

Remarks of Rabbi David Saperstein

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I am profoundly honored to receive this *sherut l'am* recognition, especially, as we say in DC, receiving it from you, Mr. President, a good friend and distinguished leader of our Movement, who is guiding us through unprecedentedly challenging times. I am also touched to be part of this gathering of the eminent faculty of the College attended by Movement leaders, most especially for me, my dear friend Rabbi Rick Jacobs who leads the URJ with vision and courage. How meaningful to be here at this conferral of Master's degrees to you educators and you rabbinic and cantorial students, you who will soon be leading our Movement for the next two generations. And finally, I am most deeply moved to be alongside colleagues and friends honored today for twenty-five years of your own exemplary *sherut l'am*. It is so meaningful to me that many of you are partners to the Religious Action Center and champions of social justice in your own right (and a special shout-out to Michael Namath for his remarkable contribution these many years to the RAC and our celebrated, impactful *l'taken* program). So to receive this award as part of this joyful celebration of such achievements in the lives of all of you graduates and degree recipients-- truly, *cosi r'vayah*: my cup runneth over.

This celebration takes place at an extraordinary moment. In the ebb and flow of history, there come times when we arrive at a crossroads. Future generations will be shaped by the path we choose. Sometimes the implications are self-evident; for others, only hindsight reveals the consequences of our choices with stunning clarity — as Robert Frost famously observed, “and that made all the difference.”

We sense today that we stand at unprecedented crossroads — globally, in the United States, in Israel, and within our own Movement.

A Movement at a Crossroads

Our beloved Reform Movement is itself at a crossroads. Measured by how people identify themselves, every mainline Protestant denomination — Episcopal, Presbyterian, Methodist, UCC, Lutheran — contracted 35–70% between 1960 and today; even the Catholic Church would have faced significant losses but for large-

scale immigration. By dramatic contrast, Reform Judaism has been the fastest-growing theologically liberal denomination in North America — actually, the only growing one.

In 1960, Conservative Judaism was by far America's largest Jewish movement. The 2014 massive Pew survey found the Reform Movement not merely now the largest, but 1% larger than the Orthodox, Conservative, and Reconstructionist movements combined. By Pew's 2020 poll, that margin had grown to 7%. What potential! Yet, as I would guess most of my 25-year colleagues would agree, this immense potential has not been fully reflected in our synagogue experiences, despite many inspiring exceptions around the country. Overall, in the last twenty years, our synagogue membership also has been somewhat declining, exacerbated by the pandemic and its economic pressures — but far less than other liberal denominations.

In Israel, the non-Orthodox streams, the Reform and Conservative combined, likewise measured by how people identify — are now approximately the same proportion of Israeli Jews as the ultra-Orthodox, the *haredim*. Today, WUPJ congregations and communities span nearly 50 nations. Given the resources to build a vibrant, flourishing liberal Judaism, we can transform Jewish history. So, on the one hand, what an exciting time to be a Reform Jew.

And yet, on the other, again as many of my colleagues would testify, we feel deluged by challenges. The threats facing denominational institutions and seminaries that thrived in the last century are daunting — in our Movement, in every mainline Protestant denomination, and in the Catholic Church, seminary enrollments are falling; clergy shortages loom across the Protestant, Catholic, and non-Orthodox Jewish spectrum. Even a mainstay of fundamentalism, the Southern Baptist Convention, after decades of rapid growth, has been shrinking noticeably for the past two decades, and that shrinking is picking up momentum.

Our institutional leaders — the College, CCAR and URJ -- are all engaged in meeting these new challenges: virtual pathways to clergy education, fellowship to college students to give emphasis to the pipeline that will bring new people leadership, embracing new community entities complementing and integrating with the synagogue to assist young people in creating new pathways in their search for meaningful Jewish life, and a major focus on expanding quality continuing education for our professionals and lay leaders. All while sharpening the successes of our camp system, the RAC, our Israel programming, and our congregational support networks, most particularly for medium and smaller sized congregations. To you who graduate

today: Please know the commitment these institutions have to making your career as fulfilling and meaningful as you dream it will be today.

The Political Crossroads

And today we likewise approach crucial crossroads in political and public life — in the U.S., in Israel, and across the globe.

Of all the political crossroads before us, few carry more immediate weight for the Jewish people and for Israel than some of the themes of part of this week's *parashah* with its rules of the Sabbatical and Jubilee:

And you shall hallow the fiftieth year

וקראתם דרור בארץ לכל-יושביה יובל היא תהיה לכם

and proclaim liberty throughout the land unto all the inhabitants thereof; it shall be a jubilee unto you;

It is this promise of liberty for all, on which I wish to focus. Those words are, of course, inscribed on the Liberty Bell. That bell was sounded on July 8, 1776, at the first public reading of the Declaration of Independence, forever linking American liberty with the ancient cadences of Jewish liberty. Nachmanides connects the rarely used word *dror*, liberty, with *dor*, generation, suggesting liberty is a heritage passed *l'dor v'dor*, throughout the generations.

