

American War Games Yom Kippur Day 5773

One of my favorite films is called War Games. In the film, Matthew Broderick plays a young man who finds a back door in a military central computer, called the WOPR (War Operations Plan Response) in which reality is confused with game-playing. Broderick's character, David Lightman, challenges the computer to a game called "Global Thermonuclear War," which Lightman assumes is just a game.

In fact, the computer plays out thousands of possible war scenarios with the Soviet Union, 24 hours a day, hoping to find the perfect strategy in which the Soviets will be destroyed or dominated by the United States. It estimates Soviet responses to our responses to their responses and so on. WOPR estimates damage, it counts the dead, then it looks for ways to improve its score.

At the end of the film, as the clock ticks down to the launching of actual missiles which will surely mean World War III, the computer finally learns. The iconic line of the movie is when the computer, says, "Strange game. The only winning move is not to play." It's a Cold War parable about the dangers of technology.

But the message of this dated film seems eerily relevant today. If the film were written today, it wouldn't be about America's battle with a competing superpower. It would be about America's battle with itself.

Like the WOPR, there are war games being played out in American politics today. Instead of tubes and circuits and hard disks, insert our politicians—politicians of all political persuasions. Throw in Super PACS, spending unaccountable billions of dollars in an attempt to buy elections under the guise of free speech. Mix in the real-world financial crisis in this country. Sprinkle in inflammatory rhetoric that reminds me of newspaper editorials leading up the Civil War, or the hatefulness spewed in the press in the months leading up to the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin in 1995. What you get is a modern-day War Operations Plan Response.

It seems we cannot agree on anything in our country. When it comes to establishing justice, ensuring domestic tranquility, providing for the common defense, or promoting the general welfare, our politicians can't seem to get much of anything done. Many of them seem certain that no one on the opposite side of the aisle has a brain in their head; many seem to believe that their horse in the race is the only one that can save America, and that the other horse hates America; some believe that if a politician of

their own party works together with a politician from the other one, he or she deserves to be voted out of office. If either side compromises, they lose. And if neither side compromises, they each get to blame the other for the problems of our country. Each side in this scenario is doing its own war gaming. Each side seeks to avoid mutually assured destruction, even as they engage in tactics which will ensure it.

In the film, WOPR plays out a Soviet nuclear first-strike, then a first strike by the United States, then a NATO/Warsaw Pact escalation, then a Thai subversion and a Burmese maneuver... ever more obscure and unlikely situations. The computer explores every remotely plausible scenario, looking for angles, casualty estimates, and survivability rates, hoping to find a strategy to obliterate the Soviet Union with nary an American casualty.

Today, our political WOPR contains gaming strategies, too. You've got the Conservatism vs. Liberalism standoff. You've got the Welfare State strategy, the percent calculation, the rugged individualism scenario, the blue state people vs. red state people divide, the politics of race, the politics of gender, the Federalism vs. States' Rights confrontation. Instead of an exchange of legitimate political ideologies and visions for our country, where passionate and good people figure out how to take the best ideas and emerge with solutions where not everyone gets what they want, but everyone comes out with more than half of what they need, what you get is an internal American political system that is a zero-sum game—in which one side winning means that the other side necessarily loses.

Instead of compromise solutions, what we get is no solutions to the problems our nation faces. Zero-sum politics means we and people we love remain unemployed; it means more and more hard working people in our own community are going hungry; it means we can't be sure Medicare will be there when we or our children need it; it means we can't find a balance in government regulation of small businesses; it means we can't come to terms with the challenges of health care costs or our debt crisis or illegal immigration or climate change or the wars we're engaged in.

At this time, in the lead up to the November elections, the nastiness reaches its apex. And what you get is the retirement of long-standing representatives and senators, passionate politicians from both sides of the aisle, who either can't sustain their seats because they've committed the sin of not hating the other, or who prefer to retire than to participate in the "global thermonuclear war" that is American politics. Good people willing to work to compromise solutions are out; gridlock in the name of ideology is in.

The Jewish philosopher Martin Buber wrote: “The human world is today, as never before, split into two camps, each of which understands the other as the embodiment of falsehood and itself as the embodiment of truth. . . . Each side has assumed monopoly of the sunlight and has plunged its antagonist into night, and each side demands that you decide between day and night. . . .”

