

The Sanctity of Sacred Texts
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Rosh Hashanah 5783/2022

Many of you know that I love to read. I love to read books, and talk about books, and then research and talk about which books I want to read next. At least once a month my sister and I will text each other the link to a NYTimes Book review or a post from our favorite bookstagram account with the caption “Ahhh there is so much to read!” I often say that books are my love language because I find so much meaning in recommending or gifting a book I have loved and in receiving books people think I will enjoy.

Over the past few years I have been increasingly distraught to see the outrageous number of book bans and challenges. Last year “the American Library Association’s Office for Intellectual Freedom tracked 729 challenges to library, school, and university materials and services, resulting in more than 1,597 individual book challenges or removals in 2021.”¹ Just last month, students in Kelleher TX returned to their classrooms to find that their school board had been so overwhelmed by book challenges that they had simply removed more than 40 challenged books, including the Bible and Anne Frank’s diary, pending further review.² To make sure we are on the same page, let me pause to clarify a few terms. “Banned” means a book was removed from a library. “Challenged” means that someone filed a formal complaint requesting a book’s removal. “Censored” means someone removed or altered part of a book, like crossing out a curse or coloring over an illustration.³

¹ <https://www.ala.org/news/press-releases/2022/05/organizations-join-ala-unite-against-book-bans>

² <https://www.npr.org/2022/08/18/1117708153/bible-anne-frank-books-banned-texas-school-district>

³ <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/where-are-the-jews-on-the-banned-books-list>

Some of these recent book bans have hit particularly close to home for the Jewish community. In January of this year, a school board in McKinn County, Tennessee banned the Pulitzer-Prize-winning graphic novel *Maus* from the district's Holocaust curriculum. For those of you who have not read it - and I hope you will read it soon! - *Maus* is based on the true story of the author's parents, and depicts Jews as mice and Nazis as cats. The board ostensibly voted to ban the book because of vulgar language and the depiction of a nude character.⁴ I say "ostensibly" because that's obviously not the reason the book was banned.

First of all, I've seen naked cats and mice in pretty much every childrens' book I've ever read so that cannot possibly be the real problem. Secondly, the majority of journalists, book critics, and historians who watched or attended the board meeting agreed that the "real" reason for the ban was that the school board was just plain uncomfortable with the way the Nazis were portrayed. After reading the minutes of the school board meeting, author Art Spiegelman said board members seemed to object to the graphic nature of the events in the book, as if they were asking, "Why can't they teach a nicer Holocaust?" To which he responded, "This is disturbing imagery, But you know what? It's disturbing history."⁵

It would indeed be very difficult to teach anything truthful about the Holocaust without touching on violence or hatred. As one book review points out, "No one has yet figured out how to depict the Holocaust without ugliness, for the very obvious reason

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/27/us/maus-banned-holocaust-tennessee.html>

⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/27/us/maus-banned-holocaust-tennessee.html>

that it was one of the greatest crimes in human history.”⁶ But people often don’t want to teach truthful Holocaust history because they are uncomfortable with how many people were complicit in the atrocities, and how that might relate to our own complicity in modern day violence. For this reason, *Maus* is one among many Holocaust books to be banned because they are considered too graphic or violent.

It should not go unmentioned that the Nazis themselves banned Jewish books with “un-German sentiments” beginning in 1933, mostly in universities and schools.⁷ Banning a book about Nazis because of discomfort that the Nazis are portrayed too negatively is the pinnacle of ignorance and it cannot be tolerated. How would we feel if our very own Rena Finder saw her book removed from libraries because she tells the truth about the tragic disappearance of her father and violent death of her young cousin? We would, I expect, be outraged. The removal of accurate books from Holocaust curricula erases the important truths about the past and leaves room for atrocities to be perpetrated again. If we do not read and learn from **accurate** history, we will be doomed to repeat it.

Book Bans are obviously a Jewish issue when schools or libraries ban Holocaust books that portray the truth about genocide. Book Bans are also a Jewish issue when anti-Zionists object to books about our homeland, like when local author Hayley Neil saw her book challenged and/or banned by anti-Zionist and anti-Semitic library patrons

⁶ <https://www.theatlantic.com/books/archive/2022/02/banned-books-list-to-kill-a-mockingbird-maus/621428/>

⁷ <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/columns-and-blogs/soapbox/article/88746-book-bans-and-antisemitism-go-hand-in-hand.html>

who objected to the fact that the book was set in Israel.⁸ Most of all, Book Bans are a Jewish issue because we are People of the Book!

