# THE RABBINIC RESPONSE TO MORAL CRISIS IN AMERICA: HOW REFORM RABBIS USED THEIR VOICE DURING MCCARTHYISM AND TRUMPISM

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# Table of Contents

## Chapter 1: Introduction

On November 8, 2016, I was a first-year rabbinical student at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR), living in Jerusalem. That night, during the United States presidential election, my classmates and I stayed up watching the results. As more and more votes began flowing into the news networks, and it became clear the results were not going to be what had been predicted, my classmates and I were silent. Not knowing how to react or respond, many of us went through the motions of our day in a state of relative silence. The following day, my classmate leading services that morning read a poem that her rabbi had written in response to the results of the election. This was the first kind of direct rabbinic response to the results of the election that I heard. As the shock wore down, I realized that I was interested in seeing how more rabbis were choosing to respond or address the events – or choosing not to. Not for political reasons, but because, in my opinion, the 2016 campaign, more than any other moment in my lifetime, had been framed by moments not of 'right versus left,' but 'right versus wrong.' I had witnessed a campaign filled with rhetoric and policy proposals that, to me, were worse than things I disagreed with politically. They were failures of our collective moral compass. As I began my rabbinical school journey, I wondered if rabbis could use their rabbinic voices to respond to moments like that one. I certainly felt like they should, but I also knew there were differing controversial opinions on the idea.

In the spring of 2017 Rabbi David Wolpe published an article in The Jewish Journal entitled "Why I keep politics off the pulpit."[1] After many readers sent letters to the paper in critique of his position, Rabbi Wolpe wrote again, noting the number of responses which referenced Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel's marching with The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King in Selma, Alabama, claiming that "issues like slavery and civil rights are very rare, once in a generation…"[2]

Although Rabbi Wolpe continued to assert his belief that politics do not belong of the bimah, he agreed with his critics in certain specific situations. In those situations, Rabbis have not just the authority, but the obligation to speak and to act. One of the first organized responses to the Trump presidency that I was aware of came from Rabbi Andrea Weiss, then an Associate Professor of Bible at HUC-JIR.[3] Rabbi Weiss organized scholars of religion from a multitude of religious traditions from all around the country to write letters to the incoming administration. Called *American Values, Religious Voices*, the project began on January 20, 2017, and sent one letter to the Trump administration and members of Congress for each of the first one hundred days. These letters did not address particular political policies or positions, but rather were expressions of morality, grounded in the various religious traditions of each scholar. These value-driven letters drew on the best of both religious and American doctrine. Rabbi Weiss did not have a congregational pulpit from which she could address the moral crises, she saw, but creatively found another way to lift up not only her own voice, but the voices of

[1] Wolpe, David. "Why I Keep Politics off the Pulpit." *Jewish Journal*, 7 June 2017, https://jewishjournal.com/commentary/opinion/220094/keep-politics-off-pulpit/.
[2] Ibid.
[3] She is now the Jack, Joseph, and Morton Mandel Provost of the College-Institute.

religious leaders of many faiths, to speak truth to power, guided by the moral compass of their faiths.

This thesis will focus on ways other rabbis embodied the work that Rabbi Weiss did, using their rabbinic voice – pulpit or not – to address two different moments of moral crisis in American history. It will explore the different ways in which Reform Rabbis (and the Reform Rabbinate writ large) chose to speak up, speak out, and act. Initially, I had planned on spending significant time in Cincinnati, Ohio, at the American Jewish Archives. My goal was to spend time there exploring extensively a variety of sermons from the two periods of moral crisis I chose to explore – McCarthyism and Trumpism. My plan was to analyze numerous sermons, comparing and contrasting their content and methodology of critique. As the COVID-19 pandemic came into focus, my methodology and process had to shift as well. With limited access to archival materials, I chose to and focus in on fewer sermons and augment those with resolutions from the CCAR, CCAR quarterly journals, and other written forms in which rabbis chose to assert their moral authority during these two periods of time.

First, the period surrounding the rise to prominence and power of Senator Joseph McCarthy, and the movement that became known as McCarthyism. During the first half of the 1950s, until his formal censure by Congress on December 2, 1954, Senator McCarthy was the center of political conversation in America. After claiming – though without ever corroborating – that he had the names of over two hundred Americans who were communists,[4] McCarthy made it his political and personal mission

[4] McCarthy also used the number 57, and twice said 207, in addition to the claim of 205 he gave in that first speech in West Virginia in the winter of 1950. There were various pieces of conflicting evidence, and McCarthy himself remained "uncertain" of the exact number his entire life. (Tye 115)

to expose communists living in America, no matter how many he falsely accused and whose reputations and careers he destroyed along the way. The moral compass of America seemed to change during those four years. Americans were willing to condone – if not encourage – the suspension of due process, the presumption of innocence, and the complete destruction of the character of so many of their fellow citizens, because of the weak idea that maybe the ends would justify the means. Sparked by the *fear* of communism, Senator McCarthy led unwarranted and unsubstantiated attacks on his fellow citizens, creating one of the darkest periods of civil society in twentieth century America.

The second period of moral crisis is arguably still happening. The rise in popularity and then to political power of Donald Trump, brought with it a movement known as Trumpism. This movement, like its spiritual ancestor McCarthyism is based on the worst human instincts of American society. Operating on fear, demagoguery, 'other'ing, conspiracy theories, and the creation of completely erroneous narratives of blame and scapegoating, a moral crisis has emerged and flourished – in part due to the lack of cohesive rebuke in response. For various reasons, partisan politicians, many journalists, and opinion leaders throughout the country have been slow or absent from any kind of condemnation from many of the actions of Trump and Trumpism. Worse even, a type of false equivalency has been created, particularly in the American news media, that has colloquially become known as "whataboutism." Scared that an attack on Trump would be viewed as partisan, or that a news outlet would be seen as not being 'fair,' media throughout the country tempered their critiques on the actions of Trump or his followers or waited until they could also bring up a similar (though certainly not

equal) critique of a group on the left side of the political aisle.[5] This represented a huge moral crisis in America, where every action was viewed as political, and the idea that there could be an objective moral absolute was lost. Trumpism stoked the fires of an 'us versus them' mentality, and the idea that some things – even our system of democracy – could be above reproach became unreliable.

While both of these crises had major political ramifications on our country, my focus here is on their moral impact. It is primarily through this lens that these periods of history beg for the voice of a moral authority, a spiritual leader, a reform rabbi. Before exploring the rabbinic response to these crises, however, we must first look at the contexts and climates which led to them. The following chapter will explore the social and political contexts which gave rise to McCarthyism, and the context in which American Jewry found itself in the 1950s.

[5] It is worth noting that as the Trump presidency continued, and particularly after he refused to accept his reelection loss, the news media began to call out specifically both his actions, and the negative effects of 'whataboutism' that were being issued from his campaign surrogates.

## Chapter 2: The Rise of McCarthyism

The social and political makeup of America in the early 1950s is important to understand as context for exploring the numerous ways various rabbis and the Reform Movement in general responded to the events that led to the rise of Senator Joseph McCarthy and its outgrowth, McCarthyism. The Red Scare that swept the country following World War II, compelled Americans of all religions to consider how to act and react to the newfound perceived "threat." In the winter of 1950, America was feeling politically on edge. Six months earlier, US spy planes had confirmed that Russia too had an atomic weapon. A few months later, Mao Ze Dong and his army had reshaped the entire country and government of China. Accused Soviet spy Alger Hiss had just been convicted of perjury[6], and Klaus Fuchs had been arrested for atomic espionage, for supplying the Soviet Union with information from the Manhattan Project.[7] This was the sociopolitical context in which America found itself when Joseph McCarthy announced on February 9th that he was in possession of a list that included two hundred and five names. "A list of names that were made known to the Secretary of State as being members of the Communist Party and who nevertheless are still working and shaping policy in the State Department."[8] Before long, many Americans aligned themselves with the tactics and theories of Senator McCarthy, and he ramped up a large and loyal

[6] The statute of limitations on espionage had expired. Hiss maintained his innocence until his death but represents one of the first instances of the United States going after any citizens who were suspected of working with communist powers.

[7] Tye, Larry. *Demagogue: The Life and Long Shadow of Senator Joe McCarthy*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2020. 115.

[8] Ibid.

following. The mass of followers behind him, with more Americans both inside and outside the political arena echoing his behaviors and sentiments, created what we now refer to as McCarthyism.

