



## Hello Temple Sinai,

On Yom Kippur, we read from the book of Deuteronomy, “I am setting before you this day a blessing and a curse.” The original meaning is that we need to choose one or the other, but these past weeks, it has often felt like the two come together like two oceans and our choice is how navigate the straits.

The election has elicited a lot of feelings from all of us, regardless of our political persuasions. The shifting count was nerve-wracking. The polls were wrong again, and while some of us were disappointed with the outcome, many of us – including many Republicans - felt a profound sense of relief, one that brought me to tears. While some of that is about specific policies, much of it is about tone and civility. It turns out that there is a great sense of safety in the norms of civil discourse. That is a particularly important lesson for people like me who as a young activist had little patience for being told to be polite when justice was the issue. That was the argument of conservatives; it often went along with the argument that staying in the closet was good, that staying ‘in your place’ was good. While I still think that there are times for outrage, the past few years have taught me the dangers of constant outrage, and reminded many of us of the importance of what the rabbis called:

דרך ארץ

*Derech erez*

It translates as “the way of the world”, or “the way things work,” but it means the importance of basic civility in our society. It tells us to say hello to others even if they don’t say hello to us, and to approach interactions with a sense of empathy and kindness. In short, it means, ‘be nice’ because the world works better when we are. (Click [HERE](#) for a short article with more information.)

The rabbis had lived through political upheavals: charismatic leaders that ended badly, kind mystical rulers that ended badly, and brutal authoritarians that ended badly. Like most norms, *Derech Eretz* often includes those things that are commendable to do but not legally mandatory, like manners. Jewish tradition, while for free and open discourse, balances that with a strong sense of responsibility for the power of our words. The rabbis heavily emphasize the need to be careful and caring with our words, to speak only what is true, and to avoid

trafficking in gossip and rumors. As I shared on Yom Kippur, we are taught that Jerusalem was destroyed because someone who was angry about a party invitation complained publicly and badmouthed the host. Words have power and can create a sense of danger or a sense of safety.

So many, but not all, of us felt a renewed sense of safety after the election, for a wide range of reasons. Here, on the heels of that relief, comes galloping in the increasingly concerning rhetoric about the transition, and the precipitous rise in cases of COVID-19, including a significant increase in Vermont where we have excellent, thoughtful leadership. We are now requiring quarantine for anyone that enters from out of state, and gatherings of more than 10 people inside *or outside* are discouraged. I had just made our plans for Hanukkah that included several evenings lighting a menorah *in person* outside at the temple. We will need to adjust our plans. It is a constriction when what we grave is an opening.

As I feel pulled back and forth by tides relief and worry, by blessings and curses, and as my new adorable puppy rampages through the house, I keep thinking of the well-known Israeli song *Al Kol Eileh – For all these things....* Here is a [video of a Koolulam massive singalong of the song](#). The song chorus says:

*For all these things, all these things,  
God, may it all be kept for the good.  
For the honey and the bee sting,  
For the bitter and for the sweet.*

We are blessed to live in interesting times. So were our ancestors. This song reminds us of what they knew so well, that we always live amidst blessings and curses, and it is our choice to ***hold onto the beauty of being alive, to appreciate the blessings even amidst the curses***. It is our duty to keep the ways of *derech erez* even when those around me don't. May we honor their memory by appreciating the blessings of being alive even as we fight against the curses, and to control the only thing we can: our behavior and our personal sense of integrity and goodness.

Ken y'hi ratzon,

David

P.S. **Our services this Shabbat** will be our usual services at the usual times. The Torah Portion is [Chayei Sarah](#).

P.P.S. If you haven't given to our **annual appeal**, *please do*. Our goal is 100% participation. If you have given, thank you.