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Yom Kippur Morning

### With Torah in our Mouths

This is the 100<sup>th</sup> time Yom Kippur has been celebrated in this room. One hundred seasons of repentance and reflection, one hundred prayerful meditations on how to be good. No one remains who first sat here, pondering the meaning of life and death. And yet, on this Day of Days and Sabbath of Sabbaths, the generations collapse and we can almost stand side by side.

Yom Kippur is a great leveler. The traditions of fasting and wearing white serve in part to equalize all who take seriously the power of this day. “Our origin is dust, and so is our end” we are uncomfortably reminded. Though each of us is unique, we share a common mortal bond that erases the distinctions of race and religion and background and class.

Thus the quote etched in glass here to my right, one of the many biblical passages that grace our sanctuary windows. “Have we not all – all one father?” (Malachi 2:10, *sic* [repetition of “all”]), it says. It is a simple message, and profound, appealing to us both as a metaphor and as a basic truth. Spiritually, God is our parent in common, the creator of all life great and small. Mythically, all people trace their ancestry to the first person – whose name, Adam, simply means Human – so that, as the Rabbis teach, “one person will not say to another: My father is greater than yours.”<sup>1</sup> And even scientifically, the notion of a common evolutionary source reminds us that human beings, despite our many differences, are more alike than not.

Yet, most of us would surely blanch were I to say this ancient verse means “All Lives Matter.” The context of this particular phrase and its social position mark it as deceptive, chauvinistic, and crude. Yes, of course, we allow, all lives do matter – indeed, every life is likened to an entire world<sup>2</sup> – but that phrase, used as a refutation of “Black Lives Matter,” says much more than it seems to.

This simple example shows the power of words – in particular, the power of words used to subvert their own meaning. And it may come as a surprise that the original source of our quote, “Have we not all one father,” is equally subversive. In its original setting, the phrase is actually used not to promote equality but to undermine it. It was, in a way, the “all lives matter” of its time.

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<sup>1</sup> Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5 and Palestinian Talmud Sanhedrin 23a-23b.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

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Let me set the stage.

The quote comes from the book of Malachi, the last of the Bible's Prophetic works. Malachi was both prophet and priest, and he preached after the end of the Babylonian exile. He excoriated the priests of his day, who were responsible for the spiritual health of their community, charged not only with punctilious worship of God but also the moral education of the public. The priests of Malachi's age disregarded their sacred duty in order to profit off dishonesty and sloth. They permitted blemished sacrifices on the altar; but even worse, they allowed exploitation and fraud, "cheating laborers of their hire and subverting the cause of the widow, the orphan, and the stranger" (Mal. 3:5).

Throughout the book that bears his name, Malachi stands in contentious dialogue with these errant priests. He gives voice to their insipid protests: "How have we scorned your name?" (1:6) they ask in wonder, and, "How have we defiled you?" (1:7). "Oh what a bother!" (1:13) they sigh when faced with the weight of their duties, and "Why has God grown so weary?" (2:17).

These are the wayward priests who also say "Have we not all one father?" In their mouths, addressing Malachi priest-to-priest, it refers not to God or Adam as their common father but rather Aaron, the original ancestor of ancient Israel's priesthood. In their self-righteous indignation, it is as if they are saying, "Who are **you** to tell **us** what to do? We're just as priestly as you – since we descend from Aaron just as you do." Even their rhetorical question, "Did not one God create us?" (2:10) is a form of self-deification. "We can decide for ourselves," they seem to say, "between what is right and wrong. We don't need you to criticize or complain; God's on our side just as much as yours."

When Malachi himself says *וְלֹא-אֶחָד עָשָׂה*, "Did God not make [us] one?" (2:15), he **affirms** the basic principle of ultimate equality. But he exposes the priests as gaslighters who warp this bedrock truth for their own self-serving aims.

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In context, our quote is troublesome at best. But I don't fault our congregational founders for painting it on the wall. They sought to redeem the principle from those mouths that twisted it, to affirm their belief that, *no really, we are all one and the same*.

And we face today a very similar challenge. Just as "All Lives Matter" a few years ago deployed a good message for combative ends, we currently face another public debate over the use and misuse of loaded language. I speak of antisemitism, the

anti-Jewish bias that has filtered down even to our Hyde Park community. There are those who exploit antisemitism both locally and nationwide, ironically harming the Jewish community even as they purportedly seek to defend us. And we have at duty to stand up to them.

Now, it should go without saying, first and foremost, that antisemitism is a problem. Hostility toward Jews because they are Jews is endemic to most societies in which we have lived, though its fervency rises and falls from age to age. Periodic and explosive antisemitic incidents – such as the murders in Kansas City, Pittsburgh, DC, and elsewhere – keep the Jewish community ever on edge, wary as lower-grade threats like the graffiti we’ve seen in Hyde Park persistently remind us that some of our neighbors simply wish we weren’t here. The risk of physical harm is relatively small; but as I’ve heard from many of you, the rise in antisemitism in Chicago<sup>3</sup> and beyond<sup>4</sup> seeps into daily life and can taint previously cordial relations with neighbors, colleagues, and friends.