Soon, the American Jewish population found themselves particularly implicated in a sociopolitical atmosphere that sought to link them with Communists. This came out of a long history of anti-Semitic literature which equated Jews and Communists, starting with the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. As much of America – particularly liberal America – sought to distance itself from Communism, Jews and Jewish organizations couldn't take the same approach. Much of the atmosphere in the Jewish community was overshadowed by the arrest, conviction, and subsequent execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. Arthur Goren, a professor of Jewish History at Columbia University wrote about the atmosphere among the Jewish community at this time. He described the "agony and trepidation caused by the conspicuous presence of Jews among those accused of disloyalty and even espionage, and the presence of a marginal but vocal radical Left within the organized Jewish community. Thus, the arrest in 1950 of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg for handing atomic secrets to the Soviet Union, and their trial, conviction, and execution in 1953, jarred the self-confidence of American Jews."[9] Jews worried that they would become inextricably linked with communist traitors, and were sometimes willing to compromise their values in order to avoid this association. There was even disagreement within the Jewish community about whether or not to help "Jewish victims of the anti-Communist crusade. The most prominent instance was the

[9] Sarna, Jonathan D., editor. *The American Jewish Experience*. 2nd ed, Holmes & Meier, 1997. 307.

campaign for clemency for the Rosenbergs in which Communist and left-wing groups were active."[10]

McCarthy's attempts to include Jews as potential victims of a communist takeover did not seem to work with the majority of the Jewish community. Historian Michael Kazin noted that "a mere decade after the Holocaust, there could be no greater fear for Jewish intellectuals than the spread of mass intolerance associated with the demagogues on the right."[11]

This was made clear in a study commissioned by the American Jewish Committee, in the early 1960s. Authors Lucy Dawidowicz and Leon Goldstein looked at the nature of many Jews' strongly negative reaction to McCarthy's message and methods. Though McCarthy tried appeal to the fears of Jewish Americans by creating a false equivalency between Nazism and Communism, ultimately the majority of Jews remained unconvinced:

> The images McCarthy conjured up among Jews were frightening visions of stormtroopers goose stepping down Broadway, of an America taken over by a red, white and blue reincarnation of Hitler's Brown and Black shirts. The senator from Wisconsin seemed to symbolize that "it could happen here". However exaggerated their fears, most Jews recognized McCarthy as a demagogue bent on exploiting for his own aggrandizement the nation's abhorrence of communism and anxiety over Russia. They sensed in McCarthy's anti-communism qualities similar to Hitler's, though he was not anti-Semitic and even tried to show his philo-Semitism. They feared his cynical opposition to liberalism and his contempt for due process. Many

[10] Ibid.

[11] Svonkin, Stuart. *Jews against Prejudice: American Jews and the Fight for Civil Liberties*. Columbia University Press, 1997. 117.

felt threatened in their security not only as American citizens but also as Jews, associating McCarthy with antisemitism.[12]

Fear of a Communist presence in America stoked a rise in anti-Semitism, explicitly linked to communism. As researcher Stuart Svonkin described, "professional agitators spread allegations of a 'communist Jewish conspiracy' that was supposedly 'plotting the overthrow of white-Christian mankind."[13][14] The erroneous blanket equation of Jews and Communists created a challenging situation for Jews who wished to speak out in defense of those whose civil liberties were slowly being stripped away, since advocating for those civil liberties meant 'siding' with communism, a nuance that became even harder to parse out when Jews were universally labeled as communists. Furthermore, the political right saw this as an opportunity. Anti-communism and antisemitism could be easily equated as one and the same. In fact, in 1953 the American Jewish Committee drafted a position paper that cautioned "that 'extreme or demagogic anticommunism may become the means of uniting and organizing the fascist and racist elements in the country."[15] This played out in Washington in the late 50s, when "notorious anti-Semites joined the fight against the censure of Senator Joseph McCarthy."[16]

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[12] Ibid. 116.
[13] Ibid. 114.
[14] This quote is strikingly similar to the chants of those emboldened by Trumpism in the summer of 2017 in Charlottesville, VA, who lit torches chanting "Jews will not replace us!"
[15] Svonkin, Stuart. *Jews against Prejudice: American Jews and the Fight for Civil Liberties*. Columbia University Press, 1997. 114.
[16] Ibid. 115.

At least in the public political sphere, the Jewish community was caught in a no-win situation. While there were many Jews who *did* identify as socialists and communists, particularly in the 1920s and 1930s who were associated with the labor movements, by the end of World War II, the vast majority had completely disavowed communism.[17] Because of this conflation, as baseless as it may have been by this point in history, it created a scenario for Jews in which attacking fascism and/or racism was often equated with being pro-communism.

This predicament presented an opportunity for some clergy to assert their moral authority in a political context. While there is a long history of preaching morality from the pulpit, often some clergy sought to use their pulpits as a place of refuge from political controversy. Furthermore, there are congregants who intentionally seek the comfort of a synagogue as precisely the place to go in order to avoid a controversial political discussion altogether. However, for those rabbis who sought to follow in the footsteps of the Prophets, the pulpit was the ideal place to make a moral argument to addresses the civil liberties being stripped away from Americans in the name of combatting communism.

[17] Zola, Gary Phillip, and Marc Dollinger, editors. *American Jewish History: A Primary Source Reader*. Brandeis University Press, 2014. 283.

## Chapter 3: Responses to McCarthyism

As we saw in the prior chapter, the American political climate of the 1950s left the Jewish community in a no-win situation. Jews around the country, and specifically in Hollywood were blacklisted as accused or suspected communists, often with little to no evidence whatsoever. Many Jews found themselves unemployable and caught in a society steadfastly committed to sowing suspicion among the community. Furthermore, the groundswell of anticommunist beliefs and opinions in America set the stage for emboldening fascist and racist elements within the country.[18]

While many Jews were afraid of speaking out against McCarthy for the reasons explored thus far, there were Reform Rabbis who did step up to speak out. The idea of how and when to speak out on this topic must have been such an active topic of conversation among Reform rabbis at the time. This is evident by the fact that it was a major issue at the 1954 annual convention of the Central Conference of American Rabbis. The CCAR, the professional organization of American Reform Rabbis, used this convention to provide a clarion call to their members to speak out against McCarthy and McCarthyism. In a report from the Commission on Justice and Peace, the Conference recommended and passed resolutions that explicitly called out the fears stoked by Senator McCarthy, as well as commending those rabbis who chose to take a moral stance in opposing him and his views.

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[18] Svonkin, Stuart. *Jews against Prejudice: American Jews and the Fight for Civil Liberties*. Columbia University Press, 1997.

The first resolution both affirmed and actively encouraged its members' responsibility to take a stand:

> "We also recommend to our colleagues that wherever possible on a local level they cooperate with liberal religious leaders of all faiths by setting aside one weekend on which all liberal pulpits will be devoted to the condemnation of the flagrant abuse of moral principles on the part of many who presume to be protecting American democracy"[19]

From the start, the Conference argued that the pulpit is *precisely* where rabbis can and should be speaking from a place of moral authority. The Report continues by condemning the attacks on certain religious leaders, mentioning both Christian ministers and Reform Rabbis by name. But perhaps most importantly, the Report addresses the phenomenon of McCarthyism itself without any veiled allusions or references and makes a political statement in the process. "While we recognize that the hysteria commonly known as McCarthyism goes beyond the evil of any one individual, yet because senator McCarthy himself has become the most flagrant and immoral symbol of McCarthyism, we believe it essential to strip him of his committee chairmanships."[20] In this striking condemnation, the Conference chose both to name the man responsible, and to recommend political consequences for his actions. While it might not seem politically expedient, the key word in the resolution is once again morality. By ascribing the symbol Senator McCarthy represents as immoral, the

[19] CCAR Yearbook 1954, Resolution 1.
[20] Ibid. Resolution 2.

Conference used its religious moral authority to continue to support its members in standing up to the moral crisis that McCarthyism had become.

Later in the report, the Conference makes even more explicit the type of action they urged their members to take. Resolution 6, states that there is a "special responsibility" that compels some to act:

> Teachers and clergymen who are especially concerned with the moral and ethical principles on which our democracy is founded, have a special responsibility for the preservation of those principles. We are enheartened by the number of our own colleagues who have courageously brought the message of prophetic Judaism to bear on the problems of contemporary society, and we urge this conference, as well as the Union of American Hebrew Congregations to uphold and encourage these men.[21]

This resolution highlights the "special responsibility" that clergy, along with others, have in these matters. The pulpit is a unique and powerful place from which to address some of the most important issues any society faces. Clergy's words carry a special weight in our society, since to a lay community, they are viewed as conduits of God, and their words are often heard as such. Their emphasis on "moral and ethical principles" asserts the special authority held by clergy to levy their critiques of society in general and government in particular. By using their voices to take a moral stand, clergy strive to raise the discourse so that future critique may also be framed from a moral position. The CCAR resolution supported and encouraged their members to make use of this unique position in the way they speak up and speak out.

[21] Ibid. Resolution 6.

Finally, the CCAR report concludes with a resolution that is both shorter and seemingly less emphatic than most of those that preceded it, but in the long term may have had the most profound impact on the way that American Jews –clergy and laypeople – choose to respond to the issues of the times. The Eighth Resolution states, "we heartily recommend the cooperation and leadership of our colleagues in establishing social action committees in their congregations…"[22] Today, many synagogue members feel the most connected to their congregational community through their Social Action committee. Adding this resolution at the end of the report, the Conference made clear that morally driven responses to injustice were not just the responsibility of clergy from the pulpit but could also be taken up by lay people through their work as activists in their communities. The establishment of social action committees in congregations across America created a national commitment from the Reform Jewish community to act on the messages their clergy were preaching and march with them forward, working towards change beyond their synagogue walls.

