

Erev Rosh Hashana Sermon 5784  
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The last big thing I did before the pandemic took hold was stand up in my childhood best friend's wedding. I have known my sweet Jon since I was 14. I still have his wallet sized senior photograph and the keychain he bought me when he went on a choir trip to San Francisco. I dogsat for his family's two golden retrievers for all of college, even though I am severely allergic to that breed. Jon met his future husband in his first year of college, and when Joe decided it was time to propose, he reached out to me to ask for Jon's hand. Jon even personally drove me back to St. Louis the day after his wedding because he wanted to spend more time with me after I had travelled half a continent to be with him. The man hadn't even been married for 24 hours yet and he was giving me a ride home an hour and a half away!! Standing up in his wedding was one of the great honors of my life, and a memory I held close to my heart as I watched New York City go dark in March of 2020.

I have not met many parents like Jon's parents. They love their only son and his husband with a fierceness. Jon is adopted, and it is so obvious how much Jon's parents wanted him and cherish him still. And in loving him, they love me. When Jon's dad's cancer came back in 2022, I flew out to be with his extended family to support them through it. Thankfully, he made a full recovery. I was so grateful that I could be part of the support team to get him and his family through such a difficult time, and they were grateful to have me there. We've all been close since I was a teenager, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

I am blessed to have friends who I can consider to be family this way. We should all be so lucky to have connections like this in our lives. However, there is something to this story that may be difficult to understand on its face. Jon's family is deeply conservative. His parents are devout conservative Christians, his father is a card-carrying NRA member, and in recent years they have become aligned with QAnon and all that goes with it. And despite all of this, they have never done anything but support their gay son, his husband, and their nonbinary best friend. We all have a fantastic relationship with one another, despite it seeming odd on its face.

This is not the first time I have been in such a situation. I grew up in Missouri, a state famously known for its old-school ideologies, and yet I have always been nothing but myself despite the controversy and frankly the danger that came with that choice. I was often the first gay person someone met, the first transgender person someone met, often even the first Jew someone met. I was friends with Catholics, Mormons, Muslims, Pentecostals, Evangelicals... you name the ideology, I have loved someone who holds it. Of course, there are accepting and loving people of all walks of life, and I have met many of those people. And even so, plenty of people lived in the duality. Many of my friends opposed gay marriage and still loved me. I had friends who thought I was going to hell for being Jewish, but still thought I was a good person. That is quite a difficult dichotomy to hold, but they held it, and we were able to make it work.

How is it possible to make sense of this cognitive dissonance? In an ever-dividing world my experience sounds like a story of the ancient past, even though I am still living it. As we go

further and further into our respective echo chambers, it becomes hard to associate with people who disagree with us. How can we be friends with someone who is so different than us on a fundamental level, who is hateful, who is immoral, who is cruel, who doesn't understand that *this way is the only way*? I hear people say that we cannot associate with people who think differently than us. That they don't deserve a platform. They should be cancelled.

It is important to understand that each of us are influenced by our surroundings, our upbringing, our religion or lack thereof, our personal story... we use this context as the lens for how we see the world. People who we may perceive as doing evil may think that they are working in the name of God, the very same God we are asking in these Days of Awe to inscribe and seal us in the book of life. We all want the same things for ourselves, goodness, mercy, sweetness, joy.

Why is it, if we all want the same things for ourselves, that we must hate people who disagree with us? The answer is simple: we are fearful of them, we are fearful of we do not know, and we are fearful of the consequences of the actions that these people are taking. Fear itself is the root of our division, fear itself is the root of our hatred. That is not to say that there is not reason to fear. As antisemitic rhetoric rises, especially here in Pittsburgh where we know the consequences of antisemitism all too well, we have good reason to fear! In a world where queer people like me are watching as governments are taking away our rights one by one, in a world where my life expectancy as a transgender person is 35 years, we have reason to fear. However, when a child comes to us afraid of the dark, what can we do to help them? We can shine a light. We can help them to see. To see is to understand. This does not only apply to children. To see someone different in our midst, is to understand them, at least a little. Visibility matters. Your visibility matters. Dividing ourselves in these echo chambers where everyone thinks the same, takes away from the opportunity to see and understand something different than ourselves.

The last decade or so has been incredibly difficult on us as Americans as we become further and further divided. We have self-segregated by party, by ideology, by religion. Reaching across the aisle is a tactic relegated to the distant past. This is not sustainable, nor is this the way to a brighter future. We cannot devolve into factions, as this cannot heal, it can only hurt. This sort of division is what brings down great nations. And I am not saying in any way, shape, or form, that hatred, abuse, or evil is okay or should be tolerated in any way. But perhaps instead of ignoring, we should be engaging.