And let’s also be clear that there is a serious debate about what counts as antisemitic. Specifically, anti-Zionism, the opposition to Israel as a Jewish state, is to some an expression of principled Jewish values and to others is, at its root, a form of antisemitism. Thus on the one hand, some insist that the urge to single out Israel as a uniquely bad actor on a global stage shared the likes of Russia, Yemen, and Sudan is motivated by antisemitic bias. But on the other hand, since Israel receives unparalleled military aid from the United States, others contend that Israel’s special treatment is political, not parochial. Often the debate rages without either side really listening to the other.

It seems clear to me that some anti-Zionist stances are motivated or fueled by antisemitism, while others are not. But more importantly, it also seems clear to me that the greatest threat to American Jews comes not from the left but from the far right, where white supremacy and Christian nationalism insist categorically that Jews do not belong in the U.S. Antisemitism is like other forms of racism; we know it exists, we know it’s a problem, but people might disagree about whether this or that incident or act qualifies.

But regardless of these nuances and reasonable disputes, we face a bigger problem than defining antisemitism. I am confident that we bear witness today to a gross abuse of the genuinely painful experiences felt by many American Jews. When President Trump appeals to antisemitism as justification for deportation or travel bans,

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<sup>3</sup> According to a recent report of the Chicago Commission on Human Relations, Chicago saw a 25.5% decline in hate crimes but an increase of 58% in anti-Jewish hate crimes. See: <https://www.chicago.gov/content/dam/city/depts/cchr/general/2025%20CCHR%20Hate%20Crimes%20Report.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> The American Jewish Committee (AJC) reports startling increases in perceived antisemitism across the USA: <https://www.ajc.org/AntisemitismReport2024>.

he spits in the face of ancient Jewish and modern American values. His administration deviously exploits antisemitism to violate civil rights and smother free speech, hiding behind our vulnerability as a smokescreen for political moves against immigrants and universities. Antisemitism is real, and the Trump administration is peddling it.<sup>5</sup>

A brief review of some of the more impactful cases includes attacks on higher education across the country. Columbia University recently agreed to pay the federal government \$200 million after being slammed with a funding freeze of twice that size in the government's effort to, purportedly, "respond to [a] spike in antisemitism"<sup>6</sup> on campus. In contrast, Harvard is suing the Trump administration over its cancellation of more than \$2 billion in federal grants. Northwestern remains in the middle, with \$790 million in federal funds suspended and faculty urging its administration to fight.<sup>7</sup> These headline cases don't cover the numerous smaller acts of defunding and disengagement maintained under the guise of reforming American colleges, which this federal administration calls "hotbeds of radicalism."<sup>8</sup>

The safety of Jewish students is often invoked as the justification for these tactics, but it's a classic bait-and-switch. The true aims, and the impact so far, focus on limiting international student enrollment, dismantling DEI, and punishing administrators for not being sufficiently conservative. A cascade of university presidents have resigned, including from Columbia, Penn, Harvard, Cornell, Northwestern, and my alma mater, the University of Virginia, whose president, Jim Ryan, was instrumental in building a culture of diversity on that famously and historically white campus. True concern for Jews in Charlottesville, Virginia – as well as across the country – would focus on the chilling chants of "Jews will not replace us," not defunding Holocaust education and Jewish cultural programs, as this administration has recently done.<sup>9</sup>

As universities responded to campus protests against Israel's war in Gaza, many were caught in an impossible bind. Balancing free speech with student safety is never easy, and each university had its own successes and shortcomings. But the government's response to these legitimate protests has been to wage war on higher

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<sup>5</sup> Some of this language appeared in my editorial in the *Chicago Sun-Times*, "Don't use attacks on Jewish community to violate American principles" (June 9, 2025), available: <https://chicago.suntimes.com/other-views/2025/06/09/jewish-antisemitism-washington-colorado-attacks-gaza-palestinians-israel-rabbi-daniel-kirzane>.  
<sup>6</sup> <https://www.politico.com/news/2025/03/07/trump-federal-contract-freeze-columbia-00217781>

<sup>7</sup> <https://dailynorthwestern.com/2025/07/29/lateststories/lte-northwestern-faculty-group-opposes-dealmaking-with-lawless-trump-administration/>

<sup>8</sup> This is the phrasing of May Mailman, the senior political advisor understood to be largely responsible for the Trump administration's strategy with respect to American universities. See Ross Douthat's interview of her in "Interesting Times" (September 25, 2025), <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/09/25/opinion/trump-academia-victim-may-mailman.html>.

