

**Banning Books- The Power Struggle Over Ideals and Identity**  
**High Holy Days 5783/2022- Rabbi Mara S. Nathan**

On Friday morning, August 12, Salman Rushdie, was brutally attacked as he walked on stage to be interviewed at the Chautauqua Institution in Western New York. As it turns out, Rabbi Stahl and many other members of our congregation were there to see him.

After the publication of his novel “The Satanic Verses” the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini of Iran had issued a fatwa, ordering Muslims to kill him on sight. Rushdie had famously spent many years in hiding, but lately, he had begun appearing in public without evident security.

Even while the explicit motives of the attacker are unknown, there is no doubt that a strong desire to silence Rushdie was at play. And while we might seek to comfort ourselves with the notion that this act of violence was unique, it's impossible for me to ignore the chilling connection it has to the steady increase of attacks on books and their authors who do not conform to the status quo.

When the written word and those who create it are under attack, we are all very much in danger.

In August, The San Antonio Current reported that the Northeast ISD (Independent School District) was asked to review 431 books for appropriateness and ended up removing 119 of those including an illustrated adaptation of The Diary of Anne Frank and the Bible!<sup>1</sup>

Shocking!

But Claire Moses of the New York times explains, “A lot of people don’t consider the bans they want to be racist or bigoted. They say the books contain specific content that they feel isn’t appropriate for children, and they’ll sometimes point to explicit passages.” Still, it's hard to deny the undercurrent of bigotry. Librarians across the country say that the majority of challenged books are about Black or brown or LGBT characters.<sup>2</sup>

For me, this seems insane if not outright Un-American. After all, the right to free speech is protected under federal law. I always thought that meant I could write what I want, read what I want and discuss whatever I want. I don’t need anyone’s permission. I know there have always

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.ipost.com/diaspora/antisemitism/article-714895?fbclid=IwAR0b3-ARVK8fMQDDcxT4zZm5LtZ4GcJ7qfsMyb5OL\\_iewrvleVy\\_hh6Zm6c](https://www.ipost.com/diaspora/antisemitism/article-714895?fbclid=IwAR0b3-ARVK8fMQDDcxT4zZm5LtZ4GcJ7qfsMyb5OL_iewrvleVy_hh6Zm6c)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/31/briefing/book-banning-debate.html>

been books that have stirred controversy. Look at Uncle Tom’s Cabin, the first book in the United States to be banned on a national scale. The Confederacy barred it from stores not only for its pro-abolitionist agenda, but because it aroused heated debates about slavery (and some historians argue that the book catalyzed the Civil War).<sup>3</sup>

And I know there have always been parents and school boards who were uncomfortable with books in schools and libraries that depicted life beyond white, straight, middle-class America. They have attempted over and over to remove books from shelves even though in 1981 the Supreme Court ruled such actions were unconstitutional.<sup>4</sup> It should have been the end of the story. Not quite.

Today the people who are determined to limit access to books that are *meant* to inspire and encourage difficult conversations have gained power and agency once again. And as we now know all too well, the most established judicial precedent can be overturned if the social climate is just right. We are at yet another moment when the desires of a vocal minority are being made reality by hardliners in positions of power. And now their influence is being felt on both the local and state level.

During the nine-month period from July 2021 to March 2022, over 1,100 different titles were banned across the country. This has an even greater impact than you might imagine. The banning of a single book title can mean anywhere from a single copy to hundreds of copies being pulled from libraries or classrooms in a school district. “We are witnessing the erasure of topics that only recently represented progress toward inclusion.” said Jonathan Friedman, Director of PEN America’s Free Expression and Education program<sup>5</sup>.

We can no longer deny the ample evidence that we are in the middle of a power struggle if not an outright war. A war of conflicting ideals and ultimately a war of identity. And whether you realize it or not we are in the middle of it every day.

