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It surely won't come as a shock to anyone who has gotten to know me over the course of this past year that libraries are my happy place. In elementary school I would check out as many books as Mrs. Hipkens, our school librarian, would let me take on a Friday afternoon, knowing I would have a trove of adventure and excitement to hold me through the weekend. When I was a teenager, I would make regular pilgrimages to the 42nd Street branch of the New York Public Library, climbing past the iconic lion sculptures into the cathedral-like main reading room, with its dark wood panels and long tables where librarians would bring the books out you selected to be read in that room surrounded by majestic silence and the quiet rustle of pages. In college, Aimée and I would spend much of our time together in the Quincy House library, where she had a work-study job staffing the front desk. We would "study together," often until the wee hours of the morning and then I would routinely help her shut down the library at 2 AM which was closing time. When I was in rabbinical school, I would often finish my day of classes and hevruta study sessions, then head down to the Biddle Library at Penn Law School to join Aimée and study with her there. We'd work for a few hours, take a break for dinner, then go back in until they literally closed the library down around us. When I became a father I rediscovered with great joy the children's section of our local library and spent countless hours snuggled with our children on beanbags, reading classics from my own childhood to them. When we recently moved to Glen Rock one of the very first things we did, even before we were unpacked? A family trip to the library – at our kids' insistence – with our deed in hand so we could sign up for library cards. Like I said, libraries are my happy place.

Which makes me particularly distressed about an increasing trend we are witnessing in our country: a mounting and sustained attack on libraries, librarians and, well, books as libraries have come under siege in many parts of the country by the very communities they're trying to serve. Book bans have been steadily rising over the past few years, and the American Library Association which keeps track of bans and challenges across the country has raised the alarm based on the most recent data: In 2021, the ALA recorded 729 book challenges targeting 1597 titles. That's more than double 2020's figures, and the highest number since the organization began keeping records in 2000. Of course the actual numbers are probably much higher: some challenges are never reported by libraries and books preemptively pulled by librarians out of fear for their jobs are obviously not included.

These librarians' fears are not unfounded. In March, the Idaho House of Representatives passed a bill aimed at eliminating protections for schools and librarians, opening them up to fines or prosecution for lending books seen as harmful to minors. In Tennessee, a man running for district attorney stated his hope that the time would come when librarians would be held criminally liable for contributing to the delinquency of a minor if they allowed them to check out objectionable books. And librarians *are* getting fired: Fired for holding book clubs where teens can discuss books on race relations or social inequality, or fired for refusing to pull books off the shelves when ordered to by the city council or parents groups. In some towns, libraries' budgets are being slashed and librarians' salaries cut by local councils to pressure them to get rid of books they disapprove of. This year alone, books that have been removed from the

shelves of public libraries because of legal challenges and pressure campaigns include the children's classic *The Night Kitchen* by Maurice Sendak, Art Spiegelman's groundbreaking Pulitzer Prize-winning Holocaust graphic novel *Maus*, and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* – as well as a children's book teaching about the battle to overcome school segregation called *Ruby Bridges Goes to School*.

Advocates of these book bans – including the stunningly ironically named Moms for Liberty, as though banning books was somehow an expression of 'liberty' – say they are protecting children from confronting ideas or perspectives that parents don't want them exposed to. And certainly parents have the right to make choices about what they want their children to read. But choosing for your own children isn't the same as pulling books off of library shelves and depriving other parents and children of the right to make their own choices and explore and learn about the world around them. The idea of restricting and limiting knowledge is one that is inimical to Judaism – a tradition that is rooted in asking difficult and challenging questions, examining issues from multiple perspectives and upholding, even celebrating, a diversity of voices and points of view.

We see this approach on every page, in every line of the Talmud, the great compendium of Jewish law and wisdom, collected between the first and sixth centuries of the common era and that represents the embodiment of Jewish thought. The rabbis of the Talmud plumbed every aspect of life, from the most profound and sacred to the most mundane; and the quintessential feature of the Talmud is that it is famously comprised of seemingly endless argumentation and debate – different and conflicting viewpoints being brought to bear on the issues the rabbis are addressing. The Talmud will never provide one perspective on a subject when seventeen will do; and many modern scholars argue that, as much as the content being discussed, the argumentation itself is part of the point: that these arguments represent and promote a culture based on disputation and debate, on not shying away from challenging questions. And, by preserving even the minority positions that have been rejected, Jewish tradition recognizes the importance and integrity of multiple perspectives and affirms the value of promoting open discussion.

Perhaps in part because of Judaism's approach to knowledge and learning and certainly because of our status as a powerless minority that was often in the best case *tolerated* in whatever country we found ourselves living, Jews have endured more than their share of censorship and book burning down the ages, including the burning of the Talmud in France, Italy, Germany, and other European countries throughout the Middle Ages. The Talmud's insistence on legitimizing alternate points of view – or simply *servicing* as an alternate point of view within a largely monolithic society – was often seen as threatening and being profoundly at odds with the autocratic orthodoxies of the time. I think it goes without saying that whenever people in positions of power have sought to impose their viewpoints or suggest there is only one legitimate point of view for all society that generally hasn't gone well for Jews. As Rabbi Yitz Greenberg puts it, "Jewish distinctive existence continues to be a very sensitive litmus test of the capacity of human groups and -isms to accept their own limitations and respect the dignity of others. The fact that Jews exist and are different poses a challenge to all who make absolute claims for themselves." (*The Jewish Way*, p. 231) Judaism thrives in open societies where ideas can be discussed and debated and a variety of perspectives is encouraged; and we are

threatened by societies that are closed and restrictive, whose absolutism allows no room for dissent or difference of opinion