Growing up in Missouri, a near permanent fixture of my life was the Westboro Baptist Church, a group known for its hatred of the LGBTQ+ community, who has protested countless funerals and events, and even proclaimed that 9/11 was divine punishment for Americans. Their church was four hours down Interstate 70 from where I grew up, and I saw them in my city protesting funerals, my high school's production of "The Laramie Project", and pride month events. As an openly gay and transgender Jew in Missouri, I spent a lot of time thinking about this group. I was the pinnacle of sin in their eyes, even though I was just a regular person to myself.

When I was in college, I went down the YouTube rabbit hole and discovered a Ted Talk given by a grandchild of the founder of the group named Megan Phelps-Roper. In this talk, she explains what it was like to be a member of Westboro for 25 years, and why she left. She tells of how she started going to protests at five years old, holding signs like “Gays are worthy of death” and “God Hates Jews” in her tiny fist. She tells that she wanted to spread Westboro’s doctrine more widely, and so joined Twitter in 2009. At first, she was met with the same rage and hostility she had been facing at protests since she was a child. But strangely enough, a pattern began to emerge that she didn’t expect. Someone would interact with her on her Twitter profile with rage, she would respond with bible verses and smiley faces, and suddenly, they were having civil, curious conversation. People she spoke with on Twitter began to visit her at protests. They had heated but friendly conversation. Slowly, Megan and her Twitter sparring partners began to see each other as human beings, and thus they treated each other with respect, even though Megan held genuinely dangerous points of view. These internet strangers started pointing out inconsistencies in Westboro doctrine that planted seeds of doubt in Megan, causing her to leave at 25. She realized that the other side was not full of demonic evil as she had been so told. She realized that *she* was a mortal, flawed human being, just like everyone else, and she could no longer justify her position.

The Westboro Baptist Church does not see itself as the bad guy. Its members do not see themselves as bad people. This church, and everyone else on this blue marble we call Earth, believes that they are doing the right thing for the world, whatever doctrine they hold. Megan says in her TED talk “We write off half the country as out-of-touch liberal elites or racist misogynist bullies. No nuance, no complexity, no humanity. Even when someone does call for empathy and understanding for the other side, the conversation nearly always devolves into a debate about *who* deserves more empathy... we routinely refuse to acknowledge the flaws in our positions or the merits in our opponent’s. It’s hard because... that sense of certainty that ours is the right side is so seductive.”

We cannot allow ourselves to be tricked into this thinking.

Megan concludes her TED talk with a gift: four things that the people who engaged with her did differently which resulted in making actual dialogue possible. And I’d like to regift it to you all for the new year, so I’ll share them with you now.

First, don’t assume bad intent. Remember that everyone is the hero of their own story. Assume everyone is likely coming into this with neutral or good intent. Assuming that they are approaching the conversation maliciously cuts us off from understanding the other person’s perspective. They are a human being. Treat them like one.

Second, ask questions. By asking someone with whom you disagree a question, you can help yourself to understand where the other side is coming from. It also helps the other person know that they are being heard. It allows the other party to ask *you* questions. Questions facilitate dialogue. Ask them.

Third: stay calm. This is incredibly difficult, and takes a lot of patience and practice to perfect. Exploding at another person will not create affective change. The only thing it will do is end a conversation prematurely and make both parties angry. You are allowed to politely excuse yourself before you explode. You can lighten the mood with a joke. This is all totally kosher. Being cool and collected in tense situations is like wielding a superpower. Don't let anger be your kryptonite.

Lastly: make the argument. You cannot assume that the value of your position is obvious or self-evident. If your argument was so obvious, everyone would hold your position. I so often hear people with non-normative experiences say things like "they should just google it" or "I shouldn't have to perform emotional labor." And to a certain extent, they're right. When push comes to shove, you should be your first priority, and you have every right to protect your peace. And at the same time, the people who we are saying should just google it either will not do such a thing, or find themselves on a part of the internet with bad information, hostile language, or views that are incorrect but affirming to their personal belief. Nothing can beat a human conversation. Nothing can beat learning about something new with someone you trust and respect. So explain your side. Make your case. Megan says so eloquently in this talk "As difficult as it can be, reaching out to someone we disagree with is an option that is available to all of us."

I understand that this is all a big ask. I get that this is a deeply unpopular thing to do in the current landscape. I know that this is something that you may be dreading to hear. But we need to hear it. We cannot let hate and fear divide us. We cannot continue to isolate from one another, we cannot fall into echo chambers that deafen us to the outside world. United we stand, divided we fall. It's not just a political motto. It's the truth. And the division we are facing can be fixed if we are willing to take on the work. Tikkun Olam, repairing the world, is a group effort, and though we are not obligated to complete the work, we cannot refrain from partaking in it. So I'll continue connecting with loved ones with whom I fundamentally disagree. In doing so, I hope I am planting the seeds of understanding. Shana tovah.