

How Religion is Failing America

Sermon, *Kol Nidre* 2018 | Rabbi Michael Holzman

Friends, the hour is late. I have a confession on my mind. It's a private thought, I'm in a public place. It's a confession that goes against everything that I want to believe about the world – the story I tell myself is usually an optimistic one – and it's a confession that I imagine that some of you may not trust.

Religion is failing our country.

I say this as a religious leader. I'm partly to blame.

Three weeks ago, the President of these great United States had dinner with some religious leaders. He said that if the other party will retake control of Congress, "They will overturn everything that we've done." That much I can accept. And he went on to say, "and they'll do it quickly and violently." And he repeated the words, "And violently. There's violence. When you look at antifa, and you look at some of these groups – these are violent people."ⁱ I think we can all recognize, that if the President of any party accuses the other party of fomenting violence, and the pastors, priests and reverends present nod their heads in silent agreement, then Religion is failing America.

Last week I spoke about how we each balance the freedom of self, with obligation to other, and how our dominant culture does this, with a system of contracts that breed cynicism and mistrust. On Rosh Hashanah I argued that we can augment contracts with covenants that restore hope and trust, and I described how we begin right here at NVHC. Well, the name for our country in Hebrew, what Israelis call the United States, is *Artzot HaBrit*, the Lands of the Covenant. At this moment, the American covenant is on life support, and religion should be doing CPR.

The prayer that began tonight's service, *Kol Nidre* illustrates what ails our country, why religion is failing America, and how our faith leaders and institutions should be responding.

First, at its essence, *Kol Nidre* is an admission of our failure to keep promises and a plea to have those promises cancelled. Promises are the currency of covenant, and they usually reflect our most personal and private commitments. Yet, here we are, in public, declaring, "I have failed." That is the bedrock of Yom Kippur: a willingness to admit sin, error, mistake, transgression and failure, a willingness that uncovers our deepest, most private, beliefs of right and wrong, and a willingness to bring that selfhood with

all its brokenness out into the public. Well, the one of the most important promises we all make is both private and public, and at this moment, in 5779, we must admit we have failed to keep it. "I Pledge Allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all." This is a promise, a private feeling of loyalty and love, and a public connection of self to country. But two opposing camps claim ownership of the word "indivisible," and the definition of the words, "liberty and justice for all." A piece of our private selfhood is split and bleeding, because our public life is shattered and smashed.

Our entire country should be with us tonight, singing Kol Nidre, asking for forgiveness, and promising to renew our commitment, to this pledge in the new year. But America is not here, only in private groups of family and friends to we discuss our beliefs about the country, or we shout them in public as loud as we can, at rallies, marches and protests. This distance between private and public leaves no room for us to hash out our differences, to understand alternative opinions and come to consensus about the meaning of this pledge of Allegiance. And that is America's first ailment, a broken promise, suspended between private selves and public communities.

Second, Kol Nidre makes no sense without understanding the larger narrative which created it. Narrative is a popular word, used by intellectuals to describe how different people see the events of the world. Neil Postman, late scholar of communication and education at New York University defines it this way:

I mean by "narrative" a story. But not any kind of story. I refer to big stories – stories that are sufficiently profound and complex to offer explanations of the origins and future of a people; stories that construct ideals, prescribe rules of conduct, specify sources of authority, and in doing all of this, provide a sense of continuity and purpose. ⁱⁱ

For Kol Nidre the narrative is that the laws of Torah see unfulfilled oaths as an affront to God, a taking of God's name in vain, and a catastrophic risk to the survival of the community. But we, Reform Jews here tonight in 2018, we are in conflict with this narrative. I doubt anyone here is worried about catastrophic communal risk because of individual broken promises, but we still say this prayer.

Well, America itself depends upon narrative. Never in human history, has a group of people formed an entire country united solely around a narrative, instead of an ethnic, or cultural affiliation.

But like Kol Nidre, this “American Experiment” contains conflicting narratives. America is both a city on a hill and a colonialist oppressor. America provides equality to all, but also enslaves some. America rewards merit, but tilts the scales toward the powerful. America offers a door of refuge, but first for Christian Western Europeans.

And in this moment, following the election of the country’s first Black President, living with the disruptive and exploitative effects of technology, feeling the destabilizing power of the global economy, America’s second ailment is that the narratives have exploded in outright hostility. Like never before in my lifetime, I feel that the “American Experiment” hangs precariously by a thread.

And Kol Nidre illustrates America’s third ailment, with a story that begins in 1240. That was when the Catholic Church created something called the Disputation of Paris, to prove its intellectual superiority to Judaism. During the proceedings, Nicholas Donin, the Catholic advocate, argued that because Kol Nidre erases our promises, with a simple public statement, Jews in general cannot be trusted. Over the generations, that accusation metastasized until Jews were blamed for everything from the Black Plague to the treaty of Versailles, from the death of Christian children, to the fabrication of the Holocaust.

