

YOM KIPPUR 5778

IS THIS A SAFE SPACE?

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For twenty-five years I was proud to be a Lord Jeff. This all changed last year, when I became... a Mammoth.

Let me explain.

For generations, Amherst College students and alumni proudly rallied around our unofficial but beloved mascot, the Lord Jeff. In the 18th Century, Lord Jeffrey Amherst served as Commander-in-Chief of British forces during the French and Indian War. With gusto we would sing our college song, “Lord Jeffrey Amherst”:

“Oh Lord Jeffrey Amherst was a soldier of the king/and he came from across the sea/To the Frenchmen and the Indians he didn’t do a thing/in the wilds of this wild country...”

Well, not exactly.

It turns out that Lord Amherst, in the course of his wartime correspondence, recommended distributing to the Native Americans blankets infested with smallpox virus. While no one knows if his devious tactic was ever employed, Lord Jeffrey Amherst managed to distinguish himself as the granddaddy of germ warfare.

The College, like the town, will still be called “Amherst.” But no more references to Amherst athletes or students as “Jeffs.” No more Lord Jeffrey Inn on campus. And *definitely* no more singing “Lord Jeffrey Amherst.”

According to a poll, 83% of current students viewed these references as offensive. So a contest was held and the mascot “Mammoths” selected, because the college’s natural history museum houses a prized skeleton of a woolly mammoth. At the end of the day, the Board decided that a mascot should unite and not divide, so purple Mammoths it is.

What happened at Amherst last year is emblematic of culture wars that have roiled campuses everywhere.

We have heard about student protests, from hunger strikes to requests for “trigger warnings” on curricula.

We learned about “microaggressions,” meaning subtle or unintentional discrimination against members of a marginalized group. Several universities now classify the phrase “America is a melting pot” as a microaggression, along with phrases like “Everyone can succeed in society if they work hard enough” and “I believe the most qualified person should get the job,” on the grounds that such statements downplay the role of race and gender in attaining life successes.

We saw many schools abandon symbols and traditions with ties to racism, colonialism, and slavery. Other schools underwent protracted disputes, like Princeton, which ultimately retained the name of President Woodrow Wilson on its School of Public and International Affairs, despite Wilson’s well-established white-supremacist views.

It seems that everywhere you looked this year, college students were demanding new deans and presidents, more globalized curricula, and school-endorsed “safe spaces.”

This past year, protestors at the University of Missouri linked arms in front of a “safe space” they’d formed on the quad, threatening to call the police if media—including student reporters!—didn’t back away. At Wesleyan, students circulated a petition to cut funding for a school newspaper that ran an op-ed criticizing the Black Lives Matter movement. The petition alleged that the school had neglected “to provide a safe space for the voices of students of color.”

Should college campuses provide “safe spaces” for their students?

Let’s hear what Judaism might have to say. A visit to any traditional Talmudic study hall discloses that Judaism tolerates a high degree of spirited, boisterous, indeed heated debate in the service of sharpening opinions and reaching compelling

conclusions. The Talmud itself is an anthology of arguments among Rabbis. Minority opinions are recorded alongside the majority; often the Talmud does not even make clear who “wins” the debate. We Jews have a historically high threshold for dissonance and disagreement.

This past March, conservative political scientist Charles Murray was shouted down at Middlebury College by students and activists. After moving his interview to another location, a violent confrontation erupted, pitting protesters against Dr. Murray and college officials. The interview moderator was hospitalized with a concussion.

Does the demand for “safe spaces” mean that colleges have an obligation to shield students from opinions that cause discomfort? That neglect to acknowledge a disenfranchised group’s mistreatment?

What about outright offensive or odious opinions? Dr. Murray’s assertion in a book written almost twenty-five years

ago, that intelligence is linked to race, has provoked controversy, to say the least. Should Murray be silenced?

My own college experience informs my perspective. When the Amherst Black Students Union supported bringing Louis Farrakhan to UMass just down the street, I engaged in a series of heated but respectful dialogues about the proposed talk. I wrote op-eds to the student paper and enlisted the support of faculty and administration in denouncing Farrakhan's demagoguery and notoriously anti-Semitic views.

At the end of the day, Farrakhan's speech went forward. And hundreds demonstrated peacefully outside.

That's how free speech works. In other words, we do not have a Constitutionally protected right not to be offended.

I am happy to see so many of our college students back at WRT today. You who are on the front lines of this issue understand that college ought to expand intellectual and social horizons, not reinforce preconceived and parochial notions. College

should provide a safe space *for* thought, not *from* thought, as Salman Rushdie recently quipped.

Many of you bring heartening news that college administrations have taken seriously their commitments to do what is in their power keep students safe—safe from violence, from intimidation, from the dangers of binge drinking, from sexual assault—to the extent that any institution can regulate such matters.

But safe doesn't always mean *comfortable*. College campuses can be laboratories for intellectual inquiry and free expression. They can also be breeding grounds for misinformation and bias.

Especially when it comes to Israel.