Sure, we have a couple sections of uncomfortable Torah that we read **(voices) really quietly** or **(voices) super-fast** so that we don't accidentally invite the Evil Eye to curse us, but we still read those sections! We take this reading for granted because that is the way we've always done it, but it is actually quite remarkable that we read the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, or of Shimon and Levi massacring the people of Shechem, or all the various rebellions of the Israelites in the desert. Last year Reverend Debbie Clark was scheduled to teach a Torah Yoga session during the week of *Parashat Korach*, the story of the violent rebellion against Moses that ends with the rebels swallowed up into a fiery pit. It is violent and traumatic and many parts of it are deeply theologically uncomfortable. As we were discussing the *parsha*, Rev. Clark told me "this is one thing I love about teaching yoga in your community. In my tradition we just don't read this part of the text very often, but you read every part of the holy text, even the uncomfortable pieces."

We sure do! Look at what we just read today! On a day celebrating the new year and the renewal of creation, we read a story about a near-miss violent death that could have ended the story of our people before it even started. **Why?!** Why is this what we read today? First there is the *pshat*, the straightforward meaning of the text. The ram who is sacrificed in place of Isaac is symbolically connected to the shofar we sound on. Second is the *drash*, the deeper meaning of the story. The Akeidah shows us how

⁸ <https://www.kveller.com/this-moving-tale-about-an-israel-youth-trip-sparked-outrage-before-it-even-came-out/>

Abraham and Sarah lived out the words, “chadeish yameinu k’kedem,” renew us so we can begin again, and again, and again, even when the world seems set against us.

Abraham and Sarah almost didn’t make it as the progenitors of our religion. Isaac wasn’t born until they were 90 and 100 respectively. Third, the Akeidah demonstrates that the good things in the world will not be created through violence. God takes Abraham and Isaac on a long three day journey to demonstrate to them and to their neighbors that although Abraham is willing to give up everything, this God and this new religion do NOT demand violent sacrifice. As we start each new year we confront this viscerally chaotic origin story again and again to remind ourselves of the preciousness of life. Imagine if we didn’t read this story, didn’t grapple with its complexities, and didn’t learn important lessons from it. Maybe our Torah reading this morning would be more pleasant, but we would be missing out on valuable insight and reflection about some of the more difficult parts of life. The Akeidah is one of many challenging stories that we not only read, but revere.

We also revere texts that are graphic in a different way. In the time of the Talmud, the rabbis were debating which books, in addition to Torah, were part of the sacred canon and which were not. Most of the rabbis were adamant that *Shir haShirim*, the Song of Songs, was a lovely poem but was absolutely not sacred literature because it contains too much sexually explicit content. Then Rabbi Akiva, the greatest of all sages, came into the conversation. He is considered the premiere scholar of the Talmudic generation, the great sage with wisdom and direct access to the divine. Whenever Rabbi Akiva enters the room during a Talmudic argument, you know that he is going to settle the dispute and that his opinion is considered correct. So Rabbi Akiva enters the argument and says that *Shir haShirim* is *Kodesh haKodashim*, Song of Songs is the

holiest of all holy texts. This text, more than any other, embodies the tumultuous and passionate relationship between God and Israel.⁹ We cannot leave it out of our sacred canon just because it has some explicit body talk!

All of this is to say, we Jews do not shy away from stories that make us uncomfortable, whether they are violent or sexual or just plain strange. The Akeidah and the Song of Songs and so many other texts reflect the truth that we experience every day: life is violent, messy, joyful, confusing, chaotic, and weird. Our stories are what make us who we are. We wouldn't learn anything from straightforward or comfortable stories! Stories are tools for understanding complex issues and our sacred text is our people's particular history of facing life's challenges. It shows us how we strive to relate to God and others. It shows us how our ancestors have succeeded and failed yet always maintained their relationship with God. Without the role models and narratives of our sacred text we would be adrift. Similarly, limiting young people's access to books does not protect them from life's complex and challenging issues, it simply deprives them of constructive role models and closes their ears to differing voices.¹⁰

Finally, our tradition, our story of this very day, teaches us that words are holy. Today we celebrate the birthday of the world, and do we all remember how the world was created?

בְּרֵאשִׁית, בְּרָא הִי, אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם, וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ - וַיֹּאמֶר הִי, יְהִי אֹר; וַיְהִי-אֹר

⁹ Mishnah Yadayim 3:5

¹⁰ <https://uniteagainstbookbans.org/toolkit/>

“In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth, God **said** “let there be light” and there was light.”¹¹ God **spoke** to create the world. We celebrate that speech in the first sentences of the Torah, and we remember them every day when we say “Baruch she-Amar v haya ha-olam, blessed is the one who **spoke** and the world was created.”

