

**Temple B'nai Shalom
Braintree, Massachusetts
Rabbi Van Lanckton**

**November 5, 2016 Shabbat Morning Service at Temple B'nai Shalom
Three Days Before the National Election**

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Early in the service we have a very brief Torah study, which I introduced as follows:

This morning for our Torah study we will read mitzvot selected from the book of Leviticus. They include that you shall not hate your brother in your heart and you shall love your neighbor as yourself. The duty to love others as we love ourselves was recognized as a civic virtue more than 2000 years ago by the Roman senator and philosopher Marcus Tullius Cicero. He identified it as a central value in a civil society. We need that in our lives and our country today as we approach the election next Tuesday and in the days following. Love our neighbors as ourselves. We will read aloud together the excerpt from Leviticus on page 9 of our siddurim.

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Later in the service, after the Torah reading, we say a prayer for our country. I introduced it as follows:

In a moment we will pray together the prayer for our country. We pray today with special awareness that next Tuesday will mark, at last, the end of this divisive election. I'll have something to say about that in my sermon. For now, we will pray together that this nation be a nation of peace and security, happiness and prosperity, justice and freedom. Let's pray together, page 415 in our siddurim.

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I then gave the following sermon [I don't read the title when I give the sermon; the title is for the benefit of you, my dear readers]:

E Pluribus Unum – Love Your Neighbor As Yourself

Yesterday morning, I took a short break from writing my sermon for today. As I ate my breakfast and read the paper I found the following headline, reporting on a recent poll: "Voters Express Disgust Over U.S. Politics."

The story expressed what I have been feeling and what I guess many of us have been feeling as we approach, finally, at long last, November 8 and the end of this presidential election. Here is a summary of the first two paragraphs of the newspaper story.

An overwhelming majority of voters are disgusted by the state of American politics. Many voters doubt that either major-party nominee can unite the country after a historically ugly presidential campaign.

In a grim preview of the discontent that may cloud at least the outset of the next president's term, Hillary Clinton and Donald J. Trump are seen by a majority of voters as unlikely to bring the country back together after this bitter election season.

More than eight in 10 voters say the campaign has left them repulsed rather than excited. This rising toxicity threatens the ultimate victor. Both Mrs. Clinton, the Democratic candidate, and Mr. Trump, the Republican nominee, are seen as dishonest and viewed unfavorably by a majority of voters.

The election will end with the counting of the votes next Tuesday night. If the election turns out to be as close as now seems likely, the counting won't end until early Wednesday morning. A lot of us are likely to be pretty sleepy at work that day.

Here is what I hope: after the votes are finally counted and a winner declared, I hope we will not then face more sleepless nights worrying about how our nation is going to be reunited and again live up to the promise of its name, the United States of America.

Whichever one wins, he or she will be confronted with an enormous task. Both candidates are disliked by a majority of voters. How do we come together and make ourselves into one united country again?

One place to start is a three-word phrase that appears on all our coins: "E pluribus unum." "Out of many, one."

Even before the phrase was on our coins, it appeared on the Seal of the United States, and still does. E Pluribus Unum has long been considered a de facto motto of the United States, though it was never officially adopted by law. Instead, in 1956, at the height of the Cold War against "godless" Communist Russia, the United States Congress adopted "In God We Trust" as our official motto.

Because I have the great good fortune to be married to Alice, who has been a Latin teacher forever, I explored the origin of "E Pluribus Unum." We can trace the phrase to a book by Marcus Tullius Cicero, Roman senator and philosopher. Cicero wrote a series of three books in the year 44 BCE. The second book in the series was titled *De Officiis*, which means "On Duties" or "On Obligations." It was Cicero's attempt to define ideals of public behavior. He includes the following sentence in the book, with a phrase credited as the origin of "E Pluribus Unum." Cicero writes, "'When each person loves the other as much as himself, it makes one out of many (unus fiat ex pluribus).'"

The phrase "E Pluribus Unum" was recommended in 1776 to be included on the Seal of the United States. So here is a puzzle. How did a fragment of one sentence in a book written in Latin 1,800 years earlier come to the attention of the committee designing our national seal?

Here is the answer to the puzzle: Cicero's book had enormous impact and was widely known throughout Europe and therefore in the American colonies.

Although the book is of course not a Christian work, St. Ambrose in the year 390 declared it legitimate for the Church to use along with everything else Cicero had written. The book became the moral authority during the Middle Ages. Illustrating its importance, some 700 handwritten copies remain in libraries around the world dating back to before the invention of the printing press, more copies than all but one other book. Following the invention of the printing press, De Officiis was the second book to be printed, second only to the Gutenberg Bible.

According to one historian, "in Shakespeare's day, De Officiis was the pinnacle of moral philosophy." In the 17th century it was a standard text at English schools and universities. The book influenced John Locke, one of the philosophers who in turn influenced the founders of our country. In the 18th century, Voltaire said of De Officiis, "No one will ever write anything more wise."

Traditionally the phrase "E Pluribus Unum" is understood to mean that our country is one nation formed from many states. The phrase can also suggest, however, that a single and united country emerges out of many peoples, races, religions, languages, ancestries and political views.

So we can see that phrase, "E Pluribus Unum," as our challenge. How do we recover from this election, one that has opened up such divisions among us, and once again become a single nation?