Psychologist Jonathan Haidt, explains that these conspiracy theories, are part of something called naïve realism: the belief that I see the world as it really is, and if you do not agree, then you are either misinformed, or corrupted by bias.ⁱⁱⁱ The more disorienting the world becomes, the more I grasp at my view of reality, and the more I see corrupt intent in anyone who disagrees. As early modern ideas in astronomy, math, science and philosophy, began to shake the Church, the continued existence of Jews, was a denial of Catholic reality, and thus, Jews must be plotting in secret.

As our world becomes more disorienting, we see these conspiracies in our politics. Any disagreement in policy must mean the other guy is deluded by Sean Hannity or NPR, reading too many Trump Tweets or the New York Times. Right now, huge swaths of our country believe that foreign entities colluded with recently elected Presidents to subvert our democracy. One half believes this about Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump and the other half believes it about George Soros and Barak Obama.

This is America’s third ailment. We are naïve realists, trusting only those who see the world as we do, and seeing mendacity, bias or conspiracy in those who do not.

These three ailments – the private/public split, colliding narratives, and the assumption of bias – these things are tearing our country and our families apart. Religion should be mending us back together.

But Religion is failing America.

The division between private and public happens because what we value in our private lives is determined by morality, and what we value in our public lives, is determined by politics. This might be hard to hear, because politics has become a dirty word. But we need politics. The military strategist Carl Van Clausewitz famously said, “War is the continuation of politics by other means,” which also means: “Politics is the prevention of war by other means.” Politics is how we disagree without killing each other. And behind every political issue is a moral question. Behind gun control are self-protection and the sanctity of life. Behind taxes are individual achievement and social responsibility. Behind criminal justice are the legacy of racial intolerance and the need for public safety.

But politics demands confrontation, and morality requires vulnerability. Therefore, the only way to safely hash out moral beliefs and political opinions outside the echo-chamber of family and close friends, or the implications of making public policy, is to find a hybrid public/private space. The problem is that as journalist Mark Dunkelman writes in his book, *The Vanishing Neighbor*, these essential public/private places have disappeared. Fraternal organizations, neighborhoods, clubs and leagues are dying. Even classrooms now avoid controversy. So our families become tense battlegrounds for the public, and our Congress attempts to resolve issues that should be private. Raise your hand if you have someone in your family whose emails you dread and who brings a partisan cloud over thanksgiving dinner.

Religion is failing America because our faith institutions contribute to this problem. Churches, synagogues and mosques feel forced to be only public or only private. The public ones often self-sort into homogenous policy shops, and the private ones forbid politics claiming to be a spiritual haven from the outside world.

Both paths fail America.

Imagine if instead, the faith community used the tools of religion to provide that hybrid space. We did that here, at NVHC, after the Parkland shooting, with our Community Conversation about Gun Violence. Two of our members sat together before the community, and shared stories explaining their positions from varying sides of the gun

control debate. Then we had a respectful and deep conversation. It happened in our sanctuary, on our bima, with clergy present, including multiple generations, with moments of silence, with the expectation that after every speaker, the entire community would respond with one voice, the simple word, *Shamati*, "I hear you." Those religious symbols, created a safe hybrid space.

Following this experience, a small committee of NVHC leaders, drafted a potential covenant for conversation based on guidance from an organization called Better Angels, a document that will help us bridge the public/private divide.

Religion also fails America when it comes to the battle of narratives. Right now, the only denominations in America that are thriving, are the most fundamentalist and literalist. From mega-churches to Chabad, faith leaders are training people to expect simple narratives with straightforward answers.

But religion is supposed to be about living in paradox, training people to hold conflicting ideas in our minds without exploding. From the Talmud to Vatican II, to the Hadith literature of Islam, religion has taught the world how to wrestle with texts, how to disagree, and how to address conflicting narratives. We do this through conversation, learning, and study that reveals how to look beneath simple narratives to find deeper meaning.

I want to show America that we can apply those skills to our great national texts. In a country where civics education is nothing short of anemic, religion can help us seek meaning behind the words of the Gettysburg Address, The New Colossus, the I Have a Dream Speech or Federalist 10? Through the habit of study, where disagreement and dissent are encouraged, where questions dominate more than answers, religion can rebuild our ability to find meaning in conflicting narratives. That is how Religion should be saving America.

Lastly, Religion should be the antidote to conspiracies. Because a conspiracy theory is an attempt to disqualify, delegitimize and, ultimately, dehumanize an opponent. And religion is the reminder that all people are created in the image of God, all voices worthy of respect.

When those evangelical leaders I described at the outset of this sermon bobbed their heads in silence they betrayed the deeper teachings of their own faiths, that all people are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, and among those are life,

liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, rights protected by our democracy, not any one policy or Supreme Court pick.

