something. Join our synagogue’s anti-Semitism task force – now over a hundred strong. Take the threat seriously. We must be vigilant and proactive. The only way to defeat hate is to confront it. This is one of the key lessons of Jewish history. Powerlessness encourages attacks. Fear encourages terrorists. Bullies must be confronted.

It was our desire to stand up and be counted that led us to establish the immigration and refugee task force and to embark upon a refugee relief mission. Representatives of two of the NGO’s we partnered with will teach here on Yom Kippur. The issue of immigration is exceedingly complicated. We know that. Still, we were appalled at the bullying of the weakest and most desperate human beings. We wanted to reject the narrow nationalism force-fed to us by some of our leaders: To resist viewing suffering people as hindrances, threats and enemies of the homeland. To respond to pitting group against group, and to bear witness to the struggle, pain, vulnerability and universality of the human condition. This, too, is a Jewish value.

We did some good in Greece and Germany. We brought gifts, resources that so many in our congregation donated, including the youngest in our community – the children of our nursery and religious schools. We made life a little better for those whose lives are not good. We gave comfort to aid workers, who toil without recognition; who dignify the indigent serving and saving those they do not even know.

But it was not only that. We went for ourselves, for our own self-respect. We went because we did not want to stand idly by, as America coarsens, its rhetoric debased by its highest representatives, its honor diminished by its preeminent officials, its moral standing degraded by its senior spokesmen. We sought to cleanse ourselves; to wipe the moral stain that clings to us. To stand up and be counted. Silence is assent. Inaction is agreement. Idleness is support.

It is hard for human beings to step into another’s shoes, particularly with regard to immigrants, refugees and strangers, millions of people we do not know. We cannot even grasp the magnitude of millions. We are better able to relate to the suffering of one person. That is the reason I

wanted to take you directly to the refugees themselves. To step into the shoes of the persecuted, the weak and the dispossessed and to step away from cynicism, sarcasm and scorn.

Look into the eyes of a young Syrian girl as we did. Hear the traumatized child now laughing. The laughter of a child - the most pleasing sound in all existence. Does it affect you at all? Envision where she came from and what brought her to this shelter. It will be harder for you, then, to speak of her as a security risk, a threat to America. Policy makers may still decide not to take her in – or the many thousands of those like her – perhaps for good reasons. There is a limit to what any one country can do – although our country could be doing a lot more. And it is true that there are some bad people riding the wave of immigration. But cease this callous cacophony of contempt, its intention or effect, to dehumanize her and desensitize us. Hear the cries of desperate children, the saddest sound in all existence.

Does America First preempt our moral obligations? Does America First free us of the need to think of others? Does “total allegiance” contradict our Jewish responsibilities? Do DREAMERS also have the right to dream the American dream? “You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” “You know the soul of a foreigner, for you were foreigners in the Land of Egypt.”

To step into the other’s shoes is the beginning of morality and the first step of compassion. Step into the shoes of the dispossessed. Try to see, not a Muslim, a Mexican, an African, an Afghani, an Iranian; try to see a child of God, and try to hear their cry. Try to imagine yourself on a tempest-tossed rickety boat fleeing Assad’s chemicals, Taliban atrocities, Boko Haram savageries, and ISIS’ brutalities. Try to feel the desperation. It should be familiar to you. Don’t you remember? It hasn’t been too long. You don’t have to go all the way back to Egypt. Just think back two or three or four generations. We Jews were on those boats – the wretched refuse that no one wanted. The world shut its doors to us too. Still living among us are survivors of the great inferno.

Do not allow the three generations since to dim your memory or dull your moral sensitivity. One remarkable Afghani refugee we met in Solonika reminded us that the only difference between us is that he was born in Afghanistan and we were not.

Most of us live here because of a decision of an ancestor who, whether by foresight or fortune, decided to leave before the Gates of Hell bolted shut. Were it not for that decision, we would not be alive. We would never have been born. Many of our ancestors who disembarked on Ellis Island could not speak English. Had that been a condition of immigration, we would not likely be Americans, or even alive. The very arguments voiced against immigrants today were used against us yesterday.

So what are we going to do?

We will continue to work as hard as we can. We will keep on keeping on. We will continue to speak up and act up so that America lives up to the content of its creed. We have made a good start, but it is only a start. We have three task forces, each with over one hundred participants who are pursuing social justice diligently, determinedly, daily. I urge those of you who have not yet joined to reconsider. We will gladly accept any contribution of time, talent or treasure.

Our synagogue is not a political organization. We do not endorse parties or candidates. Our concern is the morality of policies. Our calling brings us into contact with the political world, but not as partisans. We are moral agents, seeking the welfare of the community.