<sup>9</sup> <https://forward.com/culture/711925/neh-grant-termination-jewish-yiddish/>. Note that after defunding many small programs dedicated to Jewish life, history, and culture, the NEH announced a \$10.4 million grant to the conservative organization Tikvah. See: <https://www.jta.org/2025/09/17/united-states/neh-unprecedented-10m-grant-to-tikvah-has-some-jews-celebrating-and-others-crying-foul>.

education writ large, to train its anti-immigrant agenda on college kids, and to subsidize conservative cultural causes even at the expense of mainstream Jewish ones. To cry antisemitism and then dismantle higher education is fraud. And the Jewish community has rightly not remained silent.

Last April, a broad coalition of national Jewish organizations – including the Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist movements – issued a scathing rebuke. They wrote, in part:

We reject any policies or actions that foment or take advantage of antisemitism and pit communities against one another; and we unequivocally condemn the exploitation of our community's real concerns about antisemitism to undermine democratic norms and rights....

It is both possible and necessary to fight antisemitism – on campus, in our communities, and across the country – without abandoning the democratic values that have allowed Jews, and so many other vulnerable minorities, to thrive.<sup>10</sup>

This is where I stand, and where I believe our community stands as well. Of course we struggle against antisemitism and work for its dismantling. And of course we insist that Jews should be held to the same standards as everyone else and that Jewish students should be free from prejudice and harassment. But with the vigor of the ancient prophets, we also denounce the government's exploitation of our plight. We will not stand idly by as they sacrifice our safety on their ideological altar.

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I know many in this community work in academic environments where tough choices are being made every day. And whether we are employed by a university or just go to shul near one, the best tool most of us have is our words. When those who are in power are guilty of twisting language to their own purposes, we must stand as models who do the opposite, who teach and preach and lead and advise with the wisdom and conviction honed by our ancestors across the shores and through the centuries.

In ancient Israel, the priests were entrusted with moral education. In the book of Malachi, God says of the ideal priesthood, "I had with them a covenant of life and peace (הַחַיִּים וְהַשָּׁלוֹם)" (Mal. 2:5). In other words, God relied upon the priests to sustain Israel's spiritual health. What's more, תּוֹרַת אֱמֶת הָיְתָה בְּפִיהֶם, "A Torah of truth was in their mouths, and nothing perverse was on their lips. ... For the lips of the priests keep knowledge ...

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<sup>10</sup> <https://jewishpublicaffairs.org/press-release/jewishcommunalstatement/>

for they are messengers of the Eternal of hosts” (Mal. 2:6-7). Thus not only their hearts but also their tongues were devoted to sacred service. Good priests mean what they say, say what they mean, and mean to do right as often as they can.

We rightly demand the same of our leaders today, to uphold truth and defend peace, to speak with integrity and sincerity and to try to do what’s right. But this is not just a task for leadership. Or, to put it another way, all of us can exercise leadership in our own arenas. After all, the Torah calls us to be a “kingdom of priests” (Ex. 19:6) – every one of us has the power and the potential of these paradigmatic spiritual leaders.<sup>11</sup> Thus this morning’s Torah reading:

Surely, this Instruction which I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. ... No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it. ... Life and death I place before you, blessing and curse. Choose life that you may live” (Deut. 30:11, 14, 19).

Like Malachi’s vision of perfect priests, we have תורה אמת בפינו, the Torah of truth in our mouths. And like them, we stand as heirs to a covenant of life and peace if we use the power of our words to build a society of integrity and respect. Ours is the task to say with sincerity, *We do have all one father; we do share a mother in common; and we stand as equals in this world, no one made better than anyone else.* And ours is also the task to recognize when Jewish values and concerns are dragooned into the service of those who seek only to help themselves. The radical equality of Yom Kippur puts each of us on a level playing field – and it’s up to us to join the right team.

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Yom Kippur calls us to change. And the prophetic message of this day also calls us to be instruments of change in the society in which we live. The metaphor of God’s forgiveness depends on human action; as God says in the Book of Malachi, שובו אלי וְאֶשְׁכְּחָה אֶלְיֶכֶם, “Return to me, and I [then] will return to you” (Mal. 3:7).

So now’s the time to be on guard, to be sure that efforts to address antisemitism are really designed to help Jews. And when we see our own words twisted against us and the values we believe in, it’s up to us first and foremost to speak out. No one speaks with more credibility about antisemitism than we do, so this is our own very special responsibility in today’s landscape of political concerns.

Heeding our prophetic call, let us keep Torah ever in our mouths, continuing the work of our ancestors, from 100 years ago and a 1000 and beyond.

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<sup>11</sup> Malachi, too, acknowledges that all the people have a role to play to “remember the Torah of Moses” (Mal. 3:22).

Let us accept the mantle of spiritual leadership, finding proper paths to support the Jewish community without harming those of other faiths.

And may we commit ever to words of honesty and truth to bring parents and children,<sup>12</sup> teachers and students, neighbors and friends — all people in our nation and our world closer in life and in peace.

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<sup>12</sup> See Mal. 3:24.