Over the past decade, the BDS Movement—Boycott, Divestment, & Sanctions—has proliferated. In 2011, I led a successful effort to persuade Amherst college trustees to defeat a BDS resolution placed before them by Students for Justice in

Palestine. In a particularly disturbing example from earlier this year, students at Tufts University passed a BDS resolution on the eve of the Passover *Seder*, when most Jewish students were home for the holiday.

Some parents have even begun to ask me to recommend colleges to which their kids should *not* apply in order to avoid BDS activity.

This request, alas, I cannot oblige.

First and foremost, because BDS may not be *everywhere*, but it could be *anywhere*.

Second, because we at WRT equip our high schoolers with the confidence and knowledge required in order to speak up when confronted with pernicious speech about Israel.

If you are a high school junior or senior, I hope you will join me for this year's "Packing for College" class on the first Wednesday of every month starting in January, where we do

just this. I also encourage all of our students and parents to take the new Campus Toolkit Handout provided by the Anti-Defamation League.

And third, because Judaism would not have us shrink from the challenges through which character is forged.

Recent events, of course, have tested the limits of my commitment to free speech. We Jews should never take for granted that the guarantees of freedom of speech, freedom of religious expression, and freedom to organize peacefully have strengthened our American Jewish community for centuries. We do not live like the Soviet *refuseniks* of my childhood, who feared that an ill-chosen comment about the government could result in a visit from the KGB and a one-way ticket to the gulag. Jews thrive here in large measure *because* of America's Constitutional guarantees to *all* citizens.

Still, the rise in Neo-Nazism, and the license white supremacists apparently now feel to organize and take their

message to the streets, as we saw last month in Charlottesville, could give pause to even the staunchest free-speech advocate.

Of all the words written in the wake of Charlottesville, I found these, from the Newseum, a DC institution dedicated to the First Amendment, most compelling:

“Hate-propagating neo-Nazis and bottom-dwelling white supremacists—the dregs of our open society—have and should have First Amendment rights to speak and march in public.

“We need to see them for what they are: a disappointing collection of the disaffected ... often ignorant of the real meaning and history of the symbols they display, carrying torches meant as much to intimidate as to illuminate.

“We need to hear them for what they say: advocacy of discredited ideas involving racial purity and

intolerance, couched in misrepresentations of U.S. history and the American experience.

“We need to understand them for what they are: betrayers of what President Lincoln called ‘our better angels,’ of the principles of equality, justice and the rule of law.”

Just because we grant to such groups the right to organize and speak freely does not mean that we consider their opinions valid or valuable to society. There can be no moral equivalency between Neo-Nazis and the broad coalition of people who oppose them. Anyone marching with a mob wearing swastikas and chanting “Jews will not replace us” has relinquished all claim to innocence.

Still, defending free speech means that we permit such ugly displays. It does not follow, however, that we stand idly by when the torches blaze. Is there anything more Jewish than standing up to Nazis? This is no time for complacency. Anti-Semitism—whether from the far left in the form of BDS, or

from the far-right in the form of Neo-Nazism—demands a consistent and firm response.

Understanding how we Jews have been affected by anti-Semitism may stir our empathy for others who stand with us against hatred and bigotry.

Think of how you feel when you see a swastika and you may have an inkling how African-Americans feel when they see a Confederate flag. Both were symbols of hate and violent subjugation floundered by regimes with the military power to back up their intentions.

Although we Jews have benefited from free speech and should join in its defense, it does *not* logically follow that we should support enshrining *all* symbols in public, particularly Confederate flags and monuments which were erected predominantly in the 20th century as emblems of white resistance to black social advancement and civil rights.

Defenders of racial inequality under the banner of “Southern heritage” are welcome to voice their views, as is their right. But public spaces should not be used to glorify their narrative. If we put ourselves in another’s shoes, given everything we know about anti-Semitism, we can understand why a public Confederate shrine may not feel like a “safe space” for millions of Americans.

You know, we actually have a familiar English word that means “safe space.” That word is “sanctuary.” For almost thirteen centuries, English law recognized the church as a safe space to which fugitives could flee and obtain immunity from arrest. Later the term “sanctuary” would apply to political asylum, and even today a burgeoning “sanctuary movement” has grown in houses of worship, to provide safe haven for immigrants fearing deportation.

All this begs the question: as we sit here, in our beautiful sanctuary, on the holiest day of the year, is this a “safe space?”

The past year highlighted the vulnerability of Jewish institutions. In the wake of bomb threats to JCCs and synagogues across the country, and a climate of rising anti-Semitism at home and abroad, WRT undertook a comprehensive audit of our security practices, from personnel to procedures to infrastructure. Volunteer leaders and professionals collaborated to upgrade temple security, a decision we consider a wise and important investment in our spiritual home, especially for our children.

So I would love to stand here today and vow that you will always be safe here at Westchester Reform Temple.

But you know that I cannot make this promise. We live in an era where no one can guarantee freedom from harm or loss, terror or violence. In the wake of hurricanes and earthquakes, in the omnipresent shadow of bloodshed at home and abroad, we read with new eyes the verse from *Unetaneh Tokef*: “We who are mortal—our origin is dust, and so is our end.... [We are] like broken vessels, like withered grass, like a flower that must fade....” Even the safest space offers limited protection.

