

In Response to Charlottesville

Remarks delivered by
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In the city of Philadelphia there sits an iconic bell with these words inscribed upon it: Proclaim liberty throughout the land to all the inhabitants thereof. The words themselves were taken directly from our Torah, words given to the Jewish people while still in the desert as they prepared to enter the sacred land of Israel.

In the city of Philadelphia there sits a bell, that was struck to proclaim the sound of freedom when our nation declared its independence, when America was born, when the country that we loved was founded on this sacred land, a land we hold dear for upon it bears the fruit and flower of democracy and freedom for all who walk upon it.

And in the city of Philadelphia there sits an iconic bell, a crack in that prevents it from sounding. The bell is known as Liberty and it serves as the symbol of everything good that our nation is intended to be.

For months now, the Liberty Bell has withstood an assault upon it, an assault intended to break the bell and crush the spirit of America. But the Liberty Bell continues to stand firm in its place, refusing to be weathered by time, broken by spirit, and smashed at the hands of its would be destroyers. While the sound of the bell is not proclaimed, the Bell continues to ring strong each and every day.

In recent days, the meaning and significance of the Liberty Bell as symbol of America has been challenged. The Biblical demand to proclaim liberty and justice in this sacred land has been tested. Today, you and I have become witnesses to a moment in our history, defining not its past but its future.

I will not cheapen the events of these recent days by seeing them only in political terms and in the language of politics. What occurred in Virginia is not about this President or another. The experience in Charlottesville represents the challenge to the nature of America and its people. What will be our character? What will we truly stand for, and what will be our future.

As Americans, we are people of great faith; not religious persuasion or religious coercion. We Americans are a people whose faith is founded in the ancestors of many peoples, in the experiences of those seeking religious liberty, in the reality of living as slaves or under the strong arm of tyranny. We are a people made up of many peoples whose stories have been forged in the furnace of hate, of bigotry, and of intolerance; and we have come out stronger and better, more tolerant, and more committed to the freedom of all because of it.

What we witnessed in Charlottesville this week is how a small band of hate can raise fear in the hearts of many, can feed weeds of evil to spread and squelch healthy flowers of freedom. But we have also witnessed the goodness of many, the kindness of men and women, black and white, Jew and Christian and Muslim, who together banded against a wave of hate and turned it back upon itself. It will not be the last time that goodness prevails but it represents how goodness in American can prevail each and every time against evil.

I have no doubt that in the days to come, our liberty and freedom will continue to be tested. And I have no doubt that the Office of the President will be tested as well. How you and I respond will either assure us all of the true greatness of America, or it will test us in ways we have not known before. I am confident that the American people, a good people, a faithful people, will rise up and stand against evil and hate, no matter where it may originate, regardless of the place from which it is spoken and encouraged, and even if it means risking our lives to do so.

As Jews, we know the terror and fear of the swastika, the raised arm, the confederate flag. As Jews, we understand that hate cannot be permitted to breathe or it will fuel even greater hate, fear, and death. As Jews, we know that what is targeted against us is ultimately targeted against others. And, as Jews, we know that the only way to respond to hate is by building strong coalitions of the oppressed, the needy, lovers of peace, and others of faith who believe in a God given world, given to all people of good will and kindness.

Let us rise from the flames that burned in Charlottesville, from the memory of the maimed and murdered. Let us stand together with all people of good will and form a bulwark of the good against the forces of hatred. To do less would be to ignore our people's story and the biblical demand inscribed on Liberty's bell.

Yes, tonight and in the days to come, let us proclaim loudly the words of Leviticus. Let us proclaim liberty throughout the land to all peoples, to all leaders, to politicians and congressmen, and yes, even to our President. There can be no place for evil on this sacred ground. Wherever evil emerges we will strangle it and cut it off at its roots. To our President and his advisors, to our Congressmen and Congresswomen, to Governors and Mayors, teachers and police, to all who are given the sacred privilege to lead and to protect the citizens and the guests of this sacred land – to all of them, let us declare: Be strong, be courageous, as you have never been before. Stand firm in defense of liberty for liberty is a precious gift never to be taken for granted, never to be squandered, and never to be forgotten. Too many have sacrificed life and limb for the liberty we hold dear. Let no one take it from us, now or ever.