Last winter, I was in regular communication with the rep from Penguin Random House Speakers Bureau as we worked on the details of Isabel Wilkerson’s presentation about her book **Caste: The Origins of Our Discontent**. During one call, the rep asked me if we were still comfortable with Wilkerson speaking to our group. I told her of course. We’d been pouring over her book, section by section with members of Antioch all year. What made her ask? She told me that

<sup>3</sup> <https://lithub.com/the-history-and-present-of-banning-books-in-america/>

<sup>4</sup> "Board of Education, Island Trees Union Free School District No. 26 v. Pico by Pico." Oyez, [www.oyez.org/cases/1981/80-2043](http://www.oyez.org/cases/1981/80-2043)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/how-prevalent-are-book-bans-this-year-new-data-show-impact/2022/04#:~:text=More%20than%201%2C100%20unique%20books,in%20five%20districts%20or%20more>

Wilkerson's work was now on several lists of banned books, including some in Texas. There were groups that had canceled their contracts. That afternoon I sent emails to my contacts at H-E-B, The H.E. Butt Foundation, and the Spurs to make sure they were indeed ok with going forward. Thankfully all remained strongly committed and our program proceeded as planned.

Wilkerson's book is one of many that exposes the deeply ingrained racial discrimination and the unbalanced status quo in our country. To encounter so many explicit examples while reading it was unsettling and painful. It took me three tries to make it through **Caste** because I felt so uncomfortable reading it. But I also knew how necessary it was for me to get to the end and talk about it with people whose lived experiences mirror its shameful truths.

Of course, there are those who chose not to read the book. And there are those who are not comfortable engaging in conversations about racial inequality or other inequalities in our society. There are those who would like things to be 'as they have always been.' But no one is entitled to require that other people embrace *their* personal beliefs. To give them license to do so is to set a dangerous precedent.

Take Texas mom Monica Brown. She has made it her life's mission to ban dozens of books from her community's school district libraries that contain descriptions of sex or LGBTQ themes. She believes that these books will damage the hearts and minds of students. And when her school district voted to remove only a handful of those titles this past May, she filed a police report accusing school employees of providing pornography to children, triggering a criminal investigation by Hood County.<sup>6</sup>

It is one thing to decide you do not want *your own* child to read a certain book or watch a particular movie. It's another for you to decide that *my kid* shouldn't read that book or watch that movie. When one person is given the power to proclaim that one set of lived experiences is the only one that matters; when one group desires to preserve that status quo by limiting access to ideas that might be upsetting or disturbing it shows a dangerous lack of trust in young people's ability to speak and to hear and to think critically. And it assumes that no teachers or mentors are equipped to guide them effectively.

They may seek to create what they consider to be a safe space. But what they are really doing is working to overthrow the very tenets of democracy. This is a very un-Jewish space.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.texastribune.org/2022/08/11/texas-library-book-ban-granbury/>

It might surprise you to learn that Judaism does not protect free speech. That's because at its core, traditional Judaism is not interested in democracy. Talmudic law is rooted in the Torah and supplemented by the decrees of Jewish courts that appoint their own successors.<sup>7</sup>

The focus is not on our 'rights' but on our responsibility to act in accordance with Jewish law. At a surface level this may appear to be very similar to the way that other traditional faith communities deal with challenges to their accepted norms. But for Judaism, acting responsibly means treating others with respect, not controlling conversations about theology, ritual, and community engagement. That kind of control is mainly absent from Judaism.

The rabbis of the Talmud delighted in ferociously disagreeing with each other. Our most important Jewish law books, the Mishnah and the Talmud, were written by committee across hundreds of years and- I might add- have plenty of raunchy, explicit content peppered through their pages. Jewish tradition is rarely scared of conflicting ideas. Instead, it focuses on how, when and where we speak to each other.

Not to say that we haven't had our moments.

On June 12<sup>th</sup>, 1945, a group of Orthodox rabbis assembled in a hotel in New York and burned a prayer book written by Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan of the Jewish Theological seminary (JTS). The ceremonial book burning was part of the formal excommunication of Kaplan who was the founder of Reconstructionism. Just one month after the Allies declared victory over Nazi Europe, a group of rabbis used religious principles to attempt to stifle a dissenting voice within their midst.<sup>8</sup>

Kaplan's work was considered radical. He regularly infuriated traditional Jews, including pretty much all of his fellow faculty at JTS. The stunt, however, backfired!