Thirty-nine years after those words were inscribed, the First Amendment codified for the first time in all of human history that in this new nation, one's rights as a citizen would not depend on their religious identity, their religious beliefs, or their peaceful religious practices.

The mid-twentieth century fulfillment of that promise — in expanding women's rights, civil rights, all first amendment rights including religious freedom and the establishment clause — ushered in a Golden Age of American Jewry in this nation in which Jews enjoyed more rights, more freedoms, and more opportunities than we have ever known in 2,500 years of Diaspora Jewish life. And this same period coincided with the founding of the State of Israel, animated by the certainty that a

Jewish and democratic state could be built, as its Declaration of Independence affirmed:

“... based on the ideas of liberty, justice, and peace taught by the Hebrew Prophets. It will uphold the full social and political equality of all its citizens, without distinction of race, creed, or sex.”

So much of what you, your parents, and your grandparents helped build, in Israel and in this country, feels imperiled now. Freedoms under attack. Democracy under attack. Antisemitism and other forms of hate metastasizing in ways we thought it never could again.

Competitive Authoritarianism

The twentieth century saw numerous episodes in which extremists, in or out of government, sought to undermine democratic norms. With the exception of Jim Crow, none in our own nation approached the breadth or depth of the current movement toward authoritarianism.

Indeed, neither the U.S. nor Israel has been spared. Both countries exhibit what political scientist Steve Levitsky, co-author of *How Democracies Die*, calls “competitive authoritarianism” — a mix of democratic structures and growing authoritarian practice.

The indicators are alarmingly legion, but familiar:

- efforts to undermine electoral fairness and restrict access to the polls in both countries;
- the spread of misinformation and disinformation that erodes trust in media and government, in both countries;
- verbal attacks on judicial independence — including the demonization of Israel’s Supreme Court and of American judges who rule against the president;
- the dismissal of independent civil servants and institutional gatekeepers — consider the effort to replace Israel’s brave Attorney General Gali Berharav-Miara and many U.S. inspectors general — and their replacement with loyalists;
- restrictions on civil rights, freedom of speech, press, and protest.

- Media and NGOs committed to traditional democratic norms have been targeted:
- Academic freedom has been curtailed at universities, and secondary school curricula reshaped through the government’s promotion of its whitewashed “Restoration of Truth in American History” program.

We must defend these freedoms not only for their intrinsic worth but because silencing dissent invites error and disaster. Those who argue the ends justify the means are abandoning those fundamental freedoms — and who find a government willing to embrace that argument — radiate approval for a doctrine so odious it will ultimately destroy the whole of society.

The Lesson of Samson

And while all this unfolds, Israel and the U.S. are at war.

In a few weeks we will read the *Haftarah* telling the story of Samson — *Shimshon*, sun-person -- a Nazirite, dedicated to God, forbidden to drink wine or cut his hair. But this mighty warrior forgot the source of his strength. Captured by his enemies, his eyes were put out. Blinded, he could bring down his enemies only by destroying himself.

From this we learn the tragic combination of power and blindness. Once his vision gave him the potential to lead and build; without it, he could only destroy.

The late, esteemed Rabbi David Polish, a past president of the CCAR, applied Samson’s story to America:

“Our nation arose in this world like a special being, blessed and nurtured by the sun. This giant of a nation was born in the midst of a struggle against tyranny and consecrated to a higher order of a political existence than had ever been known.... A Nazirite among the nations, denying itself the temptations of rule by caste, the heady wine of government by the few. It was endowed in its birth with the might of the continent which it straddled and the vision, which it drew from its unique history. But we stand in danger of seeing the eyes of this sun-blessed giant blinded not by its enemies, but by itself. Its strength cannot be impaired, but its vision can be mortally impaired. And nothing can be as self-destructive as the well-meaning power of a blinded, bewildered and frightened giant.”

Increasingly, the same can be said of Israel — by far the most powerful military force in its region. Paradoxically, Israel remains surrounded by enemies who would destroy it if they could, deterred by Israel's strength, enhanced by American support. Yet, Israel seems to have lost the vision to see that there are, in the end, no purely military solutions to guaranteeing its long-term safety, nor of achieving peace in that region — without which Israel will never be truly secure.

And despite the best efforts of Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran, and the enormous and understandable level of mistrust between Israelis and Palestinians, we now have the best opportunity in decades for Israel and Palestinians — in cooperation with the Abraham Accord nations, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, and the EU — all apparently willing to invest immense resources or efforts in rebuilding Gaza's homes, hospitals, and schools while constructing the political architecture of peace.

And I would add, God bless World Central Kitchen.

American power, meanwhile, is being deployed to dismantle the very multinational structures we led in building after WWII, precisely to prevent another global conflagration.