While the CCAR made strong statements about McCarthyism as a Conference, it is crucial to explore what individual rabbis did from their own pulpits, as this is where the majority of American Jews would receive these messages. While the Conference made broad, sweeping statements, perhaps it is more important to examine whether individual rabbis took up the charge to devote their pulpits to the "condemnation of the flagrant abuse of moral principles on the part of many who presume to be protecting American democracy."[23]

[22] Ibid. Resolution 8.
[23] CCAR Yearbook 1954 Resolution 1

Rabbi Leonard Beerman was one such rabbi, who took up the call to action with fervor. Beerman was ordained from Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC) in 1949 and became the founding rabbi of the newly formed Leo Baeck Temple in Los Angeles, California that summer. However, even before his ordination Rabbi Beerman developed a reputation for powerful preaching that would follow him for most of his career. In October 1948, the fall of his final year of school, he gave a sermon to his HUC community in Cincinnati that was known as the "Chapel Sermon."[24] In this sermon, Beerman stated, "Israel is the eternal wanderer and sufferer, like man himself, fighting against thistles and thorns, shadows and abstractions. Israel is *the eternal dissident*. The great disobedient child of history."[25] Beerman not only preached that message but lived it himself. He would soon become known as the Dissident Rabbi, and it was this passion that guided many of the sermons he would give throughout his long career. It was as the dissident rabbi that Rabbi Beerman ascended the *bimah* to preach on the evening of October 16, 1953, to address his congregation about the recent activities of Senator McCarthy and the House Un-American Committee.

Rabbi Beerman began by discussing what he called the "mission" of us as Jews (or of him as a rabbi) in America, and in the world. He laid the groundwork for action, evoking the time and the words of the prophet, and that "our God desires neither sacrifice nor burnt offering, but the doing of justice, the showing of mercy, and the

[24] Beerman, Leonard I., and David N. Myers. *The Eternal Dissident: Rabbi Leonard I. Beerman and the Radical Imperative to Think and Act*. University of California Press, 2018. 10.
[25] Ibid. 3.

pursuit of righteousness."[2627] Before launching into a more explicit attack on McCarthyism and HUAC in general, Rabbi Beerman lifted up the biography of someone he considered to be a modern-day prophet, Rabbi Stephen S Wise. Rabbi Wise had been attacked and his name "conjured up for desecration by the House Committee of Un-American Activities, which alleged that he 'carried out the instructions of the Communist Party or collaborated with it.'"[28] Much of the first two pages of the sermon listed Rabbi Wise's many accomplishments, and particularly noting that he fought against his congregation, which sought to limit or censor what he said from the pulpit. Beerman noted the importance of freedom of speech so that he "might speak without compromise."[29] As the end of this biographical section about Rabbi Wise, Rabbi Beerman made a powerful comparison of Wise to our ultimate prophet: "He died on the 19th of April 1949, and since that day, as it was said of Moses, there has not risen another like him."[30]

Having established Rabbi Wise as a modern prophet, Beerman transitioned to the committee that attacked him. By framing his argument against HUAC and McCarthyism in relation to Rabbi Wise, Beerman was able to subsequently denounce McCarthyism writ large in much stronger terms, which went beyond the Committee's specific attack on Rabbi Wise. The impressive nature of this sermon is demonstrated in

[26] Beerman, Leonard. *The Kindest Use a Knife*. Sermon delivered on 16 Oct. 1953.
[27] Paraphrased from numerous prophetic works.
[28] Beerman, Leonard I., and David N. Myers. *The Eternal Dissident: Rabbi Leonard I. Beerman and the Radical Imperative to Think and Act*. University of California Press, 2018. 115.
[29] Beerman, Leonard. *The Kindest Use a Knife*. Sermon delivered on 16 Oct. 1953.
[30] Ibid.

its structure. By raising up Rabbi Wise first, Beerman makes it easier to critique a system which attacked him.

Beerman goes even further in his preparation before that critique, by raising the stakes for the nation.

> Indeed, as time continues, unless the American people protest with more vigor than they have in the past, we may anticipate that while distracting our attention toward the menace in the East, the demagogues and the opportunists will pick our pockets of many liberties which we Americans of all religions and race have struggled and bled for in the past.[31]

After raising these stakes, Beerman proceeded to critique, not just the man behind McCarthyism, but the society that allowed it to exist:

> During recent years, the infamous destruction of Democratic rights which is known to all the world by the name McCarthyism has lived by what it fed on – the ruined lives and reputations of numerous fellow citizens who have never been charged with a crime... To destroy a human reputation is as heinous a crime as actual murder. Whatever disease prompts a man to slay his fellow man in a moment of passion can be no worse than that of calculated character assassination and this crime is one in which all of us as a community are guilty. For McCarthyism and everything related to it cannot operate in a vacuum. It can succeed only when the climate of public opinion is propitious only when other men are willing to follow the leader and accept his protest stations of patriotism as face value. Oftentimes too, people do know better, like many among us, but will resort to the totalitarian argument of the communists and fascists, that the end justifies the means, and thus assuage the consciousness of their own guilt.[32]

[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid.

In this passage, Rabbi Beerman explicitly denunciates both McCarthy and the society that enabled his rise. Framing his argument against the backdrop of an attack on the personal character of Rabbi Wise, strengthened his critique. Once this critique was laid out – particularly given the framework of a society that is willing to "assuage the consciousness of their own guilt," Beerman turned to a larger critique of McCarthyism as a whole.

As he broadened his critique of McCarthyism, he wrote how he was not surprised by the attacks on Rabbi Wise, and how they gave him fuel to respond with a corrective.

> ….and since religion at its best and noblest is subversive to this tyranny which masks itself as patriotism it is logical and necessary that it be attacked too. Truly the demagogues have attempted to make our nation sick, for they are carriers of a virus more deadly even than the one they claim to cure…Today, because these men are in responsible positions, we are a sick people, but understanding and correction can make us well.[33]

Rabbi Beerman used his pulpit to offer a direct, pointed critique on McCarthy. Other rabbis took alternative approaches to address this issue. In a sermon that was broadcast on the radio in Boston, Rabbi Roland Gittelsohn spoke about communism and its potential threats without explicitly attacking Senator McCarthy. Rather, Rabbi Gittelsohn's remarks focused on social issues that were affecting a broad swath of the American population. While Rabbi Gittelsohn did not mention McCarthy's tactics, he spoke directly as a counterpoint to the fundamental claims that McCarthy was making.

[33] Ibid.

While McCarthy focused on the dangers present in Communism as a response to societal issues, Gittelsohn sought to address those issues directly. In doing so, Gittelsohn attempted to undermine the foundation of fear upon which McCarthy, his rhetoric, and his policies stood.

Rabbi Gittelsohn did not address Senator McCarthy or McCarthyism by name, but the critique is apparent through context. There is no story or classic "hook," as there might be in a typical sermon, and no reference to Jewish text. Instead, Gittelsohn began by acknowledging that communism posed a real threat to American freedoms, and that "the last thing in the world I would want to accomplish this morning is to minimize in any way whatsoever the very real danger of communism."[34] However, as soon as he made this fundamental point, Gittelsohn pivoted to discuss "two elementary perceptions without which all our efforts to combat communism are doomed to failure."[35] Once he had made it clear that he opposed communism and recognized its dangers – potentially alleviating any concerns that he was too sympathetic to the communists and allowing certain listeners to dismiss him without hearing the rest of the speech – Gittelsohn addressed these two other key issues which he believed to be posed equal threats to society. The first was a clear implicit reference to the actions of Senator McCarthy and his followers:

> The first is to recognize that we cannot preserve democracy with the repressive tools of totalitarianism. Those who would fight communism

[34] Gittelsohn, Roland. *Is Communism Our Chief Enemy?* Sermon delivered on 7 Feb. 1954.
[35] Ibid.

> with the methods of the communists – by stifling free thought in a straightjacket of conformity and persecuting every departure from political orthodoxy – are at best naïve fools, at worst unconscionable scoundrels.[36]

This is the closest he gets to speaking about McCarthy. Gittelsohn urged his listeners to understand that the methods and the process by which America combats communism matter. McCarthy, and all those who followed him, were endangering democracy by utilizing the "repressive tools of totalitarianism."[37]

The rest of the sermon dealt with Gittelsohn's second issue of perceived threat: "we delude ourselves horribly if we diagnose communism as such to be our principal problem. Communism, however aggravating and dangerous, is but a symptom of the real problem."[38] While communism was what McCarthy and others used as a catch-all scapegoat to generate fear, Gittelsohn went more directly to some of the root causes of fear and unease in America. Rather than address the debate about communism, he focused on the foundational issues that allowed it to flourish, and subsequently be attacked. He wrote, "My thesis this morning is that our civilization is suffering from a form of social cancer which is responsible for the spread of communism and which we would do well to recognize and treat before it is too late."[39] In the rest of the sermon, Gittelsohn went on to raise the issues of hunger and poverty, both in America, and

[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid.

around the world. After presenting some statistics on American poverty, Gittelsohn remarked that, "…at least the average here **is** $1453 per year. The average annual income of the same human being if he happens to live in Western Europe rather than the United States is $473…in Africa, $118!...one third of all humanity lives on less than the equivalent of $150 per year."[40] This, for Gittelsohn, was the fundamental flaw in society at the moment, and it was both the reason that the ideals of communism could grow and prosper, and also the reason that communism had not yet been defeated. "Most of the world is miserable and fearful and resentful and sullen and hungry! This is humanity's number one problem. Communism is but a product or symptom of this, which can be defeated only by human beings who want very much to defeat it. And human beings, like most of those on earth today don't want much of anything except a chance to live and eat and be well."[41] By framing the problem like this, Gittelsohn spoke directly to many of the fears and frustrations that Americans were feeling. He explained that communism is one attempt to deal with some of these problems.

