

Ultraviolet: Transforming Our Hearts, Souls, and Minds

Introduction:

Years ago, a nature documentary revealed that many flower petals, such as those of marigolds or black-eyed susans, are festooned with intricate designs that human eyes can't detect. But to a honey bee, the ultraviolet patterns look like runways, beckoning them to where the good nectar resides. This opened an entire world hidden from our species. After all, while people like honey, we are not in the business of manufacturing it from flower nectar. We rely on bees for that. As a consequence, for this and other more complicated matters about visual acuity, ***we don't tend to see what we don't need.*** This is a common trait across the animal kingdom, including humans. Our senses only relay to us that which is useful to our survival. But what if our survival and well-being required us to develop our senses while nurturing a sense of humility about how limited our perceptions really are?

This is, therefore, a sermon about ultraviolet light. It is also a talk about how my years in the pulpit radically changed my understanding of American politics and activism, ultimately revealing why our politics are so polarized. Finally, this sermon is something of a prayer in which I

hope that my personal transformation and *teshuvah* in regard to politics may inspire and encourage you.

As a young teenager, I campaigned for the Democratic Caucus, specifically for Edward Meyer. Although you might imagine that Edward was Jewish with a last name of Meyer, he was anything but. He was tall, white, and Christian, with a fetching smile. All of his children were also tall, and white, with fetching smiles. I was a short, Jewish kid, still afraid of my shadow, with no evidence of “fetching.” It didn’t matter; in those days, Jews and Blacks saw eye to eye on many political issues. So Edward Meyer put this Jewish kid in a run-down field office located in some projects in downtown New Rochelle. And I made it work.

Later, I and other teens canvassed for Greenpeace, going door to door raising funds. We would get picked up in an old Ford panel van and drive to different neighborhoods. The driver would yank open the sliding door, and we spilled out, filled with messianic zeal. Those were early days for the American environmental movement, and half the time, people couldn’t comprehend that there even was an environmental problem. Back then, the Ad Council had a long running commercial depicting a Native American shedding a tear from a canoe as he looked at trash in the

river. That's as far as most people knew about environmental concerns—litter.

If you have ever canvassed, then you will understand that it is hard work—lots of rejection! Some people were nice, some were angry, but if you could get four out of ten people to donate to the cause, you were a superstar. I was happy to get two.

In my early thirties, I helped Rabbi Michael Lerner of Tikkun, serving on his board along with Laura. I was also a news junkie, and was hooked on his politics of meaning. Like Michael Lerner, I also gravitated toward political involvement because it appeared to be a path to meaningful engagement. Politics looked like the best path to building a better, justice-filled world.

The path that transformed me has been a journey of *teshuvah*—a path of repentance, return, and self-discovery. These Days of Awe are all about transformation, and over the last couple of decades, my role as a congregational rabbi has transformed my heart, soul, and mind, leading to a complete revolution in my politics.

Why is this appropriate for Yom Kippur?

Tik Tok. That's why.... Earlier this year, a TikTok video went viral, featuring a male pheasant—the Great

Argus—performing an elaborate mating display. He spread his magnificent plumage like a giant, semi-open umbrella, showing off his intricate colors to a nearby female pheasant. To the human eye, the female appeared completely uninterested. She kept walking away as he desperately paraded around her. Millions of people interpreted the video as a lesson in unrequited love, laughing at the metaphor of clueless human male dating attempts. “Dude, she’s just not that into you!” But there’s more to this story than meets the eye.

What viewers missed is that the female pheasant was, in fact, paying full attention—but not in a way we could easily perceive. The eyes of pheasants are designed to have their clearest focus in their peripheral field of view. This is the complete opposite of human vision. In other words, that Tik Tok video went viral because we *assumed* that pheasants see like we do, straight ahead with a hunter’s stereo vision; but rather than dissing her courting fellow, she was, in fact, intensely focused on him. Turns out, this boy pheasant had serious game.

What do the mating rituals of pheasants have to do with politics, you ask. Fair question. Let me introduce the notion of *umwelt*.

What Is an Umwelt?

The term *Umwelt* refers to the unique sensory world in which each creature lives. It's a concept developed by biologist Jakob von Uexküll, and it explains how every being experiences reality based on its biological makeup. A bat's *Umwelt* is shaped by echolocation, they understand their world through the reflection of sound, while a dog's understanding of the world is dominated by its sense of smell. Though we share the same physical environment, our individual experiences of that environment are vastly different.

I first encountered this idea during my time at NYU when I read philosopher Thomas Nagel's essay *What Is It Like to Be a Bat?* Nagel argued that no matter how advanced science becomes, we will never fully understand what it is like to be another creature because our sensory experiences are so different. In recent years, I've come to realize that Nagel was both right and wrong. Science has brought us closer to understanding other beings' *Umwelts*, but we'll never fully bridge the gap. There will always be parts of another creature's experience that remain a mystery.