All we can do is do our best to provide for your physical, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing. No matter your age or stage of life, no matter your ethnic or religious background, no matter your skin color, gender, sexual orientation, financial means, employment, or ability, we want *you* to participate fully in the life of this congregation, because WRT is your home.

The sanctuary in Jewish tradition has changed over time. In the Torah, the sanctuary was the innermost shrine of the Tabernacle, housing the Ark of the Covenant, where the Israelites communed with their God. It is called *Kodesh Ha-Kodashim*—literally, the “Holy of Holies.” Fittingly, *sanctuary* comes from a Latin root meaning not “safe” but “holy.”

According to the Talmud, the *Kodesh Ha-Kodashim* was a private chamber where no person ever set foot—save for one man, on one day of the year. On Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the *Kohen Gadol*, the High Priest, would enter the sanctuary and whisper the secret name of God.

But even that sanctuary could not remain a safe space forever. In the year 70, Roman battalions burned it to the ground, leaving a ruined platform above the Western Wall, the last vestige of the Temple compound.

The ultimate “safe space” in Jewish tradition had proved vulnerable.

A different kind of structure served Jewish communities in the wake of its destruction. Unlike the shrine in Jerusalem, these were not called “sanctuaries”; at first, they weren’t even considered particularly holy.

They were known as synagogues, from Greek words meaning “place of assembly.” In Hebrew, this becomes *Beit Knesset*.

Do you get the difference between a *sanctuary* and a *Beit Knesset*? The sanctuary was off-limits to all but one man, all days of the year save for one, and even then, to speak but one word—barely audibly.

Today's sanctuary is a true *Beit K'neset*. It is a house of assembly, a home for many voices. We rabbis and cantors are not High Priests. Our voices frame WRT's mission and our spiritual direction, but ours are not the only voices that matter here. We need *your* voices here.

Will this conversation provide a safe space for *you*?

If by “safe space,” you mean a place where divergent viewpoints are considered valid, welcome, and deserving of respect—absolutely. In this *Beit Kneset*, this house of assembly, this home of many voices, we will always make time to listen to dissenting opinions. That means if you wish to disagree with one another, or with us clergy, so long as you do so respectfully and in the spirit of Jewish debate, then our sanctuary will always be a safe space.

It just might not always be a *comfortable* space.

Truth be told, Judaism has never guaranteed comfort, especially not on Yom Kippur. Fasting, praying, refraining

from all physical pleasure—all these add up to a pretty uncomfortable day. (You can add “sermon length” to the list of afflictions.)

As for sermon *topics*, I want to state plainly that we clergy, taking our cue from centuries of Jewish practice, view our remarks as an opportunity to teach Torah and Jewish values, and to frame the important events of our time through a Jewish lens.

While never seeking to use the pulpit to advance partisan politics, you should expect that, in this *Beit Knesset*, we will continue to speak about how the Jewish tradition would have us respond to the pressing issues of our day.

We are bound to disagree from time to time. That’s Jewish! But we will never stop the conversation.

Here, we will speak about the environment, natural disaster, and the opportunities and threats wrought by human innovation and technology, because ethical stewardship of the

natural world begins in the first chapter of Genesis and continues throughout all of Jewish tradition.

We will talk about our commitment to Israel, especially in her 70th year of independence which we will celebrate this spring. We will continue to advocate for the right of all Israeli citizens to enjoy equal treatment under the law. And we will speak about our relationship with the Palestinians, because Judaism has never considered us responsible only for our fellow Jews.

We will talk about genocide, racism, women's issues, domestic abuse, inclusion of people who live with disabilities, and issues facing the LGBTQ community, because the Torah teaches time and again that we know the heart of the oppressed, having been oppressed ourselves in the land of Egypt.

We will talk about war, public safety, gun violence, global hunger, health care, and pandemic disease, because no *mitzvah* matters more than the preservation of life.

We will talk about wealth distribution and income inequality, because the Torah and the Prophets never shy away from addressing the complex relationships between people who have more and people who have less.

We will not be afraid to talk about Islamic terrorism, and we will not shy away from talking about Islamophobia, because Judaism and Jews do not exist in a vacuum—we exist in relationship with our neighbors, our allies, our enemies, and other faith traditions.

And, in this *Beit Knesset*, we will continue to talk about compassionate treatment of the world's most vulnerable, including immigrants and refugees, because no Jewish value finds more passionate expression in all our literature and history.

This is what it means to study Torah, to promote Judaism, and to live in sacred community. It means that we take a safe space and make it holy: a true sanctuary.

To that end, please join us Sunday morning for our annual community Sukkah build. I'll be on hand to schmooze with you, to hear your feedback, and to continue the conversation about today's sermon, and I would love to see you. The Sukkah itself will provide the ultimate emblem of the "big tent" of ideas and people that WRT always aspires to be.

Until then, I will *not* conclude by wishing you "an easy fast," as is traditional. I will, of course, wish you a *safe* fast, because Judaism says that life and health come first. But easy? No.

I will instead pray that the fast we undertake today will unite us in our shared discomfort, inspire us to lessen the discomfort of others, and bring us closer to the God in whom the innumerable voices of the human family become One.