

To Pledge Allegiance
Rosh Hashanah Morning 5780
September 30, 2019

Almost every Thursday I face a dilemma. We rise at Rotary, and place hands on our hearts. We then go rote, recite a phrase, enact a ritual familiar to children almost everywhere in this country. And all I can do is wonder about the words.

It's not so much talking to a piece of cloth bothers me. And it's certainly not the notion that ritual repetition of a formulaic phrase works to imprint its message in our lives. I'm a Jew. Just... look around at what we have done already today! We shoot vibrated air through the narrow hollowed end of an animal's horn! We say and do all kinds of strange things. This past summer, in the heart of Jerusalem, I even felt like I was... you know, talking to a Wall.

No, it's the words themselves.

To "pledge allegiance?" What does that even mean? How come so many take this to mean blind obedience, an absence of questions? How come, for some, there is so little room for doubt and disagreement and dissent?

Under God? That phrase... look, the Pledge of Allegiance was written by a Baptist minister. But it was written... without those words in it! They were added later. (And I'm not even sure this means what people think it does, as Dylan sharply sang about having "God on our side." But I've tackled that topic elsewhere.)

Liberty and justice for all? Really? Today? Now? You can drive past

Smith Bay to Red Hook and look right and still say those words? How do we even get them out of our mouths?

And what I wonder about the most, these days, is the concept of allegiance. Look, sometimes we say horrible things about each other. Someone who observes, who practices, who believes, who behaves in the community just a bit differently than we do... We call each other out, we call each other names, we label and shout and shun and demean those who don't "do Jew" the way we do.

But this past summer, not that long ago, the finger-pointing, the name-calling, the jarring accusation of disloyalty came... from outside. It came from a poisoned pen, and the words were sharp, and cut deeply.

On a Tuesday in late August, the President of the United States said that Jewish people who vote for the other political party show "either a total lack of knowledge, or great disloyalty."

Disloyal to who, or what? Does he mean disloyal... to *him*. Maybe not, since the next day he tried to clarify his comments. "In my opinion," he wrote, "if you vote for [the other party], you're being very disloyal to Jewish people, and you're being very disloyal to Israel."

OK, so it wasn't all about him. Except, that at the same time he turned it all back on himself again. In what Rabbi Hannah Goldstein, one of my Washington area colleagues called, in her sermon that week, "a somewhat

confusing tweet,” the President quoted Wayne Allen Root, a Jew by birth who has since accepted Jesus. The quotation read: “President Trump is the greatest President for Jews and for Israel in the history of the world. The Jewish people in Israel love him like he’s the King of Israel. They love him like he is the second coming of God.”

Ok....wow. Look, agree or disagree with the policies, and never mind which party you support, or whether you always vote the same way or you pick and choose. You know, I would think it would be... not just Jews... that would have a problem with all this. To whom, to what, are we being asked to pledge allegiance? As Americans... and, now, as American Jews?

A memory. My father is aging and ailing now, and it hurts my heart to watch. But in his prime I remember, really, only one time that I saw him afraid. It was after the arrest of Jonathan Pollard. And my father, who had been in the government for much of his career, one of the world’s leading experts on the now former Soviet Union, someone who helped guide our policy, to root our response in rational factual analysis, my father who loves this country deeply... all of a sudden, he – and every other Jewish person who worked for the government – all of a sudden he felt vulnerable. A spectre haunted America. All anyone needed to do was point a finger, and raise the issue of loyalty. Which flag flies in our heart? And where do we turn first?

The immediate reaction this summer was actually... a distraction. The conversation centered on a secondary question: is this antisemitism?

Deborah Lipstadt, in her new book “Antisemitism: Here and Now,” writes that “an anti-Semite is someone who ‘hates Jews more than is absolutely necessary.’”

It’s... not the worst definition. Because here, in this strange exchange, we were singled out, in ways other groups were not. In context, it certainly was... over the top assertion. It was out of the blue. It was more than was necessary. For this and other reasons, despite trading in some stereotypes about us which on the surface seem like compliments, yes, in classic and modern ways, and including the notion that we should all think and feel and act the same way, this was probably antisemitism.

But I don’t want to lose the core issue here. Accusations of disloyalty? Historically, emotionally, and with real life consequences, the President of the United States is really playing with fire.

What is loyalty? What is allegiance? What do we owe, and to whom? Are we really supposed to fall in step, and fall in line? Do we really have to set some of our values to the side, for the sake of solidarity and support?

This goes to the heart of who we are. But let’s leave the headlines aside, for now, and look somewhere else

Today we read an ancient tale. But it is one with a post-modern twist. As with many of the mysteries we encounter, we are not sure what

the story is trying to say. And we cannot tell, really, if the central figure is a hero or a villain.

Today we share a story, in which commander and comrade clash, in which loyalty to authority, and loyalty to community, would take us to very different places.

“V’y’hi achar ha’d’varim ha’eleh, v’ha’Elohim nisa et Avraham... And it came to be that after these things came to pass, that God ‘tested’ Abraham...” So we are told this is a test. But of what? Obedience, submission... loyalty... seems to be the most obvious answer. But maybe not...

“Kach na et Bin’cha, et Y’chid’cha, asher ahavta..... Take your son, your only one, who you love...” But he has two sons. Does he only love one? But the surrounding stories seem to say something different.

“V’ha’aleyhu sham l’Olah al echat he’harim asher omar eleycha... And offer him up as an Olah, a sacrifice, on one of the mountains which I shall indicate to you..” Say, what? Excuse me? *Olah* is not an ambiguous term. It can’t mean anything else. It is a technical term, for a burnt offering, that which is entirely consumed in flame. The actual term for this is... a holocaust offering. The English word is much older than its application to a particular historical event.