I never tell you who to vote for, and I won't start today. Both main political parties have contributed to the current political climate—that's for sure. And, like David Lightman in the film, we all are collectively responsible for this war game. Let's own our responsibility in this dangerous game on this Yom Kippur. We collectively put our politicians in office. With our silence, and sometimes with our own actions, we give our permission for this internal war of attrition. Like David Lightman, we can claim that we thought it was a game—that we never meant for it to get this way. But we cannot claim to be innocent bystanders, either. We can be complicit in allowing it to continue, or we can call upon those we've elected to do their jobs, work with people who disagree with them across the aisle, find compromise that can move us forward.

Fortunately, we have a model for what differing styles of conflict and resolution might look like—right from Jewish tradition. Rabbi Abba said in the name of Sh'mu'el: For three years the House of Shammai and the House of Hillel debated [a legal matter]. Shammai said, “The law is according to our position,” and Hillel said, “The law is according to our position.” A divine voice came and said, “EILEH V'EILEH DIVREI ELOHIM CHAYIM. These and these are the words of the living God, and the law is according to the House of Hillel.” But if these and these are both the words of the living God, why was the law set according to the House of Hillel? Because those in (the House of Hillel) were humble, and they taught both their own words and the words of the House of Shammai. And not only this, but they taught the words of the House of Shammai before their own. (Talmud Eruvin 13b).

Lest we think that serious philosophical disagreement was invented in the current political cycle, understand that the great Jewish teachers, Hillel and Shammai, lived nearly 2000 years ago, and they almost always disagreed.

As the Talmud teaches, although the House of Shammai and the House of Hillel were in disagreement - what the one forbade, the other permitted – nevertheless, the House of Shammai did not refrain from marrying women [of the families] of the House of Hillel, nor did the House of Hillel refrain from marrying those of the House of Shammai. This should teach you that they showed love and friendship toward one another, thus putting

into practice the injunction, “Love truth but also peace.” Hillel and Shammai disagreed about almost everything. But in the end of the day, they were able to be friends. They were passionate about their opinions, but they were still able to respect each other.

The point I seek to make this morning is not about moral or political relativism. There are profound and legitimate philosophical disagreements between the political parties in our country and about the proper role of government in our lives. These debates date back to the founding of our nation, and the seams of those disagreements can be seen in the founding documents of our country. Disagreement and debate are a vital part of our democracy. What I question today is the tone. What I question is the hateful language. Here, too, Judaism can provide good and bad role models for us.

There is a well-known Hebrew expression, *sinat hinam* “baseless hatred” about which Rabbi Danny Gordis, a victim of personal bashing in the press, recently wrote: “The Talmud suggests that the First Temple was destroyed because of serious violations like murder, idolatry, and incest. The Second was destroyed because of ‘baseless hatred.’ (Gordis asks:) Since the first violations are seemingly so much more serious, why was the First Temple rebuilt after 70 years, while the second never was?”

The answer was that *sinat hinam*- dismissive attitudes, communal rancor-- is different. It leads to the sorts of actions for which we can always find explanations and justifications, and so, we never really confront the fact that we’ve sinned. This is why the Temple that was destroyed because of baseless hatred has never been rebuilt.”

What I see in our country today, across the political spectrum, is the kind of *sinat chinam* that prevails over principled disagreement. And, I have to admit, that, as a Jew, that hatred scares me.

We must come to understand that respectful disagreement can lead us to greater wisdom. Rav Kook, one of the great rabbis of the 20th century, taught, “True peace cannot come into the world except by means of the value of a peace of many faces. A peace of many faces means that all sides and approaches are seen; and it becomes clear that there is a place for them all, each one according to its worth, its place, and its content. “

This is our sanctuary. In it, we celebrate and mourn together, we speak to God with our prayers, and we hear God speak to us through the words of our sacred texts. In this space, we offer each other something different from the harshness and lack of civility in the current political arena. We’re not afraid to talk about public issues here, nor should

we be. We must, in my view, be willing to talk with each other about what we're talking about out in the world, otherwise, why would you come here? But hopefully, we do so in a respectful way that makes space for differing points of view. We do so without attack ads or robo-calls.

But here's the thing: as you've likely heard me say before, this sanctuary is just that—a place that you can come and visit and feel safe. But we can't live in here. Our sanctuary has windows for a reason—we have to remember that, even as we bring TO this place our troubles, cares, concerns, opinions, and disagreements, we must also take what we've learned here and apply it to the world out there.

Today, 1400 people will hear this message—1400 people representing more than 400 families from Rockland and Bergen counties. Can we alone change the rhetoric of national, state, or even local campaigns? Probably not. But we, like the WOPR, can learn, and then we can apply what we learn to the world out there.