I found one answer in an article in next Monday's New Yorker magazine. Joshua Rothman wrote a book review in the November 7 issue entitled "The Enemy Next Door: Do good neighbors make good citizens?" In it he reviews a book by Nancy Rosenblum, a political scientist at Harvard. She has devoted her career to investigating how political and social life intersect. Her book is called Good Neighbors: The Democracy of Everyday Life in America.

She concludes that we live in two democracies. One is a political democracy, in which we function as citizens. The other she calls a "democracy of everyday life," in which we function as neighbors. She concludes that these two democracies operate separately, and sometimes at cross-purposes.

She poses the question of how we are able to live as neighbors and with good neighborly relationships with people even if we hold radically different political views. When she speaks of having that ability to get along with others, I think also not only of neighbors but also co-workers and fellow congregants. Can we find common ground in some ways despite having opposing views of who should become our next President?

The review of Rosenblum's book in the New Yorker begins with a story to which I think we can all relate, though it seems at first to be about only a highly specific local matter rather than our presidential election. Here is that story, slightly edited:

Earlier this year, my small Long Island town of a few thousand people held its municipal election. The choice was between a party that favored development and another that opposed it. The lead-up to the vote was tense. Leaflets flooded mailboxes. Signs, bigger each week, sprouted on lawns. On Facebook, voters insulted the candidates and one another with frank exuberance; around dinner tables, talk was of the irreparable damage one party or the other would inflict on village life. "It really is a shame that every four years the Village

has to deal with the smut and name calling that has seemingly become a tradition,” one party spokesperson lamented on Facebook. Perhaps, the spokesperson continued, this was symptomatic of a broader condition: elections across the country appeared to have “degenerated” and become “hate filled.”

As election day approached, life in the village seemed to have divided into two streams—a neighborly stream, which ran pure and clear, and a political stream, which was muddied and turbulent. When you met a neighbor in line at the pharmacy, it was easy to get along. But at home, contemplating his political position—or, worse, reading about it online—you were filled with contempt and disbelief. People were friendly on the street but angry in their heads; they chatted amiably in person but waged war online. They liked and loathed one another simultaneously, becoming polarized not just politically but emotionally. As the weeks passed, we were doubly in suspense. We wanted to know which party would win, but also whether our town could return to normal. Feelings had been aroused that seemed incompatible with neighborly life. Where would they go?

Our town’s experience with our local election was typical of what has been happening in our country. Across America, at moments like this of extreme political polarization, it is as though a veil had been lifted. Walking the dog one morning, you notice a Clinton or Trump sign planted in the yard across the street. You’ve known that family for years—but now, you feel, some fundamental fact about them has been revealed. Later, when you run into them at the park, you find yourself talking about the Patriots or the Red Sox, or the weather, or the kids, as usual. Your neighbors don’t seem any more evil than they did last year. But how in the world can they be supporting Clinton, or supporting Trump, whichever one you don’t support? And what about when the election is over? What should we do with all the anger and disdain we feel for neighbors who are, in our view, poised to destroy America?

At the heart of these questions is the relationship between politics and everyday life. Politics matter enormously; it’s right to care, to feel alarmed, and to argue. At times, it seems frivolous to look at life through any other lens. And yet politics can become a poisonous influence in our lives. Politics can color our perceptions too radically and play too large a role in the construction of our identities and social lives. Politics can fill us with unwanted passionate intensity. Perhaps, somewhere in the territory of the self, a border marks the place where our lives as citizens end and our sovereignty as individuals begins. If such a border exists, though, it doesn’t feel very secure right now.

The main idea in the Rosenblum book being reviewed in The New Yorker spoke to me and I think helps answer our question. She argues that we are all individuals, but each of us has multiple identities and values. We are each singular in ourselves but each of us is also plural, complicated, and sometimes contradictory in what we believe or want. We go awry when we reduce ourselves and others to one element or one issue.

It’s tempting, Sutherland says, to commit a kind of moral synecdoche. Synecdoche is a figure of speech, to refer to a part of something to mean the whole of that thing. For example, we might say “Chicago won the World Series by one run in extra innings in the seventh game.” The word “Chicago” refers not just to Chicago but to “Chicago’s baseball team, the Chicago Cubs.”

When Sutherland refers to a kind of moral synecdoche, she means that we might notice part of what our friend or neighbor is doing (for example, voting for Clinton or Trump) and treat that part as if it were the whole story about that person (that is, that the choice of presidential candidate means the person is a bad person). That would be a mistake, because a person's vote is not the whole person.

How do we avoid this error? Sutherland argues we do that by adopting a pluralistic view of the people around us. We recognize that, with one part of themselves, they may sincerely hold views that we detest, while, with another, they may exercise virtues that we admire.

American democracy, Rosenblum thinks, is founded on this theory. We have in common the understanding that we contain multitudes. Reconciling ourselves to the contradictions of pluralism is what makes it possible for us to unite as a people.

If we follow the advice in Rosenblum's book, we may be able to live up to the ideal of Cicero and of our informal national motto: E Pluribus Unum.

May it be so.

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I concluded the service as I always do, with a final prayer:

Please rise.

Ribono shel olam.

Our Declaration of Independence says these truths are self-evident: all of us are created equal, we are all endowed by our Creator with certain inalienable rights, and among these for all of us are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Your prophet Malachi said, "Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us? Why should we be faithless to each other?"

May we hold fast to these abiding truths and go forward in peace together next Tuesday and thereafter.

Shabbat shalom.