**“Where Do You Put Your ‘But’”**

**Kol NIdrei 5778**

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Trust me.

I am not trying to offend you tonight.

Not on such an important and auspicious evening as Yom Kippur Eve.

What I am about to say could be taken the wrong way but, please, I mean you no disrespect.

I want to talk about your….rather large… ‘but’.

Well, not just *your* ‘but’; your neighbor’s huge ‘but’, too.

Even my ‘but’.

Everyone’s ‘but’.

We might think there is nothing wrong with our ‘buts’, but I have been staring at them for a while and they are not pretty.

Again, I don’t mean to offend but our ‘buts’ have become so big and someone had to say it. We are human beings so we can’t get rid of our ‘buts’; nevertheless, we need to do a better job on where we put them.

I feel better getting all that out and since you haven’t left, help me look a little more closely at our ‘buts’ tonight.

Of course, even if you weren’t reading this sermon online, you all know what ‘but’ I have been referring to: the conjunction used to introduce something to contrast with something already mentioned.

That ‘but’.

I love cheesecake, **but** the calories go right to my…butt.

I would love to eat a cheeseburger, **but** I keep kosher.

I would love to kill that person, **but** for some strange reason, there is a law against doing so.

Here is the thing. This year, I discovered that the trick is not that we all have ‘buts’ but learning where to put your ‘but’. Where you put your ‘but’ changes the conversation and is the key to whether you are looking for a way to be miserable this year or whether you desire to have a richer, more meaningful life this year as a human being and as a Jew.

Your ‘but’ will determine whether you are looking for a way in this year or a way out.

Since we are talking about ‘buts’, let me add another piece to this already uncomfortable sermon before I begin to try to tie it all together. Let me add something from politics, something that will show us where to place our ‘buts’ this year.

There is a political science concept called Miles Law, first coined by Rufus Miles who worked for the Truman Administration. Miles Law states that “where you stand depends almost entirely on where you sit.” For example, if you are working on policy at the State Department, your opinion on how congressional funding is approached will be based on your office’s view of foreign policy and your office’s needs, not at all the way the Defense Department looks at it. In other words, “where you stand depends on where you sit”. In geopolitics, Israel’s view of how the world should approach the ongoing conflict in Syria and what should happen after ISIS is removed is based entirely on their geopolitical reality and their perceived understanding of the threat Iran poses. This view is far different from how Turkey, Russia or even the U.S. views the same situation. Where you stand depends on where you sit. Israel sits differently from the US and that will be where the cause of tense conversations between the US and Israel in the months ahead. America will want to drive ISIS from southern Syria and then go home (we have no geopolitical interest in keeping troops in Syria indefinitely; let Russians deal with Iran); Israel will want an American presence and will afraid that Iran will continue to move in as Russia does nothing.

Where you stand is, ultimately, where you sit.

So tonight, I want to bring those two ideas together; talk to you about where ***you*** stand this year, and where you will put your ‘but’.

I want you to think about your family and loved ones.

Ask yourself: Where do I stand with them and where do I put my ‘but’ down when it comes to my loved ones.

I ask that because we are at the start of a new year and it is not too late to repair the damage our ‘buts’ have done with those relationships.

If I knew how often I would be in my office talking to people about the problems they have with their children, parents, wives, husbands, brother, sister, friends, (fill in the blank), I would have gotten a master’s in psychology and interpersonal relationships and not in Jewish education. And I certainly wouldn’t have studied so much in my final year on Kashrut, the Jewish dietary laws. Granted Yeshiva University didn’t give me much choice, but do you know how many times I have been asked about “an egg laid on a Yom Tov (holiday) and whether it can be eaten on Shabbat? That is an actual kashrut question. No one has ever asked me that but I spent months on that earth- shattering dilemma. Or how many times I have been shown a shochet’s knife and asked to do “bedikah” (inspection), and see if it is acceptable for use? Or asked about an obscure passage in Ramban on Parshat Bamidmar or on a sugya in Baba Metzia or a girsa change in Masechet Sanhedrin?