And Abraham... the same Abraham who, told about the pending fate of Sodom and G’marah, pleads and wheedles and argues and bargains. *There*, he

objects. *There*, he gets in God's face, as it were...stands up to God, on behalf of those he does not know. But for family? For his son? "*Hineini*. Here I am." And he gets up early in the morning, takes Isaac, grabs some servants, and sets out on his way.

For this, Kierkegaard calls Abraham the "supreme knight of faith." He praises this act of obedience to the One true Commander in Chief, over the ordinary, to the point of the absurd and obscene. God is to be obeyed, above and beyond even justice and ethics and morality.

Abraham is also known as the father of many peoples. Muslim tradition calls him "beloved" or "friend" of God. He is the first Jew, the first believer, the first real monotheist. And we... we refer to him at times as "*ne'eman*," the faithful one, in praise of his *emunah*. Faith. Belief. Steadfastness. Loyalty. The word "amen," which has the same root, even implies... agreement. Or at least willingness. Consent. Complicity.

Unless. Unless of course he actually failed the test. And this was supposed to be a story about the limits of loyalty, instead. And he was supposed to stand up again, and defend his family. And he was supposed to... ask questions!

It is said that we Jews have been asking many questions ever since. Sometimes, occasionally annoyingly, it seems even... just for the sake of asking questions.

But I will tell you that, in the sacred work I do with those exploring Judaism, who are even thinking about becoming Jewish... one of the first things I ask is for people to articulate, in their own words, what they see as the difference between Judaism and other religions. And the most common response, maybe even 60% of the time, is this: in Judaism, you are allowed to ask questions. It is even encouraged. And it does not... make you disloyal.

So questions, clarification, even argument can, for us, be itself a sign of involvement. It flows from relationship. Pushback is its own form of commitment and... loyalty.

We strive to make sense of things. We seek understanding. And yet, perhaps, there is also something to be said...for a pull whose power we don't quite get.

Part of us... part of this... is about getting over our need to define things our own way, on our own terms. Part of allegiance is about getting over ourselves. About allowing ourselves to step into the world, the feeling, the heart of others.

In this, we begin with family, across time and generations. And we return, again, to the Akedah. The Binding of Isaac.

Yehuda Amichai, in his last collection of poems, builds a bridge between the Biblical story and a popular pastime of secular Israelis... the tiyyul. The hike. The exploration of the land.

אברהם אבינו לוקח כל שנה את בניו להר המוריה,
 כשם שאני לוקח ילדי לגבעות הנגב שבהן הייתה לי מלחמה...

Avraham, our ancestor, every year takes his sons to Mount Moriah,
 the same way that I take my children to the hills of the Negev,
 upon which my war took place.

Avraham, Amichai goes on to say, acts as a tour guide through his
 tortured past. “This is where I left the servants, that’s where I tied the donkey
 to the tree.... When they reached the top of the mountain, they rested awhile,
 and ate, and drank, and he showed them the thicket where the ram was
 caught by its horns.”

What a scene! Abraham, returning to the painful past, but, more,
 making the kids come with him!

Nostalgia? Or abuse? What is his purpose in going back? And what
 does he see? What must Isaac think? For that matter, what about his eldest,
 Ishmael, left behind so long ago when Abraham was told... to bring his favorite
 son?

But Amichai is not done with us yet. “And when Avraham died, Yitzchak
 took his sons to the same spot. ‘Here, I lifted up the wood. And that’s where I
 stopped for breath...’

Generations come, and generations go, but the pull abides, with the power of place. But father and son, one generation and the next, they never saw the same thing, remembered it the same way. The place is the same; the experience is different.

The poem concludes: “And when Yitzhak became blind, his sons brought him to the same Moriah, and described to him in words all those things he may already have forgotten.”

For a third generation, it is more distant still. What began as a primal, formative experience... fades or reforms... into mere words, and missing memory.

And so, here we are, Rosh HaShanah once again. We are drawn by this time, to this place... for some of us, in this congregation, a sacred space indeed.

Unless you are new as a Jew, or here in the company of someone who is Jewish, this is a pull parents felt, and their parents, and their parents before that.

Is it family, which draws us here, or community? For some it may be belief, but few of us would express that faith in... quite the same way. Certainly what we see, what we feel here is our own. Altered and different and changed... from what the experience of those who came before. Can we even

say what brings us here? Or do the words elude us, misty memory of a half-remembered past?

I want so much... for any Jew, for anyone with Jewish roots, for anyone with any kind of connection to our community... to feel welcome and wanted and to feel good about stepping in, or coming back. I want believers and skeptics and atheists and Ashkenazim and Sephardim and descendants of founders and Jews by choice and young and old and Jews of every color and ethnicity to feel part of each other, and to feel the power and pull of this time and place. I want this despite the fact, or maybe even *because of the fact...* that across generations, and between different perspectives and personalities, all of our experiences are different.

We take our children to the place... where our wars were fought. It's different. It's not the same for them. But sometimes they understand that it was powerful to us. And that is enough of a foundation upon which they create... something new

Loyalty. Faithfulness. *Emunah*. It tugs, it pulls, even in ways we cannot explain or understand. It is a kind of continuity, even in the midst of change. And it is a glue which holds a group together.

We pledge allegiance... It is an unseen pull, a primal force, like gravity. At times it is that which grounds us. And other times, it is something we must resist, in order to stand up, to stand for what we know is right.

. We come for a feeling. Let us leave with a mission. We begin with connection. Let us move on to growth. We come here for ourselves. Let us leave... more aware... of the needs of others.

L'shanah Tovah.