Character Matters Most
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It is a great privilege to speak from this podium. I am mindful of its history. Rabbi Rudin and Rabbi Davidson spoke from it, and at this point in our congregation's story, I am the trustee of their legacy.

As I stand here each week to speak to you, I feel the weight of that responsibility on my shoulders—to them, to you, and to the tradition I represent. Indeed, it is *only as* a representative of Jewish tradition that I am given the right to speak from this podium in the first place.

The inscription on the front of the podium is from the 119th Psalm (v. 109): "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path." We're here tonight because we believe that, in a world of uncertainty, Torah shows us how to be holy.

My role as a rabbi is to help shine the light of Torah on the world, so you can see clearly and follow the path of good and right. Sometimes that's easy to do; other times, it's hard. But, in all cases, it is my duty.

I love and admire many people who support President Donald Trump, including family members, friends, and cherished congregants. I am a pluralist, and I believe everyone's opinion should be respected, even if I don't agree with them. I support some of President Trump's policies and oppose others.

But, to quote the 119th Psalm, "I am afflicted very much," because what I see in our President is a moral depravity that overshadows any policy he might pursue. How ever his actions might impact the economy, national security, antisemitism, or Israel—consequential as those issues are—they feel secondary to me given his bankruptcy of character. Indeed, to talk about his policies while ignoring the issue of *character* feels to me utterly absurd and beside the point.

Some people might say to me: "This is politics from the pulpit. Stick to the Torah, rabbi."

And my answer is: This is the *heart* of the Torah. What kind of rabbi would I be if I *didn't* talk about the importance of good character? How could I justify standing behind the Rudin podium and keeping silent about the moral rot at the head of our country?

I'm sorry, I just can't. I know some rabbis have bought into the farce, or have chosen to ignore it, but I am ordained to teach Torah—to shine its light in the dark places, even when it's uncomfortable to do so.

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Our parashah this week—B'midbar, meaning "in the wilderness"—opens with a census of the Israelites to determine the allotment of land to each tribe.

Yeshivah University professor Rabbi Baruch Simon points out that the census finds 603,550 Israelite men, which matches exactly the number accounted for at the end of the *Book of Exodus* (38:26). Rabbi Simon heralds this seemingly banal fact as something actually quite important: It shows, he says, that each tribal leader resisted the temptation to overreport their numbers so as to get more land than they were entitled to. (Imrei Baruch, B'midbar 5)

The lesson is simple: We don't scam people. Responsible leaders don't use their positions to enrich themselves. It's public service 101.

Now, I'm not naive. I used to work in Illinois politics, where one governor was convicted of running a scam to sell commercial driver's licenses for campaign cash, and his successor went to prison for auctioning a Senate seat to the highest bidder.

But what I read about President Trump this week has got to be the craziest, most audacious public corruption I've ever heard of.

According to reports from multiple news sources I trust, from both the left and right, the President and his family are running crypto-currency Ponzi schemes to get rich off the presidency.

They're called "meme coins" and "stable coins." The bottom line is that they're digital scams that enable anyone who wants to curry favor with the President to funnel unlimited money into the Trump family's personal bank accounts, already to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars.

Those who buy early make a fortune, while the suckers who buy late lose it all. But, to paraphrase Randolph and Mortimer Duke, the greedy brokers in *Trading Places*, whether the meme-coin buyers make money or lose money, Trump gets the commissions.

The kicker is it might all be legal! Tried-and-true influence-peddling schemes, like getting your blockhead nephew a ghost-payroll job at the sanitation district or a Ukrainian oil company, are quaint in comparison. Why break the law when you can leverage the presidency to get rich off legal meme coins?

This infuriates and disgusts me.

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Jewish law is clear that good moral character is a prerequisite for public leadership—and that in choosing leaders, a community must prioritize character over acumen.

Maimonides writes that "under no circumstance should a person who lacks the fear of God be appointed to any position in Israel, even though he possesses much knowledge." (M'lakhim 1:8) He adds that this is all the more essential for the head of the nation, who "should be gracious and merciful to the small and the great [alike]… protect the honor of even the humblest of men… speak gently… [and] bear the nation's difficulties, burdens, complaints, and anger as a nurse carries an infant." (2:7)

Similarly, the *halakhah* holds that only someone who is humble and has a reputation for honesty and righteousness should be chosen to represent the community before God in prayer.
Only *after* stipulating this character requirement does the law say anything about the candidate's skills or knowledge of Jewish prayer. (Shulchan Arukh, OH 53:4)

Bottom line: Character matters most. If a person lacks good moral character, their knowledge, their experience, and their policies are of no importance. Period.

Tragically, our country has rejected this principle; and as a result, we are lost in a moral wilderness.

Who knows…some of President Trump's policies might indeed make America strong again, safe again, rich again. But America will never, ever be great again unless and until we embrace the priority of good moral character—not only in our leaders, but in our communities, in our marketplaces, in our children and grandchildren, and in ourselves.

The face of this podium proclaims: "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path."

What I say to you tonight is not politics; it is Torah.