If you are scratching your head on some of those, then you know the answer.

Never.

Well, the one on Ramban in Parshat Bamidbar I was asked about that one…by a Christian who is studying the Torah.

Welcome to West Virginia.

I spent an entire year in “Yore Deah”, the classic volume in the Code of Jewish Law devoted to Jewish daily life, took five “must pass” finals where I wrote notebooks of answer, spend months learning about Ta’arovet, mixtures of milk and meat (don’t even get me started on the halacha of dog food on Pesach); do you know how meaningless all those months were? Meaningless…. for a pulpit rabbi. I loved every second of study and, yet, what I learned has never been useful to me in 30 plus years in the rabbinate.

Ask me, however, how many times a person has come to me and read to me a letter they’ve received from a loved one begging them to talk and they don’t want to; a husband whose wife is no longer happy and wants out; a child who hasn’t spoken to a father in 25 years and now her parent has Alzheimer’s; a friend who despises the person who used to be his best friend.

For that, I had no training.

And for over 30 years, I have had to look at everyone’s huge ‘buts’, where they stand in that relationship and where they are going to sit.

I love my husband, **but** I can’t stand how he has let himself go.

I love my mom, **but** I will never let her control my life.

I want to be with my brother, **but** he has shown such a lack of respect for me and my family.

That is where most of us stand and I must tell you if where you stand is based on where you put your ‘but’ down and sit, then pardon the expression, you are going to be on the “crapper”.

Folks, on this day of forgiveness if all you have to show for it tomorrow night is a feeling that G-d has forgiven you, then I got news for you: you are not going to have a good year; because all the things that have made you unhappy are not going away. Your ‘but’ is too darn big and where you stand will be where you sit this year. And if by Neilah tomorrow night you haven’t changed seats, the issues that bothered you with the people in your lives are still going to be there.

And it won’t be pretty.

If I can tell you anything this year, it is not how to make a butcher’s blade kosher or what part of a cow is acceptable but where to put your ‘but’.

If you say: I love my brother **but** he is absolutely the worst, you will be fighting with him by Sukkot, our next holiday. If, instead, you say my brother is absolutely the worst, **but** I love him, you are looking for a way to sit with him and remain close.

If you say: I love my husband, **but** he is impossible to live with, you are looking for a way out of that relationship. If, however, you say my husband is impossible, **but** I love him, you are looking for a way to keeping that relationship going.

Where you stand depends on where you sit. And where you sit this year will be determined by where you put your ‘but’.

For too long, most of us here put our ‘buts’ down where we stand; oftentimes, for good reasons. People have hurt us, offended us, bothered us. Family can make us so unhappy. And so we put our “buts” down.

On a throne of self-righteousness.

My advice this year? Get off the can and put your ‘but’ down where it may actually feel better. Because you see those memorial lights? Those are individual who family have fought with and battled with for years. No person up there was perfect and every relationship has issues but tomorrow at Yizkor services, we will remember a very simple truth: we love our family, we love our friends, we love people They drive us crazy but we love them. And we all end wishing we had a little more time with them. We are all together on the same boat of life for the rest of this journey, and family and friends are in the same cabin, and there are no other boats on this ocean (and, parenthetically, it is illegal to throw any of them overboard!). And I have seen this replayed to often: G-d forbid, one of our loved ones fall off the boat, we are the first they call out to and we are the first ones to jump in.

And if they drown, we are first to mourn.

Loved ones and friends drive us crazy, family cause us pain…**but** we love them. Get rid the ‘but’ in: I love him dearly **but**. Put what bother you out of the way first and then put your ‘but’ down as in: ...**but** I love him anyway. Put your “but” down in the right place and I promise you will have a better year, one with less anger and frustration.

