

## Celebrating the Birthday of a Traumatized World

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I love birthdays. I welcome the opportunity to reach out to family, Temple members, rabbinic colleagues—all my friends—to wish them well. But what if the person “celebrating” a birthday has suffered a bereavement, is struggling with physical or mental illness, or has sustained a painful loss? My typical greeting—Happy birthday! *Mazal tov!* Have a great day!—would be inappropriate. Instead, I craft words to communicate that I am thinking of them and wishing them sweet moments on their birthday, holding their struggles alongside the joy of another year.

This evening, we have gathered to wish the whole world a happy birthday. We have so much to celebrate! We are gathered in person in greater numbers than has been possible since 2019—and, for the first time in three years, our service will be followed by our gala Rosh Hashanah reception. We may rejoice in the way that our congregation has weathered the pandemic, remaining vibrant as we faced challenges. We began Religious School with the largest Kindergarten class in recent memory! And that’s before we note individual causes for rejoicing, including *nisim b’chol yom*, everyday miracles—good health, loving family, the meaningful companionship of friends and community—which we may not take for granted as we once did.

Glad as we are to be gathered in the Sanctuary, though, you are dutifully wearing your masks. We who are barefaced and have rapid-tested to lead you thank you for protecting our health and your own—but still, those masks are prominent symbols of our traumatized world. That gala after services? Some will absent themselves; and others will remain masked, while perhaps sneaking a bite under the face covering. Most will welcome the opportunity to rip off the mask and greet one another face-to-face. Here, we won’t denigrate other people’s choices, but we have all experienced that kind of acrimony.

Our new security protocol is a response to the traumatized world in which we live. I never previously opened a Rosh Hashanah service by pointing out the emergency exits! These measures are prompted in part by an increase in violent antisemitism that many of us thought, and all of us prayed, would never come to America. But synagogues are hardly the only place where we may be concerned for safety. Harsh words, threats of violence, and the reality of violence are now constant fixtures of American life.

Many in this Sanctuary tonight are traumatized by a recent Supreme Court decision that has taken away their rights and threatens still more. Others tremble at

the future, concerned about what may become of America if children are taught that our nation is not exceptionally good. Americans seem to agree on exactly one thing: Our democracy is threatened—though we do not agree on either the cause or the solution.

So how do I, your rabbi, wish you, individually and collectively, a sweet new year in a traumatized world? You will recall that person whose birthday comes in the aftermath of the loss. I always begin my birthday greeting with acknowledgement of their difficult reality, so we start by confronting the harsh truth. But I won't stop there. I do always get around to blessings and hope in those difficult birthday greetings. Tonight, I will do that, mindful of the counsel of a powerful pastor from Chicago, Otis Moss, who urges us: "Face the tragedy, but don't give in to despair."<sup>i</sup>

In trauma, though, despair is a natural response. Late in the spring, Shelly Baron got my attention when an article circulated by the Union for Reform Judaism depicted Arkansas as a dystopian nightmare. Alisa Gold wrote about her transgender daughter: "Last year, my 15-year-old daughter, Eva, adopted at birth, was thrilled to discover through DNA testing that she had four biological siblings in Arkansas. Her siblings talked about all of the cool things they will do together when she visits them... Unfortunately, that visit won't be happening any time soon. Arkansas recently passed two anti-transgender laws that make it unsafe for her to go there."<sup>ii</sup> Gold went on to say that Arkansas law would permit a paramedic or emergency room personnel to refuse to save her daughter's life in the event of a catastrophic car accident, on the grounds that her daughter is transgender. She further charged that, if something went awry with her daughter's hormone therapy, no Arkansas doctor could legally respond.

Thankfully, Gold was wrong. I vehemently oppose the Arkansas laws she referenced. However, a raft of state and federal regulations require that emergency personnel treat everyone. Moreover, the ban on gender-affirming healthcare was and remains unenforceable, thanks to a federal court order.

When I brought the matter to the Union for Reform Judaism's attention, they publicly corrected the article.

I was irritated, but I do **not** blame the author. Anybody with a transgender child would be traumatized, and traumatized people often do not behave at their best. Young people with gender dysphoria are at an increased risk of suicide. Their parents are trying to save their lives. Laws that would criminalize life-saving treatment would traumatize any parent seeking the best for their child.

Even Moses behaves poorly in response to trauma.

Rabbi Shoshana Conover writes about an incident in the wilderness in the aftermath of the death of Moses's sister Miriam. The people have no water. For once, their complaints are justified! God instructs Moses to take his staff, to gather the people, to speak to a rock, and water will flow from the rock. Instead, Moses loses his temper, castigates the people, and smashes his staff on the rock. God provides the water but also punishes Moses. God charges that Moses has conveyed the impression that he, not God, has provided the water.