Of all the rationales provided by those who are promoting these book bans, perhaps the most disturbing to me is one from a Texas lawmaker who is insisting libraries remove any books that “might make students feel discomfort, guilt, anguish or any other form of psychological distress because of their race or sex.” The idea behind this proposed legislation is to give parents the right to challenge any book that makes them or their child feel uncomfortable – an intentionally vague and subjective standard that empowers parents to bully schools and libraries into removing books for fear of running into legal trouble. But there is something deeper going on here, because the purpose of learning and knowledge isn’t simply to reinforce the ideas and beliefs we already hold. Real learning can be uncomfortable, because it makes us think and stretch and engage with ideas and positions that we might not share. Perhaps these ideas will transform our lives profoundly. Perhaps we will examine and reject them. But either way we will emerge richer for having been exposed to and having grappled with them.

We sit here today on Yom Kippur, a day very much about creating discomfort. The whole day is designed to make us feel uncomfortable both physically with its fasting and other restrictions, and spiritually and morally with its challenges to show a commitment to justice and ethics that goes beyond the recitation of prayers or, in ancient times, the offering of sacrifices. This is the essence of the Haftarah for Yom Kippur as I alluded to earlier when I introduced the reading. By telling the people that simply “starving bodies, bowing the head like a bulrush and lying in sackcloth and ashes” was not the fast God desires, Isaiah was calling out those in his own time who were complacent in their certainty that simply by observing these ritual requirements they were doing all that God expected of them. This complacency, as much as anything else, is the object of Isaiah’s scorn. While we need to heed his admonition on what qualifies as a true fast, we also need to pay attention to his deeper message about shying away from the place of easy assumptions and facile conclusions – the idea that we can lead good and responsible lives if we keep ourselves in our comfort zones and don’t allow ourselves to confront perspectives and experiences different from our own.

Discomfort, Judaism teaches, is the place of struggle and, ultimately, the place of growth: the place out of which we can nurture and hone the qualities and traits we need to develop most fully as human beings. Unfortunately there are many people – and this is the case on both sides of the political spectrum – who do all they can to surround themselves only with views that conform to their previously held beliefs and assumptions, who operate within an echo chamber, and reject anyone or anything that doesn’t align with their beliefs and worldview. And this corrosive trend becomes still more dangerous when these same people extend their own biases and preferences – a sense that there’s only one legitimate viewpoint – by seeking to impose it on others, limiting access to books and picking and choosing what perspectives students in a public school or at a public library have access to.

Earlier this year, in Tennessee, a preacher held a book burning for works that he deemed ‘demonic.’ That’s right, a book burning. His church said they would burn, and I’m quoting here from a statement they released beforehand, “cultic materials that they deem are a threat to their religious rights and freedoms and belief system.” Books burned included the popular *Twilight* series and, wait for it, *Harry Potter*. We can roll our eyes – and should – at something that was probably as much of a publicity stunt by an ideological provocateur as

anything else. But I want to call your attention back to that language – “materials that they deem are a threat to their religious rights and freedoms.” It sounds like a joke, but this is exactly the approach that is being taken in communities around the country as school boards and local libraries are facing increasing pressure and even threats to remove materials that someone, anyone, finds objectionable.

And this is especially dangerous because many people who don't easily fit in in the setting where they find themselves seek refuge in libraries and learning and being able to connect to ideas or characters who reflect their experience and the way they feel, who give them hope and a place where they belong. These are often kids who are marginalized and bullied, and precisely those in society who are most vulnerable. For them, the library isn't just their happy place, it might be their safe place, perhaps the *only* place they can feel supported and understood, and taking that away is horrifying.

Yom Kippur is a day of taking responsibility – of admitting our flaws and shortcomings even when it's hard, of acknowledging the places we have not acted the way we should and have hurt other people, and making a commitment to trying to do better. Being uncomfortable with a book that raises challenging questions and perspectives on, say, race or sexuality and dealing with it by trying to have it taken off a library shelf is the exact opposite of personal responsibility – it's saying if something makes us uncomfortable then instead of trying to come to grips with it, engage it, we should project our own views on everyone else and ban the book so we don't have to deal with it ourselves. Perhaps it's no wonder that the symbol of Yom Kippur – day of making ourselves uncomfortable, confronting hard truths, taking personal responsibility, and everything else that is anathema to these book banners – is... a book: the *Sefer ha-Zichronot*, Book of Remembrance where Jewish tradition says God seals our fates in this New Year. Books stand in opposition to small-mindedness, narrowness, lapsing into comfortable and easy assumptions – and that is why they are both dangerous and precious.

So, yes, I'm deeply concerned about those who seek to limit access to books, silence different voices and perspectives, reinforce the premise that we should never need to confront an idea or concept that makes us unsettled. The antidote is our work here this day: being open where some seek to close down, seeking understanding and insight instead of shutting out other voices, stretching ourselves to go out of our comfort zones where some see this as a threat to their liberty, and seeking forgiveness for our shortcomings instead of seeking to blame them on others. It's not easy work, but it is essential. And if we do it right, we might merit to emerge from this day transformed, fueled with renewed purpose to help build a society where caring, openness, and understanding can flourish, and where learning, books, growth, and libraries can become the next generation's happy place.