Yet both nations have engaged in acts that have damaged their own souls as they pursue elusive military solutions to their foreign policy challenges. Post Oct. 7th, Israel has fought what began as a just war against Hamas in Gaza, but then engaged in clear violations of international law and crimes against humanity, with a near-total failure of the accountability that had characterized earlier Israeli military conduct, thus ignoring the warning of the Samson story. Settler violence runs rampant on the West Bank with alarming IDF and police complicity. And the effect on Israeli public opinion? A Penn State poll from June 2025 found that 82% of Israeli Jews support the transfer — expulsion — of Gaza's residents to other countries; 47% agreed Israel should act toward a conquered enemy city as the Israelites acted at Jericho — killing all its inhabitants; and, perhaps most alarmingly, 56% support exiling Israeli Arab citizens.

I pray that this poll is an aberration. Although we know of now others yet that rebut it.

We celebrate today here, in this awesome synagogue, whose one-time Rabbi, Judah Magnes, eventually made aliyah, and then was honored to serve as the first president of the Hebrew University. My brother Marc, an award winning Jewish historian, in his forthcoming HUC press publication titled: "Creating A Nation," explores sermons rabbis gave in the U.S., Israel and across the globe in 1947, '48, and '49

debating Zionism v. no Zionism, a Jewish state v. a democratic state, and on what it meant to be Jewish in a “Jewish state”. Marc recounts how Magnes, a courageous public intellectual, offers a powerful warning against Jewish extremism in Israel in 1947 -- eerily speaking across the decades as a warning to us all today:

This use of force and violence, which now characterizes our community, is a real change in the basic structure of the Jewish society...

...are not all of us responsible, all of us guilty, seeing that such foul deeds are done in an atmosphere which countenances the terror carried out by official or half-official “dissidents,” who claim to be acting for the good of the whole people?....

All the Jews of America share in the guilt, even those not in accord with the activities of this new, pagan leadership, but who sit at ease with folded hands. Yet we, in this land, are chiefly to blame, especially the teachers, rabbis, leaders of the generation, who are silent.

Where does this leave us? From the depth of my soul, I want to help preserve the Israel embodied in its Declaration of Independence. To do so, its security must be assured — but we must do everything we can to support those who struggle to ensure a return to Israel’s founding values and the vision of peace it once held.

The Call

Both nations stand at their crossroads, making their upcoming elections among the most consequential in their histories. If Democrats and moderate Republicans — or Israel’s next governing coalition — are unwilling to defend democratic institutions, it may be too late. As Levitsky warns: the time to resist authoritarianism is while democratic institutions are still strong. The longer resistance is delayed, the harder it becomes to prevail.

Encouragingly, across both our nations, the conscience of the people is stirring. Americans are raising their voices in growing numbers against the dismantling of democratic institutions. No Kings and the protests in Minnesota as well as “ICE out” protests elsewhere, are an inspiration to the nation. Likewise, the active participation in Minnesota of our synagogues, clergy, and national leadership led by Jonah Pesner, who does such stellar and inspiring work heading the RAC was a source of pride for us in the Jewish community. While in Israel, the nine months of demonstrations

protecting the Supreme Court, were, as a percentage of its population, quite likely, the largest sustained peaceful protests in all of world history. So too, the widening catastrophe on the West Bank, the spread of settler violence, the suffering of Palestinian civilians, the prospects of endless war in Gaza and Lebanon, — all these have begun to rejuvenate a traumatized peace Movement.

In America and in Israel, these protests are not simply noise; they are the sound of a democracy insisting its own indispensability in ensuring freedom, justice and peace.

This is where you come in. Because all of us in this synagogue today must wrestle with the questions that facing these crossroads demands of us... and find the courage to act on our answers.

For our honorary degree recipients, many of you are at the height of your influence. You have the coalitional relationships, the political and media access to make the case for preserving democracy, for protecting fundamental freedoms including the right to vote and for countering hate. Right now, you and your congregation's participation in the Movement's "Every Voice, Every Vote" campaign can greatly contribute to the Jewish impact on the right to vote and to resist this administration's efforts this year to curtail that right. So I ask you as I ask myself: when history judges these years, what will we have done with our influence?

And to you, the new graduates - you are entering this calling at perhaps the most consequential moment in generations. While soon you will face the same questions, right now the Hebrew Union College faculty and students can lead an effort to bring our community's scholarship to bear on these urgent problems, guided by the light of our ethical heritage.

And while our direct impact in Israel is more limited, our institutions -- IMPJ, MARAM, and especially IRAC, -- are growing more assertive, skilled, and effective. Now is the time to mobilize your congregations to stand behind and provide support for them -- and to encourage Israeli friends and family to engage in that fight.

Our voices must be heard -- as a goad to the conscience of America, Canada, and Israel as they choose which path to follow at the crossroads our nations face. For if we remain silent at such a time as this, the vacuum of our silence will be filled by voices that do not share our vision, our values, or our dreams.

And this above all I have learned in my fifty years of service to the Jewish people and this nation: despite all our daunting challenges and our painful failures, we are

not -- we refuse to be -- the prisoners of a bitter and unremitting past. Together we can be, we must be, we will be the forgers of a better and more hopeful world: for the Jewish people; for America and for Israel before it is too late; and for all of God's children on this earth. That cause has been the blessing of my life. Let it be part of yours. Let it begin now.