McCarthyism played on these same fears but did so in a way that only addressed communism (a singular type of response to these issues) instead of Gittelsohn's approach which addressed the root causes of those fears. Here is where Gittelsohn indirectly took McCarthyism to task again: "if -God Forbid! – the submerged two thirds of mankind goes communist, no power or force on earth will protect Europe and the United States from following suit or from succumbing on the rebound to fascism, which amounts for all practical purposes to pretty much the same thing."[42] By equating

[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid.

communism and fascism, which may seem to be on the surface polar opposites, Gittelsohn both implicitly critiqued the fascistic tendencies inherent in McCarthyism, as well as bolstered his claim that the important step to take is addressing the underlying crisis. Those who sought to speak up against communism are remiss if they do not also speak out to try and stop the underlying issues that allow communism to flourish. Gittelsohn continued:

> We have been trying to sell them democracy on the strength of the freedom and security democracy has afforded us but they for the most part have been ruled by allegedly Democratic nations for a long time without seeing either freedom or security. We've been warning them quite properly against communism but communism doesn't seem any worse to them than what they now have. As a result of which, experts tell us we're getting exactly nowhere with them which seems to surprise us a great deal though it really shouldn't."[43]

Once again, Gittelsohn spoke directly about the underlying issues the world had not addressed and explained why communism may have been a natural outgrowth. Only at the end of his sermon does he make any reference to religion at all, claiming that all of us are responsible for one another's human dignity. "Strange – isn't it – how religion and practical politics converge. 'Love thy neighbor as thyself'[44] is no longer just a Biblical luxury; suddenly it becomes the only way to keep 'thyself' alive. To loose the fetters of wickedness and deal thy bread to the hungry and cover the naked then thou

[43] Ibid.
[44] Leviticus 19:18

seest him[45] becomes more than just the dream of an ancient visionary; suddenly it grows into the most practical and indispensable policy on earth…"[46]

Gittelsohn here linked the prophetic call to care for one another to the political expediency that he believed could be a result. That by reaching out to the most vulnerable citizens in the world, the issues that gave rise to the ideas of communism would cease to exist, and therefore communism itself would crumble. With this approach, Gittelsohn made the claim that McCarthyism is not only wrong in process and method, but in content and substance as well. The sermon showed Gittelsohn's belief that there were other, more effective means of reaching the same ends that McCarthyism claimed to want. Gittelsohn closed his sermon with another simultaneous critique of McCarthy and stirring call to action for those listening: "It is not enough, my friends, to be <u>against</u> communism. We must be <u>for</u> humanity."[47]

It is important to note that while Rabbi Gittelsohn served as the Senior Rabbi of Temple Israel in Boston for more than twenty years, this sermon was not given from that pulpit. Broadcast over the radio on a Sunday morning, rather than in a sanctuary on a Friday night or Saturday morning, the sermon would have been heard by a vastly different audience. It is quite possible that the tone and content of the sermon was written in light of that broader audience. With an assumedly bigger and more diverse audience, a sermon that offered an indirect critique of McCarthyism and tried to answer

[45] Isaiah 58:6-7
[46] Gittelsohn, Roland. *Is Communism Our Chief Enemy?* Sermon delivered on 7 Feb. 1954.
[47] Ibid.

in a different way some of the same questions as McCarthy could have been a much more effective approach.

While this particular sermon dealt with some of the underlying issues in American society, it was not the only way Rabbi Gittelsohn chose to speak up and speak out. He was the chairman of the CCAR's Commission on Justice and Peace, which authored the same report cited in Chapter 2 that explicitly and pointedly called McCarthyism both "hysteria" and "evil," and claimed McCarthy himself had become "the most flagrant and immoral symbol of McCarthyism…[believing] it essential to strip him of his committee chairmanships."[48] By choosing to use multiple avenues to address this crisis, Rabbi Gittelsohn made his voice even more powerful. Understanding the various contexts in which he operated, the choice to offer different types of critique in each of those contexts separately allowed his message to be as wide reaching as possible.

Rabbi Jacob Rothschild was the spiritual leader of The Temple, the oldest congregation in the city of Atlanta, from 1946 until his death in 1973. In a sermon given in June of 1953, Rabbi Rothschild took yet another approach to offer his critique on the scourge of McCarthyism that had taken over American Society. In his approach, he focused on the emotional turmoil and impact likely felt by his congregants. Rothschild opened his sermon by commenting that while the face of America has changed with new infrastructure and new transportation, the "Soul of America has changed, too."[49] In his opening, he described the dangers that America faced that still exist after the end of World War II, the biggest one being communism. He wrote, "We entered war and

[48] CCAR Yearbook 1954.
[49] Rothschild, Jacob. *Individual Freedom and American Democracy*. Sermon delivered on 5 June 1953.

thought we had won it for the preservation of our principles. But danger didn't end. Another form of totalitarianism emerged and became an even greater threat to our way of life. Communism has sought to destroy our democracy."[50] After stating clearly his opposition to communism and the danger he saw within it, Rothschild turned to America's response in the struggle against communism, creating perhaps an even greater danger. In the section of the sermon titled "What has happened," Rothschild wrote, "In an effort to combat this foe, we have done much to abrogate the very freedoms we seek to maintain. Congress has become virtually an investigatory body. Everything is suspect…Velde[51] threatens to investigate ministers…[There has been] a new word coined in America – an ugly word – McCarthyism."[52]

Rothschild continued by describing how McCarthyism is frightening to Americans in "both implication and method," and how it is built on a foundation of "half-truth, innuendo, and threat."[53] Rothschild spoke on an emotional level to his congregation in this sermon. He established the fears that communism brought, but then spoke explicitly and powerfully in equal measure to the fears and emotions that arose from McCarthyism. He continued, "We are forced to constantly prove our patriotism…we become prey to guilt by association; guilt cast on everyone. We have to be so careful, weigh our every word, examine our past, lest we be accused of communist leanings."[54]

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[50] Ibid.
[51] Congressman Harold Velde, R-IL, was Chairman of the House Un-American Activities Committee from 1953-1955.
[52] Rothschild, Jacob. *Individual Freedom and American Democracy*. Sermon delivered on 5 June 1953.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid.

Finally, Rothschild concluded his sermon by reminding his congregants – and his country – what is at stake if this way of life continued without reproach:

> "This fear and confusion is just what the Communists want. We are falling into communist pattern by introducing a kind of thought control into the free air of America. Everyone suspects everyone else…Freedom of thought is stifled. We become afraid to speak out courageously for what we believe if that belief might be considered unpopular…there is no room for honest difference of opinion. If it is wrong, it is treason. Long ago, a Supreme Court Justice said: 'the right to be free is the right to be different.' That is the core of democracy – and we are losing it."[55]

Rothschild brought back the danger of communism with which he opened the sermon and used it as a rejoinder to the erroneous idea that the McCarthyistic approach would be successful. Clearly outlining what the nation was losing by following in this path, Rothschild closed by offering a charge to not be "afraid to be liberal! Continue to work and to speak for that which is to you right and good. Then we shall each be doing [our] part to keep the soul American free and untarnished by the forces which seek to destroy it."[56]

[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid.

## Chapter 4: The Rise of Trumpism

While McCarthyism as a mainstream national movement may have died down after the censure and ultimately the death of Senator McCarthy, those who were his most fervent supporters kept his ideas and tactics alive in some way, shape, or form, even to this day. When one looks at the rise of Donald Trump, both as a businessman and a political candidate, as well as the birth of Trumpism, there is a clear link between the President and the Senator from whom he learned so much. The physical manifestation of that link was represented by Roy Cohn. Cohn was McCarthy's chief counsel during much of his time in the Senate, and later spent over a decade as the personal attorney and mentor of Trump. As Cohn's protégé, Trump learned many of the techniques Cohn had in turned learned from McCarthy – including how to smear opponents and manufacture conspiracies. Peter Fraser, who was Cohn's lover for the last two years of his life, said, "I hear Roy in the things Trump says quite clearly. If you say it aggressively and loudly enough, it's the truth."[57] The line from McCarthy to Trump – and more importantly, from McCarthyism to Trumpism – is clear even without the physical character of Cohn to connect the two. Both McCarthy and Trump excelled at seizing upon public fears, creating convenient scapegoats for the issues America was facing. Crucially, both were geniuses at "grabbing the spotlight of their day – Joe via newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, radio, and TV; Donald on Twitter, reality TV, and cable news…each made his name into a ubiquitous brand."[58] They both built a following

[57] Tye, Larry. *Demagogue: The Life and Long Shadow of Senator Joe McCarthy*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2020. 476.
[58] Ibid.

of supporters that truly believed in their cause and their movement, and nothing could deter their support. When then-candidate Trump boasted that he "could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody, and…wouldn't lose any voters," many saw it as a new and extreme type of bravado. However, sixty-two years earlier pollster George Gallop wrote that "even if it were known that McCarthy had killed five innocent children, they would probably still go along with him."[59]

Trump's ascension from reality TV star to sideshow candidate to, ultimately, President of the United States may have come more easily because he was armed with the tools that brought McCarthy to national prominence, but it was also aided by the context and timing of his entry into the American political sphere. In the year or so leading up to the 2016 presidential campaign, America was experiencing a rise of violence stoked by fear of the 'other.' The shooting at the Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina that left nine dead was perpetrated by a self-avowed white supremacist. Black Lives Matter protests against police brutality continued throughout the country – particularly in Baltimore following the death of Freddie Gray while in police custody. In many ways, American society was in disarray, with embers of division and hate sewn throughout the country. A political figure who thrived off of scapegoating and conspiracy theories entering the national political landscape could easily capitalize on this timing. For years, politicians campaigned on the idea of change, breaking down the kind of Washington that many thought too slow to get anything done, with all of its politicians in the hands of corporate interests. Even more than this, there was a decades-long growing distrust of an 'overreaching,' big government. Some believe that