The most significant action of all of existence was speech. God spoke these great words of loving kindness that brought us into being. God created the universe with words, and we as people who are created in God’s image also have the great power and great responsibility of using words to share our stories and our ideas. Our sacred text forms the foundation of three major world religions and the source of inspiration for much of the western canon. You could possibly even argue that some of the country’s most controversial or banned books address the very same issues we see in our sacred text. Anyone could argue, for example, that Harry Potter has a very similar arc to the story of Moses - the wizard hero, raised outside of his own culture, comes back to redeem everyone from the generations-old bad-guy.

Of course Jews and the Jewish community are not the only people to be disproportionately affected by book bans. This past year, five of the top ten most challenged books were challenged or banned because of their LGBTQ content.¹² Two more of the top ten were challenged or banned based on their anti-racist content, as in, people objected to these books because the books condemned racism.¹³ It is our responsibility as Jews, as people who believe in the sacred power of words, to protect

¹¹ Genesis 1:1 & 1:3

¹² <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/top10>

¹³ <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/top10>

our right and the rights of others to tell their stories. Each time we hear a story it is a new experience, because we are new people. We must tell the stories of our own past over and over again so that we can continue to appreciate them, continue to deepen our understanding of who we are, and shape the future we want. And we must support others in telling their stories so they can do the same and because a diversity of books opens everyone's ears to new voices who we don't have the privilege to encounter in our everyday lives, thus ensuring our minds are likewise open to a diversity of opinions.

On August 11 I finished the first draft of this sermon and showed it to a few colleagues for editing. The next day, August 12, someone stabbed Salman Rushdie at a public event in New York. Rushdie is the author of 12 novels and is perhaps most famous for "The Satanic Verses," which earned him the ire of many around the globe. In 1989 Ayatollah Khomeini issued a fatwa against him, saying any Muslim who came in contact with Rushdie ought to kill him. As a result, Rushdie lived in hiding for over a decade. The author who translated "Satanic Verses" into Japanese was murdered, and there were attempts on the lives of the Italian translator and Norwegian publisher. For the last several years Rushdie had been living more openly in New York, before last month's religiously motivated attack.

Anyone whose faith cannot withstand respectful, well written, thoughtful critique, has no faith at all. To be clear, I say this about fanatics and fundamentalists in any religion, including our own. When we gather here to pray and read and study together as Jews, all respectful questions are welcome. You are not required to believe anything that the Torah says, or anything that I say. On the contrary, I encourage you to read religious texts that move you and then read texts from scientists and from atheists, read political ideas from the party you support and from the party that you don't. If the

only way we could support our beliefs is by ignoring and destroying the words of others, our beliefs would have no substance, no foundation, and no value.

As Jews we know and revere the power of words. “Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me” is not a Jewish nursery rhyme. We believe that words have power to create the entire world. With this knowledge comes a responsibility to ensure everyone has access to texts that reflect and support and guide them through their experiences of the world. This knowledge, more than anything, charges us as Jews to protect books and stories everywhere.

Some people want to ban us or our children from reading books, **ever**. My colleague Rabbi Mimi Micner gave me a very wise piece of advice, she said that our sermons and conversations cannot always end with words of comfort. There are some problems in the world right now with which we simply cannot grow comfortable. I think book bans fall into that category. But, Rabbi Micner told me, we have to end our conversations with ideas about what to do with our discomfort.

Thankfully, there are many people and organizations working tirelessly to ensure our access to free information. The Brooklyn public library recently announced an initiative called Books Unbanned, which grants free electronic library cards to access to any teen in the country and makes certain popularly challenged books “always available.”¹⁴ Every year, the American Library Association celebrates Banned Books Week during the last week of September, which happens to be **last week**.¹⁵ In addition to celebrating our High Holy days and reading the tough parts of our sacred text, I

¹⁴ <https://www.theverge.com/2022/4/25/23041346/brooklyn-library-free-digital-cards-ebook-collection-banned-books>

¹⁵ Check website for 2022 dates <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/banned>

celebrated Banned Books Week by reading *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, one of this year's top ten most challenged books. I'm also renewing my membership in the Friends of the Framingham Library, who have a specific initiative to purchase books pertaining to racial injustice.¹⁶ I invite you to join me in any and all efforts to support free access to books, by reading banned books, financially supporting your local library, or by donating books and financially supporting one of the many organizations combating book bans. I will publish a list of these and other organizations and I urge us all to celebrate our love for sacred text by reading about, speaking about, and supporting efforts to keep books in the hands of us and our children. I look forward to meeting again in a few weeks to celebrate Simchat Torah, the celebration of our own sacred text.

¹⁶ <https://framinghamlibrary.org/support-the-library/friends-of-the-library>