And think about where you put your ‘but’ in Jewish life. Because if we continue to forget the proper order of things in our own Jewish lives, namely Israel, the Jewish world, Jewish communities around the country, the Jewish people, and our community, we will suffer as Jews.

Here is what I mean:

I love Israel, **but** I am outraged by the settlements.

I love the Jewish state, **but** it will not get my support if it doesn’t recognize my rabbi or my denomination.

I love my Temple, **but** I don’t like the politics there.

I love my Synagogue, **but** I don’t like the rabbi.

I know we need a daily minyan, **but** I am not going if Jerry is going to be there; he never came when I need him to say kaddish.

I like supporting Jewish causes, **but** I don’t like that my money goes to (fill in the blank).

Folks, I hear this all the time. That’s where most of us stand and I must tell you if where we stand is where we sit in Jewish life, then again, pardon the expression: your ‘but’ means we will all be in the “crapper”.

Folks, on this day of forgiveness if all you have to show for it is a feeling that you have fulfilled your minimum requirement to your faith tradition, your congregation, or your family obligations, then I have got news for you, you are not going to be a part of anything you want to change in Jewish life that bothers you. Because all the things that have made you unhappy about Israel, about our faith community, about your own congregation are still going to be there this year and you won’t be happy.

You need to decide where do you want to put your ‘but’ this year.

Where we stand is where we put our ‘buts’. And while both sides of your ‘but cheeks’ are true, you must put the ‘right one’, literally, on the right side if you want to make this year where you are a part of something meaningfully Jewish.

Let me show you:

I don’t approve of what the government of Israel does, **but** I stand with Israel.

I don’t like where some of my money is going to at Federated, **but** I support Federated Jewish Charities.

I don’t like the rabbi, **but** I love my congregation.

I am furious with Jerry who never comes to minyan and didn’t come when I needed him, **but** I am going help make one for Susan tonight.

Reverse the order of any of those and you are looking for a way out of Jewish life.

This year, everything will depend on where you put your ‘but’.

I will never forget what Harry Kanner (alav ha-shalom) said about his mother of blessed memory. She told him that when people were mad at the rabbi years ago (imagine that: people get mad at rabbis. I never knew that happened!), she gave this advice to her friends:

“So don’t ‘amen’ to his bracha at shul.” (Don’t respond ‘amen’ to his prayer at synagogue).

What profundity.

G-d, I wish people were like her. My friends, we are Jews; we support Israel; we support Jewish causes and Jewish life. You don’t like something? First, get in the back of the line because there are a lot of Jews in the complaint line ahead of you. And we can be angry, we can fight, we can wag our fingers and that is okay; but put your ‘but’ down and put it down right. We need you and you need to be part of your people.

And, G-d help me for what I am about to say, but this year… how about wiping your ‘but’.

Or cover it up, for G-d’s sakes.

Your ‘but’ doesn’t look good on you or me or others. In fact, your fat ‘but’ is in the way of a great year.

Wipe your ‘but’:

My wife is annoying me **and** I love her dearly.

My son needs to get his act together **and** I love him with all my heart.

Netanyahu makes me so angry **and** I can’t wait to go to Israel.

I am so bored at services **and** I just love my synagogue.

No buts.

Folks, we owe it to the people on those tablets and in our hearts to work our ‘buts’ off to make the folks on those tablets and etched in our hearts proud. Proud that we got the message of what life is all about before it was too late. Life is about prioritizing what we should be focusing on and how to do it.

We will stand tomorrow and we will remember our loved ones. I have been to many a yizkor service; memorial services are when we recall people we would do anything to see again. Let us remember that life is too short to put out ‘buts’ down looking for ways to push away, to find a way out, or a way to say no.

Let us stand proudly, embrace everyone, and always looks for a way in.

And let us stand this year in ways that bring happiness in our lives and put our ‘**buts**’ down in ways that bring us the true joy of loving and living.

Amen