[59] Ibid. 3.

the seeds of Trumpism were planted as far back as the 1980s, when Newt Gingrich rose to power in the Republican Party. Julian Zelizer, a political historian at Princeton University, wrote about Gingrich's ascension to power, and its links to the rise of Trump. Gingrich was seen as a different kind of politician, and during the 1988 presidential campaign when Gingrich's political attacks on then-Speaker of the House Jim Wright rose to the national political spotlight, Gingrich himself was elevated to the number two position in party leadership. Zelizer wrote, "the leadership supported Gingrich by promoting a full-scale attack…that ripped apart institutions and norms to the point that they were irreparable. This was a choice that the GOP made. Most senior Republicans, until that time, had avoided such a path. When figures had emerged who pursued this style, such as Senator Joseph McCarthy in the 1950s, they were ultimately checked rather than elevated into the leadership."[60] Zelizer elucidated the link between McCarthy and Trump that was evident in style, but through the actions of Gingrich, became widely acceptable within the political framework of the Republican Party. This is what created the foundation for Trump to succeed not just as a demagogue, but one with backing and power from the political establishment. He concluded, "Ever since Republicans opened the doors to Gingrich, the Republican Party has never been the same. Gingrich pioneered the kind of tear-down the institutions partisanship, where the imperatives of governance are always secondary, that continues to define the party to this day. It drives elected officials to constantly push the boundaries of what is

[60] Zelizer, Julian. "How Newt Gingrich Laid the Groundwork for Trump's Republican Party." *Time*, 7 July 2020, https://time.com/5863457/how-newt-gingrich-laid-the-groundwork-for-trumps-republican-party/.

legitimate in the name of partisan warfare."[61] This was the kind of Republican Party suited for a figure like Donald Trump, and he was ready. Trump was willing to say and do things that seemed anathema to 'traditional politicians,' the new Republican Party – and many Americans – saw that brazenness and boldness as the change they were looking for. However, Trump's following also had a different framework of morality than other politicians, particularly during the Republican presidential primary season. Sociologist Jonathan Haidt, creator of Moral Foundations Theory to study moral differences across cultures, co-authored an article for Vox with Emily Elkins. Drawing on a national public opinion study conducted by Elkins, they applied Haidt's Moral Foundations Theory to the respondents of the survey and linked them to the presidential candidate they liked best. The six main receptors for morality, according to Haidt, are care, fairness, liberty, loyalty, authority, and sanctity. When applied to this group of respondents, Haidt and Elkins found that their moral foundations were statistically significant predictors of vote choice for each candidate.[62] For supporters of Donald Trump, their moral pattern was significant: "voters who still score high on authority/loyalty/sanctity and low on care – even after accounting for all the demographic variables – are significantly more likely to vote for Donald Trump. These are the true authoritarians – they value obedience while scoring low on compassion."[63] That type of moral thinking might have made Trump successful in his political

[61] Ibid.
[62] Haidt, Jonathan, and Emily Elkins. "Donald Trump Supporters Think about Morality Differently than Other Voters. Here's How." *Vox*, 5 Feb. 2016, https://www.vox.com/2016/2/5/10918164/donald-trump-morality.
[63] Ibid.

candidacy, but it also showed the sociological framework for the rise of what would become the moral crisis that is Trumpism.

While the parallels of the Trump era might be frightening to those who lived through or are students of McCarthyism, there are more positive lessons that can be learned. Eventually, both the name McCarthy as well and the movement of McCarthyism became vilified in mainstream America. The 1994 edition of the National Standards for United States History refers to the evils of McCarthyism nineteen times.[64] At a moment in time when Trumpism has power and support in the nation, just as Trump himself is leaving the seat of governmental power, the lessons of McCarthyism can be a source of optimism. In addition to the belief that in the grand scheme of American history, this period will be looked at as one of moral crisis, one can take additional solace in knowing how many spoke out against the atrocities they witnessed, including, and especially, Reform Rabbis.

Much like the response to McCarthyism, as Trump and Trumpism began to grow more popular in the United States, the Reform rabbinate took it upon itself as another opportunity to speak out. This was particularly evident as its rise was accompanied by what was perceived as countless *moral* failings. Within weeks of his assuming office, Trump imposed a ban on flights to the United States from many majority-Muslim countries. He reduced the number of refugees allowed to resettle in the United States to

[64] Tye, Larry. *Demagogue: The Life and Long Shadow of Senator Joe McCarthy*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2020. 477.

45,000, down from President Obama's target of 110,000. His administration formalized a "zero tolerance" policy on immigrants from the southern border that called for immigrant children to be ripped away from their families without warning or any plan to reunite them. Throughout his presidency, he rejected the research and opinion of scientists, culminating ultimately in his refusal to acknowledge the gravity of the COVID-19 pandemic, and his failure to produce an adequate response to a disease that has killed over 400,000 Americans. The nature of his office granted him a wide audience at any time, and throughout his time as a political leader he has displayed what can at best be called a cavalier relationship with the truth. Many Reform rabbis saw this as another moral crisis which required the leadership of their rabbinic voice. Rabbis from across the country chose to speak, albeit differently than they did in the 1950s with the crisis of McCarthyism. With new tax laws forbidding the explicit endorsement or rejection of a political candidate and the fear of losing or alienating their congregants, some Reform rabbis were more hesitant, speaking vaguely, avoiding explicit mention of the accusations or connections to Trump as the cause of the crises they saw. Some even sought to create spaces in their communities for those who supported Trump and Trumpism.

This range of perspectives and approaches is evident in the Summer 2019 issue of the CCAR journal that explored the theme "Politics and the Rabbinate." While some contributions to this journal spoke to the dangers they saw in Trumpism, others tried to stay more neutral. In fact, one such article talked about creating a specific space for congregants who did not want to feel alienated by the negative commentary about Trump. The journal, written by and for Reform Rabbis, created a platform where some

of these rabbis could write about the methods they were employing and how they were being received in their respective congregations. The 'freedom of the pulpit' is not granted equally to all rabbis, and many dealt with personal moral conflicts in making some of these choices. Rabbi Ilana Baden, of Temple Chai in Long Grove, IL, wrote about her struggle to make all of her congregants feel like they are a welcomed part of the community. Baden wrote about her desire to include of all of her congregants, regardless of their political beliefs. She believed that her congregants who may have voted for Trump did not deserve to feel unwelcome in their communities. She wrote, "When good people start judging the entirety of another person solely on their political vantage point, then we have a real problem in our society."[65] Eventually, the congregation created a *chavurah* for similarly right-leaning congregants.

Making sure that congregants feel welcome is an important objective. However, this kind of response sidesteps the larger, more important issues at hand. Rabbis have the uniquely important responsibility – obligation, even – to speak from a place of moral authority. These moral issues are not political – even if they might be perceived as such – and it is crucial to be able to discuss the moral failings of Trump without alienating the tens of millions of citizens who may have voted for him with the most noble of intentions. Surely, this represents a tension in values. It is also the obligation of a rabbi to care for their congregants and ensure that each and every one feels welcomed in their place of worship. In Baden's case, the *chavurah* that was created eventually asked her to connect them with more progressive members of the synagogue, so the *chavurah* could reach out and invite them into a conversation. Baden wrote that, "their

[65] Baden, Ilana. "The Fox News Chavurah" CCAR Journal Summer 2019. 82.

current goal is to expand their conversation and include more diverse voices in an effort to find common ground and mutual understanding. Whether or not I agree with the opinions of this group, I am proud of its existence."[66]

Another approach was taken in Short Hills, New Jersey, where Rabbi Matthew Gewirtz is the Senior Rabbi of Congregation B'nai Jeshurun. In his article for the CCAR Journal, he described his goal to be a "rabbi of the radical middle."[67] For Gewirtz, moving from the liberal bastion of the Upper West Side of Manhattan to the more conservative New Jersey suburbs caused him to think more deeply about his own political upbringing and how it might play a role in his rabbinate. He wondered, "Could I faithfully love and pastor to them if they were Republicans? I could tell, they were really and authentically worried that I might not be there for them pastorally because my politics didn't align with theirs."[68] It was this struggle that led him toward this "radical middle," a place where he believed a little compromise could ultimately allow for a lot more unity. He wrote, "I stopped seeing other points of view as being against fighting for justice, but as realizing that there were other paths to the same. I stopped being sanctimonious in demanding, at least to myself, that others who didn't see it the way I did, were less faithful – or less committed to the prophetic voice. They believed and gave of themselves as Jews, but they believed that there are many roads to get to a just end."[69] Gewirtz envisioned a scenario where he can more easily embrace all of his congregants, regardless of political viewpoint, and relate to, pastor, and love them,

[66] Ibid. 85.
[67] Gewirtz, Matthew. "What it Might Look Like to be a Rabbi of the Radical Middle" CCAR Journal Summer 2019. 65.
[68] Ibid. 69.
[69] Ibid. 70.

assuaging his own earlier fears. This is an ideal toward which all rabbis might strive. However, having one's principles so firmly set in the middle, with a goal of appeasing all, makes it much more difficult to take a moral stand. There are times when red lines are crossed and speaking out no longer becomes an issue of politics but an issue of morality, but constantly trying to keep both sides of the political aisle happy means these are fewer and farther between.

