MAY GOD BLESS AND KEEP THE CZAR… FAR AWAY FROM US
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What a stranger week this has been to be a Jew in the world, particularly as I am a Jew with American citizenship and voting rights.

What first came to mind when I heard the American President, speaking about American Jews from the Oval Office declare, "If you vote for a Democrat, you're being disloyal to Jewish people and very disloyal to Israel." What first came to mind was the line from Fiddler On The Roof, in the midst of the song Tradition, the villagers go to the rabbi and ask, Rabbi is there a blessing for the Czar?" The rabbi replies, "May God bless and keep the Czar… far away from us."

That's what I was feeling, I shared it on social media, I don't want to talk about Donald Trump, and I would prefer that he not talk about me and our people.

A congregant wrote me on this subject this week, saying that he was not sure his politics aligned with those of our synagogue. This synagogue doesn't have politics, at least not the kind he was referring to. But we do have values and as your rabbi my values shape my opinions, s they do yours I am sure. I answered him that I did not see it as my job to change his mind, rather as a rabbi and a teacher, my calling is to challenge his mind and yours, only you can change your own mind.

So tonight, I am not going to talk about President Trump, or the two congresswomen who have similarly been Jew bating, using religion to divide us rather than as our

scripture commands to bring us together, Vahavtah l'reyecha camocha, love your neighbor as yourself.

Instead I want to share a history lesson, because history as Mark Twain famously observed while it doesn't repeat itself it sometimes rhymes and I hear a rhyme of history in this week's events and it concerns me.

Let me start with a question, all good lessons start with a question: When did modern Jewish history begin?

France, 1806. Napoleon convened the Grand Sanhedrin, the assembly of Jewish notables in France. He asked them a series of questions about their Jewish identity.

The biggest question was this one.

Do the Jews born in France, and treated by the law as French citizens, acknowledge France as their country? Are they bound to defend it? Are they bound to obey the laws and follow the directions of the civil code?

The Jews answered “yes” to that question. With that affirmative answer, the Jews became citizens of France. Not only France; they showed that they could become citizens of all of the newly-emerging states in which they found themselves.

Why is the United States of America unique? and I exclude Canada from this history lesson because int his context Canada came later. Why is the United States of America unique?

Because it was the first country in the world in which Jews did not have to ask for, beg for, or bargain for their rights as citizens.

In 1915, US Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis wrote these words — about how Jews could simultaneously be proud Zionists and proud Americans.

The Jewish spirit, the product of our religion and experiences, is essentially modern and essentially American. Not since the destruction of the Temple have the Jews in spirit and in ideals been so fully in harmony with the noblest aspirations of the county in which they lived…Let no American imagine that Zionism is inconsistent with patriotism. Multiple loyalties are objectionable only if they are inconsistent.

Louis Brandeis was not talking about political loyalty. He was talking about emotional loyalties.

The accusation of disloyalty has a long history in the Jewish experience. Those who have hated Jews, from the biblical stories of Egypt onwards, have catalyzed their nefarious plans by declaring the disloyalty of Jews to whatever country they inhabit. In Germany, despite having fought for the country in World War I, Jews were suddenly treated like a cabal of traitorous outsiders. That trope is one of the most reliable ways to mobilize anti-Jewish sentiment. In this paranoid, delusional world, Jews are not native — they are interlopers and disloyal ones at that.

Lets go back to France, 80 years after Nepolian.

The same nation that gave Jews their rights conspired to take them away.

Alfred Dreyfus was accused of treason – of gross disloyalty to France. There were crowds in the streets, screaming: “Death to the Jews!”

A journalist was in Paris to cover the Dreyfus trial. He heard the screams of the mobs. He concluded that there was no future for the Jew of Europe, because the Jews would always be considered a foreign element.

That journalist was Theodor Herzl.

Zionism as a political movement emerged from our desire — to quote Blanche Dubois in “A Streetcar Named Desire” — “to not have to rely on the kindness of strangers.”

What changed in those 80 years? Jews assimilated into French society, they rose in power and influence, Dreyfus was a decorated French Army Officer. But a new pharaoh emerged that did not know Joseph as our Torah echoes in the Passover Haggadah. He saw the accumulation of Jewish power and influence as a threat, just as the biblical pharaoh did and questioned their true loyalty to the crown.

The result was not immediately the rise of Zionism and the creation of the Jewish state. What followed was 40+ years of infighting amongst the Jews over the idea of Zionism, should we have a state, should we remain citizens of the countries we were in. Germany and Poland the two greatest Jewish communities of the age were so divided. American Jews were divided, remember Chaim Potack's The Chosen, orthodox Danny who's father the

great hassid sees the creation of the Jewish state by Zionists not God as an affront to Judaism and Reuben who ships guns to Palestine and has not time or patience for the myopathy of the shetl.

When a president or a congressman/woman chooses to focus on the Jewish people we should be warry not flattered, we would be wise to keep the blessing upon the Czar in our thoughts.

What would I like to have heard from a US president when speaking of the Jewish people? I will take the words that President Washington addressed to the Jews of Newport — August 21, 1790:

For happily the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance requires only that they who live under its protection

should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support… May the children of the Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other Inhabitants; while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and figtree, and there shall be none to make him afraid. May the father of all mercies scatter light and not darkness in our paths, and make us all in our several vocations useful here, and in his own due time and way everlastingly happy.

And to what should Jews be loyal?

To the words of this week's Torah portion.

To the God "who shows no favor and takes no bribe, but upholds the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and befriends the stranger, providing him with food and

clothing. You too must befriend the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." (Deut. 10: 18-19)

That is Judaism.

This sermon draws heavily from an articles by Rabbi Jeff Salkin and Rabbi David Wolpe