Religion has the power to work instead against conspiracy thinking, by bringing people together to encounter the other across lines of difference. This is why our interfaith work with VOICE, with ADAMS and with church partners, is so important. Last October we put this ethic into action, as the interfaith leaders in voice insisted our fall action include both candidates for governor. It was all or nothing, and when both showed up, it became the largest non-partisan event in the campaign season. We followed that by creating the largest army of non-partisan Get Out the Vote volunteers in the Commonwealth.

Some of the volunteers came to work with VOICE, having just finished working for one of the parties. And I will tell you, when they pulled on that purple t-shirt, and stood in doorways with a partner from a different faith, the citizens responded. Universally, people reported that non-partisan work received double or triple the number of voter commitments than work for either party. And most of those were first time voters.

This is what religion does. It brings people to meet people, and in so doing, it undermines conspiracies.

We can prevent this. Religion has the power to heal America Religion can bridge the public/private divide, it can help us wrestle with conflicting narratives, and it can create space for humanity not conspiracy. But right now religion is failing America. We, right here at NVHC, can change the role of religion in America. We have the power to demonstrate to other religious leaders and institutions our potential to heal our country.

By working with VOICE, or Better Angels, or the exploratory interfaith work a small group has done with the Harwood Institute, NVHC can reveal what religion ought to be doing.

That is why in the coming year, we will host more congregational conversations, we will periodically bring the great texts of America to Shabbat Sustenance for conversation, and we will again join VOICE for non-partisan Get Out the Vote work.

I want to underscore this last point. In the last election, control of the state House of Delegates was determined by the flip of a coin because of one illegible ballot. Even when we live in a district that seems not to matter, high voter turn out, it says to candidates from all sides. that we are paying attention, that no small fringe group can threaten to “primary” a moderate, and that we value democracy. So go vote, and look

in your email for the sign up to help us Get Out the Vote. And then look in your email for Community Conversations, and Shabbat Sustenance about the Great Texts of America,

Reform Judaism echoes with the voices of the prophets. Micah rails against judges who take bribes,^{iv} and Jeremiah erupts at the sight of innocent blood.^v Since the founding of America, religion has led movements from Abolition to Temperance to Civil Rights. NVHC Change, our Social Action committee to do service, give tzedakah, and advocate on the issues we care about.

But Judaism is also the tradition of Hillel and Shammai Eliezer and Joshua, the protectors of the minority, the preservers of dissent. So more important than any single issue is how we deliberate. I am so proud to say that our Social Action committee takes seriously the process of inclusive deliberation, bringing together alternative view points for sometimes frustrating conversation.

This is because more important than any issue right now is the fundamental survival of American democracy.

Our country is desperate for a counter force to rebuilt trust, discourse, respect and tolerance. I am talking about more than being civil. I am talking about deep, difficult and honest wrestling with a vision of what we want America to be.

Who other than the faith community will provide that force?

Yom Kippur is an acknowledgement that I am human, I make mistakes, and I can forgive you for your mistakes. Is that not the essence of democracy? My tolerance for your right to believe what I think is wrong? In the spirit of Yom Kippur, I want to offer an apology. I have tried to make this sermon as non-partisan as possible. I am confident that some of you, feel that I have failed. That I am biased. If you are still listening at this point, I will say that you are right. I am biased. Politically I am left of center, and as my opening story about the President illustrates, I see more of this anti-democratic behavior coming from the right than the left. But I believe the problems come from both sides, that they have been forming for over a generation, that they are bigger than even politics, and this administration is a symptom not the problem. What I have attempted to communicate is that we need religion to help us rebuild the underlying habits, beliefs and norms that make democracy thrive, and neither party owns responsibility for that. We do.

As Jews, we cannot give up on America. We have been victims of conspiracy theories for hundreds of years. This country that has been better to us than any other place in history not named Israel.

When President Eisenhower returned from Europe, after seeing firsthand the destruction brought by fascism and the horrific evil of Stalinist Communism, he came home to push Americans to go to Church. From 1949 through 1960 church membership exploded by 41%. Eisenhower, a general who commanded tanks and aircraft, called religious practices, “spiritual weapons which forever will be our country’s most powerful resource, in peace or in war.”

We are the inheritors of those weapons. So this year, as we ask forgiveness for our sins, as we acknowledge our broken pledges, we commit ourselves to restoring those pledges in the year to come.

Religion is failing America. We have the power to save it.

G’mar Chatima Tova, May we be sealed for a good year in the Book of Life.

ⁱ Washington Post, August 28, 2018

ⁱⁱ Postman, Building a Bridge to the 18th Century, 101

ⁱⁱⁱ Haidt, The Happiness Hypothesis, 71

^{iv} Micah 3:11

^v Jer 26:15