Judaism is for freedom, the expansion of human liberties. We despise racism, misogyny, xenophobia, intolerance and hatred. We are for justice and righteousness. We are for peace. We are for tolerance, acceptance and love. We are for mercy. The entire body of prophetic values may be reduced to the one insistence that the weak and dispossessed be treated with respect and dignity.

We are for racial justice. *Ha'lo chivnei chushim atem li bnai Yisrael* – said Amos. Are you not as children of Ethiopians to Me, O children of Israel?

Ha'lo av echad le'chulanu, ha'lo el echad be'ra'anu – said the prophet Malachi. Have we not all one Father? Did not one God create us? Why, then do we break faith with one another?

Everything we receive from Jewish tradition pleads with us: Get more involved. Be more active. The Sages teach that we are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are we free to desist. Trying is what Judaism expects. We know that the wolf will not lie down with the lamb today, nor will the leopard lie down with the kid tomorrow. But we also know that human beings ought to be peaceful: that each of us ought to be able to lay under vine and fig tree unafraid. And we will keep trying to bring about that day, handing the torch to our children when our energy is spent and our work is done, as we received the torch from our parents.

Do not lose hope. Keep the faith. Our country is strong. With all its challenges and problems, this is still the most exceptional country on earth. Its best days are still ahead. Americans are generally good and decent. We are still the last best hope on earth. The American Dream is alive. It is still alive. The sun shines on this country and dawn will come tomorrow as well.

We are blessed to live in America. Our Jewish ancestors could not even dream of such a place. We are blessed to fight for principles and values. Gird your loins and fight. Protest, advocate, lobby, and defend with passion the ideals that define us.

Do not lose faith in American democracy. The pendulum swings from victory to loss to victory again. Social gains are rarely easy and never permanent. Progress, like gay rights, minority rights, the right of women to make decisions for themselves on matters affecting their own bodies – these advances must be fought for indefinitely. There is no relaxing, only perpetual vigilance.

It takes decades, often centuries, for bedrock principles to settle into the soil of the American landscape. There is nothing automatic about liberty, freedom and constitutional protection. Martin Luther King reminded us that “human progress...never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability. Every step towards the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering and struggle.”

It took a near century from the proclamation of emancipation to the Emancipation Proclamation. And it took another full century from the Emancipation Proclamation to the enshrinement of the Voting Rights Act – drafted by Martin Luther King and his colleagues in my father's offices at the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism in Washington. Voting rights are now under renewed threat. The struggle never ends. Political gains must be consolidated politically.

Do not begrudge these years. They can make you better. Nothing inspires us more than the fight for principle. Moral sentiment and grim resolve lift the heart and feed the pure running waters of the wellsprings of life itself. These years may concentrate our minds and force us to think through what we really believe. What are the bedrock principles that guide our actions? These years may deepen our understanding: never to take anything for granted. Everything can change in human affairs.

We get better through struggle. We do not seek, nor do we expect a challenge free world. We do not seek to empty challenge from our lives but to challenge the emptiness of life. Not to escape struggle but to struggle with escapism. We should want our fight to count. To mean something. Amidst the challenges of the years ahead lay opportunities for sacrifice and service and ennobling struggle.

And through our struggle we will remind our fellows and ourselves what constitutes winning.

Winning is when:

Justice rolls down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream.

Winning is when we:

Do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God.

Winning is when we:

Seek peace and pursue it.

Winning is when we:

Love our neighbor as ourselves. It is the preeminent command.

I so want to win these things. I want to win like never before. Total allegiance to the best of America!

“With malice toward none, with charity for all; with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right,” let us pledge to make America First:

First in kindness. First in generosity.

First in realizing the American Dream: the dream of equality, opportunity, life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. First in harnessing the immense natural and human gifts of this country, not for ourselves alone, but in service to all.

America First to protect the dignity and worth of every human being.

America First as a force for good.

America First to pave the highways and clear the byways holding back human progress.

America First to bring light to the dark places of the earth:

America First to raise every valley; to lower every hill; to level the rugged ground and to smooth the high ridges preventing human happiness.

And when we do these things;

When we unlock the fetters of wickedness and untie the cords of bondage;

When we let the oppressed go free;

When we share our bread with the hungry and take the poor into our home;

When we clothe the naked;

When we banish the menacing hand and evil speech;

When we do these things; when America is first in this way, we will win the struggle for meaning and overcome our darker selves.

Victory!

And on that day the storms will scatter, the skies will clear. Our light shall burst through like the dawn, shining in all the dark places of the earth. We shall be like a luscious garden, like a spring whose waters never fail.

We shall be called repairer of the breach, restorer of life. We shall be set astride the heights of the earth: a city on a hill – the eyes of all people upon us – forever and ever.