Rabbi Conover doesn't blame Moses, though. She asks us to examine the trauma Moses has experienced throughout his life, beginning in infancy, when placed in a basket in a raging river. Of course, his mother intends to save his life—but to an infant, that would feel like abandonment! He grows up in the palace, with an adoptive grandfather, Pharaoh, whom he comes to know as the man enslaving his own people. Then, when he leads the Israelites into freedom, they constantly rebel against his leadership. And now, his sister has died.

Rabbi Conover writes, “Many of our classic commentators look at [Moses's] actions...and ask, ‘What’s wrong with you?’ ...Yet the question ‘What’s wrong with you?’ rarely yields instructive answers. Even the question itself enforces a type of blame that rarely leads to healing. What might we learn if we instead pose a trauma-informed question: ‘What happened to you?’”<sup>iii</sup>

I am reminded of the time when Hillary Clinton, under the stress of the 2016 presidential campaign, infamously declared that then-candidate Donald Trump's supporters were “a basket of deplorables.” Secretary Clinton was essentially asking half of America, “What’s wrong with you?” instead of, “What happened to you?” Had she asked the right question, she would have learned about the perception, shared by tens of millions of Americans, that our nation has left them behind.

Everybody is traumatized. Everybody.

Living through a global pandemic has been traumatic—above all, for those who have lost loved ones, for people's whose own lives have been threatened or who are living with lingering effects, and for the health care providers who were all too often alone at a dying person's bedside.

People of color are afraid every day that their children may have an untoward encounter with police or with random armed racists.

Many white evangelicals are traumatized by what columnist Michael Gerson describes as “the disorienting flux of American ethical norms and the condescension of progressive elites[, which have] incited a defensive reaction among many conservative religious people—a belief that they are outsiders to their own land.”<sup>iv</sup>

People are scared to death of becoming pregnant, even if they desperately want a child, because they fear that their lives may be at risk without reproductive freedom.

Police officers are terrified that the routine execution of their critical duties will land them on the front page of the paper or in jail.

Married same-sex couples fear that their marriages will vanish, just as abortion rights did.

Oh, and Jewish people. ADL President Jonathan Greenblatt has recently issued a book ominously entitled, *It Could Happen Here*.

All these fears need not seem rational to all of us, nor are we well served by comparing their merit or severity. For example, that mom, Alisa Gold, could not rationally fear that an EMT would not rescue her daughter if they were hit by a tractor-trailer. Based on the way the Arkansas General Assembly would treat her child, though, we may understand and honor her concern.

Pastor Moss suggests jazz as a uniquely American response to what ails us. Jazz brings together disparate traditions, blending them without denigrating any of them. Instruments never intended to be played together nevertheless make beautiful music in harmony. The saxophone does not ask the piano to sound like a sax, and the piano doesn't ask the trombone to sound like a piano. Each has an equal right to bring their own voice to the ensemble, and each has an equal opportunity to solo. Jazz frequently means "the blues;" and Pastor Moss counsels, "We have to be holders of everyone's blues."<sup>v</sup>

If we will acknowledge that America is a traumatized nation in a traumatized world; if we will confess that our pain is not the only pain that exists, but that other people's pain is every bit as real, even if we don't understand it, and even if it conflicts with our own; if we will give everyone a chance to "solo;" and if we will work hard, together, to make harmony out of diversity—well, then, we might be ready to wish this troubled world a happy birthday.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Pastor Otis Moss, III, "Prophetic Preaching: Using Words to Make Change," Central Conference of American Rabbis webinar, August 25, 2022.

<sup>ii</sup> Alisa Gold, "Don't Sacrifice My Trans Child on the Altar of Political Opportunism," [Don't Sacrifice My Trans Child on the Altar of Political Opportunism | Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism \(rac.org\)](https://www.rac.org/blog/dont-sacrifice-my-trans-child-on-the-altar-of-political-opportunism).

<sup>iii</sup> Rabbi Shoshanah Conover, "A Lesson in Trauma-Informed Care," *The Social Justice Torah Commentary*, New York: CCAR Press, 2021, pp. 244-5.

<sup>iv</sup> [Opinion | The MAGA-evangelical alliance is a direct threat to liberal democracy - The Washington Post](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinion/the-maga-evangelical-alliance-is-a-direct-threat-to-liberal-democracy/2022/09/01/), September 1, 2022.

<sup>v</sup> Moss.