At the end of the movie War Games, as the countdown to World War III approaches and the computer plays out every feasible scenario, David Lightman distracts the computer by challenging it to play a game of tic-tac-toe. Who here has played tic-tac-toe? (RAISE HANDS) The WOPR in War Games plays hundreds of games, first against David Lightman, and then against itself. As the music builds, and the timer counts down, the screen goes blank. And the computer suddenly says: "A strange game. The only winning move is not to play." The computer learns that, like in a so-called game of Global Thermonuclear War, there are no winners in tic tac toe.

What's true about tic-tac-toe, if you play long enough? Yes, once both players know the trick, it is impossible to win the game. The same is true of tic-tac-toe politics, where both sides know how to stalemate each other from the second move. One side will technically win in this election cycle, but these kinds of games ensure that our country will lose in the long term.

As Ben Azzai of our tradition has taught, "Don't say, 'Since I have been humiliated, let my neighbor be humiliated also.' Know for a fact that it is the image of God you would be humiliating in your neighbor."

The election we face is incredibly important for the direction of the country. I urge you to participate, to vote for someone—please don't sit this one out. The last thing I want you

to hear me saying is that you should disengage from our democratic process. I'm asking you something different on this Day of Days.

Can we resolve the problems of campaign finance and Super PACs as a congregation? No, not on our own. But the 1400 of us have a choice. We don't have to play the game. We can choose to remember that attacks that demonize people in a personal way have no place in our civil discourse—and worse yet, they move us further from the solutions we need for the serious challenges our country faces. Those attacks diminish the strength of legitimate arguments and philosophical opinion. Those attacks are built on the presumption that in order for one political ideology to advance, the other has to be completely obliterated. And in a country where we are so divided, such tactics lead only to gridlock.

We can remember what Ben Zoma taught in the Mishnah when he says, "Who is wise? One who learns from everyone, as it says in Psalms, 'From all who would teach me, I have gained understanding. ' We should be willing to seek wisdom in each person, and each point of view.

Forty seven years ago, Arlo Guthrie wrote his most famous song—"Alice's Restaurant." At the time, the song was, in part, a protest against the Vietnam War. But Guthrie has updated it every few years to reflect the issues of the day. One of my favorite parts of the song comes at the end of the 25-minute performance, where Guthrie speaks about the power individuals have to make a difference. I'd like to ask Arlo's forgiveness in absentia as I take poetic license with his words. Today, he might say, if one person fails to forward a hate-filled political e-mail or Facebook post, people may think he's really naive, and it may not make a difference. And if two people of different political persuasions engaged in serious, respectful dialogue, in harmony, no one may notice.

But if three people turn off the television or radio when attack ads come on, can you imagine—three people—they may think its an organization.

And can you imagine 1400 people a day, I said 1400 people a day, telling their friends that they can disagree without being disagreeable—they may think it's a movement. And that's what it is, it's the Hillel and Shammai Anti-Hate, Tic-Tac-Toe Movement, and all you have to do is say, the only winning move is not to play.

Let's disagree, what do you say? Let's invite serious debate and discussion into this safe space—into this sanctuary. We'll start with a candidates' forum right here, with both candidates for the 5th Congressional District on October 7 at 9:00 a.m. Let's share our passionate views and differences with each other. And let us also buck the trend in society today. Let's disagree respectfully. Let's not lob hate-filled digital grenades into each others inboxes. Let's share with each other personal stories about why we care so much about the issues our states and our nation face.

Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba said: "If a father and son or a teacher and a student who are studying Torah in one place become enemies to one another, they should not move from there until their love for one another is restored." Let's not move from the difficult conversations of our day until we truly listen to one another; until we see the disagreements from both sides, until we see if we can find the kind of compromises that generations of Americans before us have found to address the most serious problems of their day.

Personally, I am pleased to publically say that a person who disagrees with my views on a certain issue asked me to lunch

last week, in his words, "to understand my perspective." I am glad that he asked, and I publicly accept. And I would welcome coffee or lunch with anyone who is open to an honest, respectful, personal dialogue and sharing of views on any subject.

When we do, my bet is that we'll each learn. We'll each grow in understanding. And we'll each come to know that we all want the same essential things for ourselves, our families, our countries, and our world.

If we can do this, and if we also turn that learning outward in the conversations we have with our neighbors, with our co-workers, with the people who bag our groceries, with the people we meet on the train and on the street, we can have a big impact. As the Talmud teaches, we can love truth, but also peace. And as Rav Kook taught, we can come to understand the importance of all sides and approaches; we can come to appreciate each approach for its worth, its place, and its content. And we can begin to work together towards a peace of many faces.

G'mar chatimah tova.

May you be sealed for blessing in the book of life.