However, other rabbis chose to speak out – and act – more explicitly in opposition to Trumpism. Since his inauguration, rabbis have also chosen to put their physical bodies on the line to protest the actions and policies of Trump and his administration. In 2017, when Trump issued what became known as the "Muslim Ban," rabbis and rabbinic organizations from around the nation organized acts of protest and civil disobedience in response. Eighteen rabbis were arrested outside of Trump International Hotel in New York City during a protest organized by *T'ruah:* The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights.[70] In January of 2018, more than 80 Jewish clergy and activists were arrested on Capitol Hill while protesting Trump's plan to end the program that protects hundreds of thousands of undocumented people who came to the United States as children.[71] One of the organizing bodies of this protest was the Reform Movement's Religious Action Center, which helped to organize thousands of rabbis and laypeople to demonstrate against many of the immoral policies of the Trump administration.

[70] Moynihan, Colin. "About 20 Rabbi Arrested During Protest Over Trump Travel Ban." *New York Times*, 6 Feb. 2017.
[71] Blumberg, Antonia. "82 Rabbis, Activists Arrested On Capitol Hill Over DACA Protest." *HuffPost*, 17 Jan. 2018, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/rabbis-arrested-daca-protest_n_5a5f8b13e4b046f0811c6213.

As they did in the period of McCarthyism, the CCAR itself issued statements in opposition to many of Trump's policies. Often, these statements were narrow and specific, focusing on one particular policy concern, rather than the broader condemnation seen towards McCarthyism. However, in the summer of 2017, just over six months into his administration, the CCAR made an official statement condemning Trump's reference to the white supremacists who organized and attended a rally that resulted in the death of a young woman as "very fine people." The statement read:

> The Central Conference of American Rabbis is outraged that the President of the United States has repeatedly equivocated in condemnation of the white supremacists who rained terror and violence upon Charlottesville, Virginia last weekend. The President's failure to differentiate Neo-Nazis, Ku Klux Klansmen, and white supremacists of the self-proclaimed "Alt-Right," on one hand, from those who stood up to that threat and an imaginary "Alt-Left," on the other, only encourages racist, anti-Semitic, and xenophobic hate-mongers to continue their reign of terror…we pray for our country, that is may once again reflect the words of its first President, George Washington, who wrote to the Jews of Newport, Rhode Island, "Happily, the government of the United States gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance.[72]

The statement is unequivocal in its condemnation of Trump, but moreover the ending of the statement is more powerful, evoking George Washington in a more subtle condemnation of Trumpism itself. Stating that they pray that the country might "once again" reflect a government that gives "bigotry no sanction" implied without explicitly

[72] *Central Conference of American Rabbis Condemns President Trump's Response to White Supremacist Domestic Terrorists.* 17 Aug. 2017, https://www.ccarnet.org/ccar-condemns-president-trumps-response-white-supremacist-domestic-terrorists/.

stating the idea that under Trump's leadership, the government was not living up to that standard.

## Chapter 5: Responses to Trumpism

As in the era of McCarthyism, rabbis took different paths to address the crisis of Trumpism. Some were more explicit than others, while others chose to focus on specific issues rather than specific individuals. As they did in the era of McCarthyism, the CCAR issued statements – some more explicitly worded than others. Some rabbis chose to speak from the pulpit and some through various other means of communication. Congregations organized rallies, taught adult education sessions, built bridges with other local religious leaders, and participated in organized protests against the cruelty of Trump era policies and rhetoric. Moreover, in the digital age, rabbis engaged in extensive use of social media, to instantaneously reach out and offer their critique, response, or prayers.

Rabbi A. Brian Stoller's is a good example of an approach of engaging in politics without coming across as politically partisan. Before ordination, Rabbi Stoller worked as the Press Secretary to a Republican Senator from Illinois, and he was deeply enmeshed in the political world. Since leaving politics to pursue the rabbinate, he has tried very hard to avoid mixing those two parts of his life and refrained from talking about politics from the pulpit as much as he can. However, there were a number of moments during the Trump era that he felt were too important to remain silent. Rabbi Stoller described himself as more politically conservative than many rabbis and congregants in today's Reform Jewish world, and is very cognizant of not only avoiding partisanship, but not alienating anyone.[73] In a sermon given in the fall of 2016, before

[73] In his article in the Summer 2019 CCAR Journal, he talks about how he himself has felt alienated and ostracized by the liberal Reform Communities in which he resides.

the election, Stoller cited a passage in the Tur[74] which talks about how a community should consider selecting leaders. He structured the sermon around the importance of character as a trait when selecting those leaders. The sermon did not mention the upcoming election, nor did it mention either major party's candidate, but the context in which he gave the sermon was clear to those who heard it.[75] The week after the election, Rabbi Stoller felt the need to preach about it, and specifically to address the amount of anxiety that he believed his congregants felt. At the time of the 2016 election, Rabbi Stoller was the Associate Rabbi of Congregation B'nei Jehoshua Beth Elohim (BJBE) in Deerfield, Illinois, a wealthy suburb northwest of Chicago, and most of his congregants, he believed, had not voted for Donald Trump. In this sermon, Rabbi Stoller made clear what he believed was right and wrong, in no uncertain terms, about the type of rhetoric from Trump that he believed to be a moral failing. However, he also chose to focus the sermon on the future, and on relationships with people, rather than politicians and policies.

Stoller opened the sermon by explaining that while he has avoided speaking about politics from the bimah, at this moment he felt he had "no choice but to address the proverbial elephant in the room."[76] In beginning this way, Stoller acknowledged that the 2016 election that was seen by many as a de facto endorsement of Trumpism, was a moral crisis of sufficient magnitude to compel him to address it from the pulpit. He began by naming the anxiety, fear, worry, and sadness that he and many of his

[74] A Halakhic code of law written and compiled by Jacob ben Asher in 14th Century Spain.
[75] This sermon was not written, but the topic and theme were given in an interview with Rabbi Stoller on 14 Dec 2020.
[76] Stoller, A. Brian. *Life in the Bubble: Reflections on Election 2016*. Sermon delivered 11 Nov. 2016.

congregants were feeling, and then he made clear how he felt personally, so that he could move toward preaching about the future. Referencing an earlier sermon, he wrote, "Several months ago I said from this bimah that, to my mind, good character is the most important qualification for leadership. This election has validated, once and for all, what I have been thinking for many election cycles now: that, when it comes to choosing leaders at least, character just doesn't much matter anymore. And that's deeply disappointing."[77]

This kind of personal statement at the beginning of his sermon spoke to the deeper issues that Stoller was feeling and allowed both him and his congregants to move past the feeling of "my candidate didn't win," and move towards a discussion of the deeper, moral issues that this election brought up. During the rest of his sermon, Stoller attempted to shake his listeners free of their "bubbles," acknowledging that "we don't know our fellow citizens."[78] One of the most dangerous outgrowths of Trumpism was and is the demonization of the other – but this is not a characteristic exclusively owned and acted on by Trump and his followers. Stoller reminded us: "Bottom line: inside the bubble, we are so sure that we're right and good, and the other is wrong and evil. It's an age-old human story: when we don't know the other, it's really easy to demonize them."[79] Stoller believes strongly that this issue is one that is abused by "both sides," or people from all political viewpoints in America, and that is the moral failing that he is addressing, but he is also sure to clarify that while both sides can be wrong, it doesn't mean they are equally wrong, and he does not want the sermon to be

[77] Ibid.
[78] Ibid.
[79] Ibid.

misconstrued as justifying Trump's rhetoric in any way. He does however, want to stress his belief that simply having voted for him does not warrant the kind of demonization or "othering" that he fears might happen: "Now of course, this isn't to say that President-elect Trump hasn't said hateful, disgusting things about all kinds of people…his rhetoric, in my view, has been vile, incendiary, and unbecoming of a person who would lead our great country. As far as I'm concerned, there is no excuse for it – period, hard stop. And at the same time, I think it is important for us to realize that there is a difference between President-elect Trump and those who voted for him. *They* are not him."[80]

Stoller's call to action, just days after Trump's election in 2016, spoke to the fear of what was coming – not necessarily about the political policies and rhetoric of Trump as president, but of the potential for the fracturing in our communities that has grown out of the rise of Trumpism. Stoller used his rabbinic voice in this sermon to state unequivocally his belief in the danger of Trump's rhetoric. He also spoke directly to his congregants and preached of the dangers for them on a relational level with one another. His call to action is to know one another better – to go beyond what might be comfortable, and to learn, so hopefully we can all grow. He concluded the sermon with this charge and raised the stakes for us all:

> If you're worried about what lies ahead, be cautious and alert, but don't be overtaken by fear. Stand up for what you know is right, fight for the vulnerable, and do your part to build a just society. If friendships and family relationships are strained because of this divisive election, reach out, heal them, and make peace. Let's make this election a wake-up call –

[80] Ibid.

