

## The Burden and the Message

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I learned in rabbinical school that my task as a rabbi in preparing and delivering a sermon is to examine my soul to discover what's bothering me. Whatever is bothering me is probably bothering a lot of other people, including many of my congregants.

The short-hand version of this advice to us as rabbinical students was, "Your burden is your message."

My burden this week has two elements.

First, I am distressed, as I have never before been distressed, about the direction of our country and its leaders. I will say more about that in a moment.

The second element of my burden is the contrary advice we also learned in rabbinical school, summarized in this criticism by a congregant to a rabbi: "Rabbi, I don't come to shul to listen to politics. Keep politics off the bima."

So, what should a rabbi do when his burden consists of deep disaffection and worry about the political direction of the country?

This morning I have made the choice to share my burden with you, but I am also trying to do it in a way that keeps politics off the bima.

My burden is about policies and values, not politics.

I am in pain. I am losing sleep. I am burdened. Why?

Because I fear America is in danger of straying from our best vision of ourselves by adopting policies and practices that betray what is best about America.

Just a moment ago we joined in the prayer for our country. We asked God's blessings for our country, for its government, for its leader and advisors, and for all who exercise just and rightful authority. We said, "Teach them insights of Your Torah, that they may administer all affairs of state fairly, that peace and security, happiness and prosperity, justice and freedom may forever abide in our midst."

I agree with all of that.

Last week, another rabbi got into trouble when he advocated changing that prayer. He turned it into a frankly political statement.

Rabbi Shmuly Yanklowitz is an Orthodox rabbi. He leads a congregation in Phoenix, Arizona. He founded and directs an Orthodox social justice organization called Uri L'Tzedek.

Last week the Jewish Telegraph Agency published an article describing a prayer composed and recommended by Rabbi Yanklowitz. The prayer got him in a lot of trouble.

I support a part of Rabbi Yanklowitz's prayer, but not all of it.

Here is the part I support:

O God and God of our Ancestors, we yearn for the success of the American government, to fulfill its righteous mandate to protect its citizens from threats internal and foreign, to fortify the bonds between liberty and justice, to ordain fair treatment under the law, and to expand welfare to all those within its capacity.

We pray that the vision of the prophets—the redemptive power of justice; relief for the poor, welcome for the marginal, protection for the oppressed, care for the sick—and the vision of the Constitution of a more perfect union be brought about.

You know, God, that all were created in Your image. May all to whom You have given the sanctity of life awaken and fulfill their calling to bring love, justice, and kindness to all corners of Your world.

May Your land, and our government, strive to be a blessing for all.  
Amen.

I suspect that Rabbi Yanklowitz would not have gotten in trouble if that had been the extent of his prayer. But it wasn't.

His prayer also included these words:

We pray that the decrees from the Executive office do not harm the innocent. We pray that any policies that are meant to harm the vulnerable in prioritization of the powerful and privileged will be quashed. Should there be plans that will merely benefit the most privileged Americans, but not all of humankind and the planet we call home, may they fail. May our nation not consort or conspire with totalitarian despots but reaffirm our commitment to freedom and democracy. May agents of hate who stray from Your holy vision of love and justice, found within and outside our country, be averted.

When a rabbi invites his congregants to join in a prayer, it is wrong to inject into that prayer statements like those. But it is OK for a rabbi to express in a sermon ideas and sentiments like those things.

Why the difference?

In a communal prayer, each congregant must either join in, despite his or her disagreement, or refrain from joining in, which is awkward and isolating.

But when the rabbi gives a sermon, the rabbi is voicing an opinion. While the congregant cannot object during the sermon, there is plenty of opportunity at the Kiddush to disagree. And if enough congregants disagree with the rabbi, in fairness the rabbi will say so in a subsequent sermon.

So, the substance of what's bothering me is exactly this: I share Rabbi Yanklowitz's concern for the vulnerable and the innocent. I just wouldn't express my fears in a communal prayer.

The Rabbi Yanklowitz prayer expresses a worry that recent and proposed orders of the government will harm the innocent. I share that worry.

I worry that a blanket refusal to admit refugees to our country will condemn thousands of people seeking to escape war and violence, perhaps even condemn some to death. We should carefully review asylum applicants to weed out terrorists. But we are already doing that. A total refusal to admit all refugees goes way beyond what is needed to maintain our safety. And it represents a violation of bedrock American values and the best of our history.

I worry about the attack on refugees also from another perspective. The refusal of countries to give shelter to those fleeing the Holocaust, including that refusal by our own government, to its everlasting shame, condemned millions of our ancestors to death. We must not go that way again.

I worry that the government issued its directive against immigration on International Holocaust Memorial Day while also issuing the annual proclamation of the day without mentioning Jews at all, reflecting a typical anti-Semitic canard that Jews were only incidentally victims among many other victims of Nazi Germany.

I worry that repealing the Affordable Care Act would deprive millions of Americans of needed health care. We must not go back to a time when lifetime limits and refusing insurance to people who were already sick left millions of our fellow Americans with nowhere to turn. Emergency rooms must not again become overcrowded places for inadequate care. Preventive care must be maintained as the best and most cost-effective way to maintain American health. That care demands insurance for as many people as possible.

I worry that denying federal funds to sanctuary cities will do great harm. Cities have refused to make their police forces agents of the federal immigration authorities with respect to non-violent undocumented immigrant because, as the Mayor of Chelsea said on the radio yesterday, they treat everyone in the city with equality and because police will be less effective in combating crime if the people cannot trust the police.

I worry that ordering executive agencies to stop communicating with the public will undermine the precious trust between the government and the people.

I worry that our rights, guaranteed in the First Amendment, to assemble freely and to petition the government for the redress of grievances are under attack.

I worry that the freedom of the press, also guaranteed in the First Amendment, is undermined when the government attacks the press. This week a trusted adviser to our President said that the press itself is the opposition. He then said to the press generally, "Keep your mouth shut."

I worry that continued insistence on the truth of claims that have long been proven false, and giving scope to the idea that there is no such thing as objective truth, or the idea that science does not matter, will reduce our ability to discuss matters rationally.

I worry that our precious planet is in peril. Our government's policies can help to avert the disastrous results of unchecked climate change, but only if we keep at it. So, I worry when the Environmental Protection Agency is instructed to stop communicating about its efforts and when the recently signed Paris Climate Accord is in jeopardy.

So I have worries.

But I am also encouraged by my faith in the resilience and determination of the American people.

Alice and I joined 175,000 people on the Boston Common last Saturday, even though it was Shabbat. My sisters and nieces marched with hundreds of thousands of others in New York City and in Denver, and my nephew marched in Washington. Letters and emails are pouring into the offices of our leaders in Washington. Together we can take action to protect the values that matter to us.

I am encouraged by the lessons of my long career as a lawyer: the government can announce actions, but it cannot sustain them for long if they are illegal because our courts are there to hear claims of injustice and lawyers will stand up to oppose tyranny.

Our country is fundamentally strong. We have survived setbacks before.

I believe in progress. I believe in the values of our Torah reflected in our founding documents and most inspiring laws and practices. We are a country committed to justice and equality. We are a nation built on the strengths of immigrants. We have long heeded ethical commands repeated throughout our Torah: protect the widow and orphan, and welcome and be kind to the stranger, for we have also been vulnerable and we have also been strangers in a strange land.

So I worry, but I worry from a place of hope.

I invite anyone who has a view that is contrary to anything I have said this morning, please tell me at the Kiddush or call or email me.