Rather than marginalize Kaplan and shore up the authority of the Orthodox Rabbinate, a chain reaction of disapproval was set off across the entire American Jewish community.

Despite their personal feelings about Kaplan's theology, conservative and reform rabbis alike made it a priority to defend free Jewish thought, practice and belief against the Union of Orthodox Rabbis' fundamentalism. They believed Kaplan should be able to voice his opinion in a democratic environment. It was essential to tolerate and even encourage a plurality of beliefs—at all costs.

It is STILL essential to not only tolerate but encourage ideas that challenge us.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.kentlaw.iit.edu/sites/ck/files/public/institutes-centers/ilh/matthew-stone.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> (Zachary Silver, *The Excommunication of Mordecai Kaplan*, *The American Jewish Archives Journal*, LXII, Num. 1.)

Whether sacred texts, like Kaplan's prayer book, works of nonfiction, like Wilkerson's *Caste*, or fiction, like Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*, books that challenge the established narrative are too often considered dangerous if only because they invite us to consider a different reality.

This is Iranian author Azar Nafisi's perspective. She was interviewed on NPR's Morning Edition soon after the attack on Salman Rushdie. When she was asked what advice she would give parents who are concerned about what their kids are reading in school, Nafisi said, "I would bring the debate to schools and talk about the fact that...we should be more scared if our children do not know the truth. (Because)...if we cannot tolerate reading about reality in books, how can we tolerate standing up to ugly realities that are happening every day? We want to arm our children with this independence of mind [and teach them to reject what we see] ....both on the left and the right...a mindset that is ideological...that only hears itself."<sup>9</sup>

I called Shannon Seglin, Temple member, current sisterhood co-president and the assistant manager of the Children's Department at the Central San Antonio Library. I wanted to know how she was doing. I also wanted to know, what can we do?

She told me that she sees more and more people who feel empowered to complain about book displays, particularly ones that highlight gender diversity. During Pride month this past spring, someone took the book "Calvin", a picture book about a transgender boy, from a display, brought it into the bathroom, ripped it up and threw it in the trash.

She spoke about colleagues who had left their positions because they were tired of always being challenged and said that while she is grateful to feel supported by the director of her department, she is sad. But luckily, she is also mad. And she shared ways we can speak out against banning books in our own community in addition to raising awareness about banned book week- which we did at the end of September.

We can engage with grassroots organizations like [Texans for the Right to Read](#) and support the [Freedom to Read Foundation](#). We can pay attention to the agenda of our local school boards and show up (with friends) to meetings to make sure our voices and perspectives are heard. But most of all we can read and encourage our young people to read too!

When we read, we open our eyes and our ears to the uncomfortable truths that surround us. When we read, we give ourselves private time to reflect on the words we see on the page. These words open windows to ideas we may not have considered and life experiences we cannot know. And when we read, we are not called upon to respond immediately. We are not required to defend ourselves or others at all. We are simply invited to think.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2022/08/23/1118959407/an-iranian-american-writer-makes-a-case-against-censorship-and-for-rushdie>

We don't need to fear dystopian literature, gender inclusive literature, conservative literature, socialist literature, religious literature, or any other form of the written word. We can be offended, we can disagree, we might even alter our opinions. Our minds are strong. We have the intellectual capacity to integrate many conflicting ideas into a multi-faceted understanding of our world. *We don't need anyone else to curate it for us.*

During these high holy days, we spend so many hours with book in hand, confronting the meaning of life, considering our deeds, our behavior, our obligations in this world. Freedom of speech, freedom of expression- they are at the core of what it means to be an American. They are at the core of what it means to be an engaged Jew. We must protect our access both to books that delight and books that challenge so that we can better engage with the world as it is and dream about how it can yet be.

AMEN