> so that we'll finally realize how important it is to break through the bubble we live in, and get to know our neighbors who think differently than we do, and try to understand them and affirm their humanity. The future of our country depends on it.[81]

Four years later, as the 2020 election approached, Stoller had moved from suburban Chicago, to a congregation in the more moderate, yet still liberal leaning Omaha, Nebraska, where he serves as Senior Rabbi of Temple Israel. After the events of the last four years, Stoller again felt it not only appropriate, but crucial, to speak again of the moral crisis he believed was happening. He believed that the worst vestiges of Trumpism were being brought to light in the framework of the election, but to Stoller, this was a human problem that on a moral scale was far greater than any single candidate or any single election, and he used his pulpit to address it, in a sermon he titled, "Idolatry, Trump, and a Society on the Brink: A Call to Repentance."

Stoller's words echoed his sermon of four year prior about the moral crisis shaping how human beings relate to each other. This sermon, however, was more of a direct rebuke on Trumpism itself, offered as a rebuke to all of society – proving that Trumpism is something that has permeated society, and is not something that is reserved for people who have one set of beliefs or another. He started his sermon with a warning: "It's about what, to my mind, is the single greatest threat we face today in America – the deep and extreme division in our society; the genuine hatred we have for

[81] Ibid.

our fellow human beings who see the world differently or support a different candidate; our complete inability as a society to disagree respectfully and still love each other."[82]

The crux of the sermon then turns to idolatry. Judaism is rife with laws and texts that make clear idolatry is one of its gravest sins, and in this sermon, Stoller approaches idolatry with a different lens. Aware of the political context in which he gave the sermon, Stoller begins by trying to assuage his congregants that while it may sound so, this sermon is not directly about politics. He wrote, "Idolatry is a spiritual error, not a political one."[83] By making this distinction at the outset of the sermon, Stoller laid out his intentions. While the rest of the sermon's content may have felt political, Stoller attempted to address these issues from a spiritual level – attempting to address the political discourse he saw through a spiritual, more indirect approach.

Stoller continued his sermon about idolatry by naming the idol explicitly: Donald Trump. However, after naming Trump as the object of the idolatry he sought to address, he turned his sermon to the Jewish ideas around idolatry in an attempt to offer, in his words – warning – to all those who heard this sermon, regardless of political affiliation or whom they had voted for. Stoller continued by saying that those who love Trump have begun idolizing him, but those who hate him are guilty of the same idolatry. He cited a particularly grotesque passage in the Talmud that discusses one way to "worship" an idol that would seem to be the opposite, before summing up his initial argument: "…here's the point: contempt, no less than love, can be raised to the level of

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[82] Stoller, A. Brian. *Idolatry, Trump, and a Society on the Brink: A Call to Repentance*. Sermon delivered 4 Sept. 2020.
[83] Ibid.

worship. It's the deification of disgust. When we let our contempt and loathing for someone or something gain such power over us that it becomes a dominating, controlling force in our lives, we actually turn that object of contempt and loathing into an object of idol worship. This society has transformed Donald Trump into an idol. Some of us worship him with love and adoration; some of us worship him with hate and disgust. But worship him we do."[84]

In framing his argument in this way, Stoller ensured that he was not speaking from a certain political point of view. Furthermore, in choosing this particular avenue for comment, Stoller chose to speak directly to the moral failings in a society that he saw as a product of Trumpism. Rather than making the sermon address the moral failings of the individual who originated them, he chose to address the larger moral crisis that affected, and still affects, us all. Stoller continued by elucidated just how far reaching this "worship" had become. He wrote, "When I ask people, "how are you doing?" these days, I can't tell you how many of them answer with something about how Trump has got them down, or angry, or terrified, or outraged…Trump dominates our conversation and our consciousness, *all the time.*"[85]

How do we recover from this idolatry? Stoller posits that the answer is not to be found in the political realm, but rather, a spiritual one – a moral one. Stoller concluded his sermon by writing:

> "No, the *real* issues that need to be addressed are *spiritual*, and the work we have to do is deeply reflective. There *must* be reasons why we have fallen into this idol worship. What *are* they? What does it say about who *we*

[84] Ibid.
[85] Ibid.

> are, and how we need to change? Maybe we can start with something Moses says in our Torah portion this week: Listening. Maybe the first step toward ending the hatred and healing our broken society and our broken relationships is to just be quiet for once, and *listen* to each other, *listen* to the truths about ourselves that we'd rather ignore; *listen* to God."[86]

Rabbi Stoller here reemphasized his crucial point. The moral crisis he addressed may have been caused, inspired, and/or incited by a specific political figure – Donald Trump – but the crisis itself – Trumpism – goes well beyond politics. Stoller reminded his congregants of the importance of voting, but at the same time prompted them to not rest on their laurels that a political solution would magically bring about the end of the moral crises. There was, and is, a lot of work to be done, and the reminder from this sermon is that work is internal as well.

In Brooklyn, New York, Congregation Beth Elohim is led by Rabbi Rachel Timoner, who became Senior Rabbi in the summer of 2015. In the fall of 2016, she gave a sermon on Rosh Hashanah morning, entitled "How Will We Love?" that dealt with the upcoming 2016 election. However, this sermon was more than just reflections on the upcoming election. Rabbi Timoner used her pulpit, and her rabbinic voice to speak out against all of the moral atrocities she felt were present in our country, without being afraid of naming the fact that the rise of then-candidate Trump and his following had brought many of these issues into the mainstream. Timoner began her sermon by describing many of the harrowing events of the previous year, from the shooting at Pulse nightclub in Orlando, to the plight of refugees, to cases of anti-Semitism online.

[86] Ibid.

Her sermon continued without mentioning Trump specifically by name, but both explicitly and implicitly, his candidacy and his conduct forms the context in which Timoner spoke. She spoke of a future when our children and grandchildren would look back at this time and ask: "How did you let it happen? The Jewish people had seen this before: angry, racist mobs, angry anti-Semitic mobs. Talk of 'taking back the country.' A leader who said he would round people up for their ethnicity or religion. A leader who threatened violence. A leader who attacked the free press."[87] While Trump is not explicitly mentioned by name in this section, Timoner did not try to obscure the fact that he is the "leader" about whom she is talking, warning her congregants about the possibly future implications of inaction. Given in the fall of 2016 *before* the election, it is clear that Timoner was using her moral voice to speak to broader issues that transcended this particular moment. She spoke to the moral dangers that she saw and articulated why this was not something that would be "fixed" if the election went one way versus the other. The moral crisis in America which the rise Trumpism gave a platform to was something that required a solution that went beyond politics. Timoner continued: "This sermon is not about how to vote in this election. This is bigger than an election. I am here to say that standing idly by is not a Jewish value. Neutrality when life is at risk is not a Jewish value. Silence in the face of injustice is not a Jewish value. The Jewish thing to do is to take a stand, to speak, to act, to do everything in our power to prevent great harm."[88] Timoner wrote as plainly and straightforward as possible, using her rabbinic voice to speak not about politics for the sake of politics, but to speak about

[87] Timoner, Rachel. *How Will We Love?* Sermon delivered 3 Oct. 2016.
[88] Ibid.

the crisis that she believed America, and Jewish Americans more specifically, faced. If political action was needed in order to reach a moral, Jewish desired outcome, then she included that in her words:

> First, we must ensure that the forces of hate do not take power in our lifetime. Second, we must uproot and heal the violence and racism that are the underpinnings of this phenomenon, that are so deeply rooted in American soil and have become so endemic to our culture that they can be easily whipped up in a matter of months. Until we do both of these things, Jews will never be guaranteed safety and well-being in this, our home.[89]

Timoner also raised the stakes of the sermon for her congregants. She wrote about the Jewish values of not standing idly by, and she did not shy away from the political action that should have been taken in order to prevent some of the danger she saw. She also made it personal. The moral crisis that she witnessed could easily and quickly become a danger specifically to Jews, and she made that clear in the sermon itself. Timoner continued by bringing Jewish text into the sermon as a call to action, cited a Talmudic passage that comments on Abraham's protest to God about the impending destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. She wrote, "From his example the rabbis taught: 'one should love protest, for as long as there is protest in the world, goodness and blessing come into the world and evil departs from the world.'"[9091] Once she established the Jewish imperative to speak up and speak out, Timoner transitioned to her answer to the question of 'how?' For Timoner, the answer is love. She wrote that "we must love

[89] Ibid.
[90] BT Tamid 28a.
[91] Timoner, Rachel. *How Will We Love?* Sermon delivered 3 Oct. 2016.

ourselves enough to believe that we can change. We must love *each other* enough to believe that we can change."[92] However, for Timoner, love is not just a feeling we give and receive. Her sermon concluded with a striking and powerful definition of love as so much more – something that can and should guide our response to this moral crisis: "Love is action. Love happens with our hands and our feet and our voices. Love is made real when we show up…and right now, today, *this* is what love looks like: Doing teshuva. Proving that human beings can change…if we can love ourselves into doing better, into being better, we will change. If we love our country into doing better, into being better, it will change."[93]

The powerful conclusion to this sermon is one which gave its audience a call to action but framed it in a way that felt tenable. Timoner's use of love as the way to do the work allowed many to feel like it was possible for them to contribute, and while she also made clear how she believed the manifestation of love in this moment was through action, the framework of love allowed her congregants to feel like they could contribute to ending this moral crisis in many ways.

