Dear Friends,

I delivered the sermon below on Friday night, before Saturday's attempted assassination of former President Trump. For the last decade or so, I have given countless sermons about the importance of pluralism, listening to differing points of view, and treating everyone with dignity and respect. I have done so because, sadly, I have felt for a long time that something like what happened on Saturday was inevitable in our toxic, rage-filled political environment. Today, with great urgency, I renew my call for all TBE congregants to do our part to reduce the political tension and rancor in our country. My hope is that the 10 Commandments for Tense Political Times I outline below can guide us on that path.

L'shalom,
Rabbi Stoller

10 Commandments for Tense Political Times
Rabbi A. Brian Stoller
Parashat Chukat 5784 / July 12, 2024

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I've given a lot of thought in recent weeks to what I want to say tonight. I don't particularly want to give this sermon, but I feel it's my responsibility as a community leader.

It's campaign season. With the first party convention beginning on Monday, I want to talk about the challenge of navigating the months and the years ahead.

First, I want to validate that we have people in our congregation who support Biden, and we have people in our congregation who support Trump, and we have people who support neither.

And I want to say that I love you and care about you, and I'm here for you no matter what your politics are and no matter who you vote for. As far as I'm concerned, we are all smart, responsible adults, and we should each support whomever we think is best for the country. Period.

My sermon tonight is not about the candidates or their policies or anything else about them. It's about *us*, and our well-being, and the well-being of our congregational family.

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I begin with something we all know: There is a reasonable chance that former President Trump will be elected in November. If you like him, you'll be happy; if you don't like him, you'll be upset. So be it.

My concern is how we in this congregation will behave toward each other during the next four months—and over the next four years.

I raise this because I remember how it was last time. We all do.

Whomever you support, I think we can all agree that the environment during those years was, well, tense.

Almost every interaction was emotionally charged. We walked on eggshells around our colleagues, our friends, and our family alike.

Even when we weren't talking about politics at all, it felt like nearly every single thing in life was political. We approached every person we met with anxiety and suspicion: Are they a Trump supporter? Are they going to judge me or jump down my throat if I say the wrong thing?

We were too scared to come out and ask it straight up, so we tiptoed around it ever so gingerly to try and sus them out. And then once we got a clear enough indication, we either breathed a sigh of relief and let our guard down, or we held our breath in the hope that we could make it to the end of the conversation without some kind of blow up.

Trump loomed so large in our lives that we gave him power over who we would talk to, where we would go, who we would be friends with. How many friendships and families fractured or fell apart over him? Too many.

And that's on *us*. There's no reason he should have that power, except that we *gave* it to him. We're the ones who brought him into our relationships, and our workplaces, and our synagogues.

Now, the country may very well elect Donald Trump again. And whether that makes you happy or upset, one thing is for sure: We all need to be kinder and more respectful to each other than we were last time around.

Because I don't want to live like that again—do you? I don't want to feel that all-consuming angst, the combustible charge in the air, like every day is a powder keg that can explode in your face with one false move.

I don't want any more friendships or families to crumble, and I don't want this congregation to experience strain or stress because of who the president is. Our temple is too important to our individual and collective well-being to let that happen.

So, my purpose tonight is to begin preparing us to remain a strong, healthy, vibrant, caring community regardless of who wins the election. To do that, I want to outline 10 principles that I think we should live by—10 Commandments for Tense Political Times:

1. A person is more than who they vote for. Our sages teach that each individual human being is like a whole world, infinitely complex, mysterious, and beautiful. One of our cardinal sins in recent years has been to deny people their humanity by reducing them to a simple binary: Trump supporter or Trump opponent. Instead, we must regard every person *holistically*, just as we surely want them to do for us.

2. Treat every person with dignity and respect. As the poem in our prayer book says, "if there had ever been another like me, there would have been no need for me to exist." Every human being is unique and, in a cosmic sense, *needed* in the world. We should value and affirm every person for who they are, a beloved creature of God. This duty is absolute; it is not conditioned on their political views.

3. Do not make everything political. In recent years, we have allowed politics to conquer nearly every sphere of life. Worse, we have made politics the primary lens through which we view the world and other people. This is modern idolatry. We must remember to give politics its proper place, but not an outsized place. It is not the totality of life, and it does not underlie every human act or thought.

4. Friendship and family are more important than politics. Ben Sirach wrote, "a good friend is like a secure shelter / whoever finds one has found a treasure." Do not ever give a politician the power to disrupt your friendships or your family dynamics. That's just dumb. And you'll regret it.

5. Assume good intentions. Most people are good. Generally speaking, they want their families and their communities and the world to flourish, even if they think differently than we do about how to get there. My guess is that this is true of 95 percent or more of the people you know and will meet in your life. If we keep that in mind, we can relate to people with curiosity and interest rather than with suspicion and fear.

6. The synagogue's mission is bigger than politics. Our temple brings together people who are committed to the core values of Judaism: Torah (Jewish learning), *Avodah* (spiritual practice), *G'milut Chasadim* (acts of kindness), *K'hillah* (community), and Israel. These are the things that unite us and give us meaning and purpose. We do not need to agree on politics; that's not why we're here.

7. Do not harangue people. In our parashah this week, Moses lashes out at the Israelites for their excessive complaining and, in anger, hits the rock with his rod instead of speaking calmly. In recent years, we too have become intensely angry at people who disagree with us, and, like Moses, we feel justified in excoriating them. Sometimes we verbally attack them; other times we're more passive-aggressive, making snide remarks in their presence; sometimes we rail against them on Facebook. This doesn't change any minds or foster healthy conversation; it just intimidates people and makes them uncomfortable.

8. All people deserve to have their spiritual needs met. Our congregants come to Temple Beth-El to make meaningful connections with other people, to learn, to experience God, to do good for others, and to be cared for during hard times. Everyone, regardless of their political opinions, has these spiritual needs, and they need to know that when they come here, we're going to be there for them. If any person feels like they don't have a place here because of who they voted for, if they're reluctant to come to Torah study because people make disparaging political comments, this temple will not be able to serve them well. If they feel judged by other congregants or, God forbid, by the rabbi, how can we comfort them when their loved one dies?

9. The synagogue must be a sanctuary for all people. Temple Beth-El exists to be "an open and inclusive congregation committed to the full and equal participation of every member"; a community that "support[s] you in defining and being your authentic Jewish self." The synagogue needs to be a safe space for everyone who seeks refuge from the acrimony that plagues so many other spheres of life today.

10. We all live under the same sky. By approaching politics with hatred, suspicion, and purity tests, we are actively unraveling our society. What do we think we will gain? Do we really believe that by crushing our opponents, we will make America stronger? Not a chance. If we genuinely want our country to thrive and live together peacefully, we must choose the path of pluralism, curiosity, human dignity, and respectful disagreement.

Now, I know how some people will respond to what I'm saying. It's the same way they always react when I give a sermon like this: "I'm sorry, I just can't!" "I don't like them!" "They're evil!" "I don't want to listen to them!"

And this time, I will say back to them: That's not good enough anymore. It's not acceptable. Work through the discomfort. Let these 10 commandments guide you.

The song Stephanie wrote puts it poignantly: "Tell me why / under the same sky / when there's so much to unite us / do we then choose to divide? / And tell me how and when / if not now / do we finally come together / and choose peace instead of pride?"