Rabbi Seth Limmer, Senior Rabbi of Chicago Sinai Congregation in Chicago, Illinois, also gave a sermon in 2016, before Trump's election, in which he spoke to the dangers that Trump and his candidacy created and fostered in American society. Limmer's sermon called on all of his congregation to stand up and contribute towards building a world of tolerance. He mentions Trump only once, but his actions throughout

[92] Ibid.
[93] Ibid.

the summer of 2016 as a presidential candidate form the entire context in which the sermon was given.

Limmer opens with a story from his time in rabbinical school, when he told a supervisor how he had witnessed two young boys using homophobic language to argue with each other. After class, he pulled them aside and explained to them why their behavior was wrong. Proudly relaying this story to his supervisor, he was shocked at her response. "Are you kidding me? You failed! Seth, let me make this clear. Your job is to *interrupt bad behavior*."[94] Reflecting back on that day, Limmer saw that teaching as a valuable lesson he carries to this day and that is reflected in the texts of the Jewish tradition. He wrote:

> it is my job as a Rabbi – and our job as a Jewish community – to stand up for tolerance, for inclusion, for the dignity and value of all human beings. This lesson grows not out [of] a heart that bleeds too easily, but rather a moral compass that stems from the depths of our tradition. The very first teaching of our Torah is that humanity is created in the Divine Image: we are instructed from the outset that every person has embedded in their being sparks of divinity…this fundamental instruction is the core of our Jewish commitment to inclusivity, to diversity, to moving beyond tolerance to a loving embrace of humanity in all its wonderful variety.[95]

Limmer set the foundation for his call to action. Simply, we must stand up for the dignity and value of all human beings. Having laid the groundwork in both personal story and Jewish text, Limmer continued by explaining how that has always been the core mission of Chicago Sinai Congregation, which has a long history of Rabbis who

[94] Limmer, Seth. *The Function of Limits.* Sermon delivered 13 Oct. 2016.
[95] Ibid.

fought from the pulpit for dignity and equality. Limmer continued by reminding his congregants they cannot merely rest on their laurels and the history of the congregation. He raised the stakes by describing the 'urgency of now,'[96] and naming explicitly Trump's contributions to that urgency. He wrote:

> our unwavering commitment to inclusion and diversity is needed now more than ever…this summer, North Carolina had its voting laws overturned by the Circuit Court that found its restrictions racist, that excoriated its legislators for targeting Black voters with 'almost surgical precision.' This fall, the United States of America has a person running for President who has claimed an American judge's Hispanic heritage prevents him from being impartial, a candidate who has questioned whether or not our nation – built on John Locke's promise of religious tolerations – should continue to allow Muslims to be welcome on our shores. We are living in intolerant times.[97]

Limmer's critique of Trump was framed around a specific issue and the value the goes with it. While there were other moral failings he could have chosen, Limmer's rabbinic voice is strengthened because of his focus on the particular cruelty of Trump's intolerance of the "other". At the end of the sermon, Limmer returned to his opening story, reminding his congregation of their role. He wrote: "Our job is to interrupt bad behavior."[98] With this final call to action, Limmer not only clarifies his critique of Trump's 'bad behavior,' but also encourages all those who heard or read the sermon to act against it as well.

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[96] This phrase comes from a speech given to Riverside Church by The Rev Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1967.
[97] Limmer, Seth. *The Function of Limits.* Sermon delivered 13 Oct. 2016.
[98] Ibid.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

While the periods of McCarthyism and Trumpism were two of the most significant periods of moral crisis in American history, they were not the only ones, and they will certainly not be the last ones. In analyzing and considering the responses of both individual rabbis as well as larger rabbinic organizations, it is evident that rabbis felt the prophetic call to speak out about these crises, and that there were varied and nuanced ways to do so. In the period of McCarthyism, the CCAR was explicit and ruthless in its condemnation of Senator McCarthy and the policies he championed. Rabbis from all over the country used their pulpits to speak out against McCarthyism. Some offered direct condemnations of policy and action, while others addressed the societal inequities America was facing. Others still spoke to the emotional havoc that McCarthy had wrought. In the era of Trumpism, the CCAR was narrower with its condemnation, but did not hold back when specific morally abhorrent comments and actions were made. Rabbis sought ways to try and heal divides among their congregations, while simultaneously offering warnings to the dangers they saw in a society growing more and more divided. Here too, rabbis spoke out on both an emotional level as well as a more direct political one. Some dealt directly with the policies and actions of Trump, while others attempted to focus their critique on the movement of Trumpism, of which he became the standard bearer. In this period as well, rabbis felt the prophetic call to speak, and to act, and rose to the occasion, in myriad approaches.

In his introduction to *Moral Resistance and Spiritual Authority,* Rabbi David Saperstein wrote about certain core Jewish values that have been adopted into the mainstream of Western civilization, including "the infinite value of human life, the importance of being accountable to the rule of law, and distributive justice, with the care for the poor the orphan and the widow as a moral obligation for all societies."[99] Saperstein explains that "these universal values…can offer powerful moral guidance to our nation."[100] He continued, "At this vital crossroads for America, the world, and the Jewish people, we must acknowledge that it is a sin – not less – to do nothing when moral decisions must be made. Our task is to heal this battered and weary world."[101]

*Moral Resistance and Spiritual Authority is* a volume of essays written by Reform Rabbis across North America, compiled and edited by Rabbi Jonah Pesner[102] and Rabbi Seth Limmer.[103] In his essay for the book, Pesner discussed the obligation he feels to act, and how the book got its name. Pesner discussed being arrested in an act of civil disobedience in support of the DREAM Act.[104] He wrote, "Even as we were being led into police custody, our group understood that we were walking in the footsteps of countless generations of Jews before us…our deeds of civil disobedience were an act of *moral resistance* to the injustices being perpetrated on the Dreamers, along with tens of

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[99] Limmer, Seth M., and Jonah Dov Pesner, editors. *Moral Resistance and Spiritual Authority: Our Jewish Obligation to Social Justice*. Central Conference of American Rabbis, 2019. xxv.
[100] Ibid. xxvi.
[101] Ibid. xxviii.
[102] Rabbi Pesner serves as the Director of the Religious Action Center, a joint instrument of both the CCAR and Union for Reform Judaism, whose mission is to "represent the values of the largest and most diverse Jewish Movement in North America to governments at all levels."
[103] Rabbi Limmer served as the Chair of the CCAR's Committee on Justice and Peace – the same committee that authored the resolutions condemning McCarthyism discussed in Chapter 3.
[104] Which would grant citizenship to over eight hundred thousand Dreamers who came to the United States as young children but have grown up as full-fledged parts of American society.

millions of other immigrants and refugees. We acted on the *spiritual authority* inherited from recent leaders like Rabbis Richard Hirsch, Abraham Joshua Heschel, and Maurice Eisendrath, who marched with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr."[105] Pesner sums up so crucially the importance of the rabbinic voice. Combining the spiritual authority with the moral compass creates a uniquely powerful voice that rabbis can – and should – use to speak and to act. The actions of rabbis and other spiritual leaders have and will continue to heal the nation in times of moral crisis, as they did in the periods of both McCarthyism and Trumpism. However, the importance and the imperative of the rabbinic voice goes well beyond a reactive need to specific catastrophic events in the world. The rabbinic voice needs to be proactive, a voice of moral leadership in all times.

*American Values, Religious Voices*, the project started by Rabbi Andrea Weiss initially as a reaction to the election of Donald Trump, is sending a second batch of one hundred letters to the incoming administration beginning on January 20, 2021, with the inauguration of President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. In sending these letters to President Biden, *Values and Voices* is proving the essential point: the central and ongoing role that clergy have in using their voice in acts of moral resistance. In *Values and Voices*, the rabbis and scholars who contributed did so by writing letters to public elected officials.

This thesis explored primarily the use of the sermon as a method of using the rabbinic voice. However, now, perhaps more than ever before in history, there are a multitude of ways for rabbis to amplify their rabbinic voice. They can use their teaching opportunities, for congregants of all ages, to teach about moral values and upstanders.

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[105] Limmer, Seth M., and Jonah Dov Pesner, editors. *Moral Resistance and Spiritual Authority: Our Jewish Obligation to Social Justice*. Central Conference of American Rabbis, 2019. 88.

As we move further and further into the digital age, the reach that rabbis have expands as well. There have been multiple op-eds published in various newspapers and online journals that spoke to the moral failings in society. While some congregants may not wish to hear what they believe to be 'politics' from the bimah during a sermon, the congregational email blast or newsletter has become another platform from which rabbis can speak out. Social media has created another method thru which rabbis can speak and have their message distributed instantaneously. Many congregations in the last few years have gotten involved with community organizing projects, and larger umbrella organizations such as the Religious Action Center have given both rabbis and laypeople a platform to advocate for policies that reflect their moral values as Jews and Americans. There are many organizations with which rabbis can affiliate themselves, regardless of whether they have a pulpit of not. These larger rabbinic organizations are also places where the moral voice of the rabbi is upheld, amplified, and disseminated across the country. Finally, they have a platform on which they can influence those they serve. Rabbis can both participate in and encourage those around them to be more civically engaged and active – whether that means marching, demonstrating or voting. It should not be contingent on a specific moral crisis in America for rabbis to take hold of their spiritual authority and use it to speak out. When we use the examples of all of the spiritual leaders who spoke out before in times of moral crisis and use them as guides for the way we speak at all times, unapologetically embracing the rabbinic voice, we can, in fact, help to prevent future moral crises in our nation.

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