This concept of *Umwelt* also applies to humans. For humans, our *umwelt* isn't only composed of our senses; we interpret that sensory input through a wide set of beliefs, ideologies, and yes, politics. Just as a bat experiences the world differently from a dog, our political

Umwelt can limit our ability to understand people with different views, and actually impact how we interpret the information our senses provide. Sometimes, those ideologies can literally blind us, deafen us, and otherwise make us unaware of an entire aspect of reality that our neighbors across the divide witness.

My Political Journey: From Expediency to Transformation

When I began my rabbinical career, I was taught to avoid politics in the pulpit, because it can be divisive, and a rabbi's authority should come from the Torah, not from political opinions. For a long time, I followed that advice. I sidestepped controversial issues and tried to keep things neutral.

But my views began to shift when I served at *CST* in Cleveland. Cleveland was a purple state, and for the first time, I felt like my vote really mattered in national elections. It was there that I met two congregants, Ted and Sam, who like Senator Edward Meyer, were both tall and rail thin. They were also on completely opposite sides of the political spectrum, so when they were engaged in their profound disagreements, you couldn't miss them. However, despite their extreme political differences, they remained close friends. Watching their relationship was transformative for me. It showed me that political disagreement doesn't have to lead to division. In fact, it

can deepen our humanity if we engage with one another in good faith.

With the benefit of hindsight, and the concept of *umwelt*, it is now clear to me that Ted and Sam's political commitments didn't blind them to one another's humanity. With the peripheral vision of the heart, they saw more than politics. Illuminated by an ultraviolet light that too many of us can't see, their friendship and love flourished. In the words of novelist Hisham Matar, "if you dictate norms and impose conditions on friendship, the friendship is dead."

As a rabbi, I used to be cautious about politics. I would often speak in coded language so that "those in the know" would understand my position, but I tried to remain diplomatic. Yet something inside me was changing. Ted and Sam's relationship planted a seed in me, and over time, that seed shot up into a completely new understanding of my role as a rabbi and my responsibility to speak truthfully.

Expanding Beyond Tolerance: Sister Kathleen's Influence

When I was younger, my grandfather took me to interfaith services in New Rochelle. I participated, but I viewed Christianity as inferior to Judaism. I thought of myself as tolerant, but my tolerance was superficial—it was really

based on a sense of superiority. My Jewish *umwelt* impacted how I viewed Christianity. Because of how Judaism influenced my vision of the world, when I looked at Christianity, it seemed to lack the intellectual rigor, logic, and common sense of Judaism.

Everything changed when I began working with Sister Kathleen, a Catholic nun. We put together an interfaith Concert of Psalms, held in a large, resonant church. The evening was amazing, but my unspoken bias held strong. It took a few years before I began to see the world through her heart, her eyes, and her actions. She embodied her faith in a way that was beautiful and compelling. For the first time, I understood the power of Christianity not as an outsider, but through her lived experience. I no longer saw her faith as inferior; I saw it as another valid way of connecting to the Divine. My work with Sister Kathleen taught me that true understanding goes beyond tolerance—it requires making the effort to see the world from someone else's *Umwelt*. Like Nagel's bat, there may always be a gap, but we can lessen it.

Ed Yong, in his book on animal perception (“An Immense Word”), writes, “This is not a book about superiority, but about diversity.” That lesson applies not just to animals but to human beings as well. My experience with Sister Kathleen taught me that different ways of being in the world—different faiths, different politics—are not about

superiority or inferiority. They are about diversity. And diversity, when truly understood, leads to transformation.

Umwelts and Political Divides

When we encounter political differences, we often do so from a sense of superiority. We assume that people who disagree with us are misguided, ignorant, or even dangerous. But this mindset is a failure of imagination—it's a failure to understand that we all live in our own *Umwelts*, shaped by our unique experiences, beliefs, and ideologies. Speaking personally, I thought that tolerance and civility were enough to see each other. I believed that if we could just be respectful of each other's views, we could get along. But I've come to realize that we need to move beyond tolerance toward a deeper understanding of one another's *Umwelts*.

In a certain way, this is magnifying a statement we find in Pirkei Avot that we should *dan kol adam l'khaf zechut*. We ought to give everyone the benefit of the doubt. It makes me want to reword a teaching by Rabbi Israel Salanter, who founded the Musar movement of Jewish ethics in the 19th century. Salanter advised, "We should worry about our own ethics and other people's material well-being, but instead, we worry about our own material well-being and other people's ethics." In a similar way, 'we should give other people the benefit of the doubt, while doubting the completeness of our own convictions.'"

For example, I have concerns about some of Kamala Harris's policies and her preparedness for the role of commander-in-chief, even while I believe that Donald Trump is deeply unfit for leadership. Am I right? Who really knows: Our blind spots are much larger than we care to admit.

Because of that, I differ from the many people who condemn Trump supporters as uneducated or clueless. Rather, I suspect that in today's America, people need radically different things from their politics. Our ideological *Umwelts* are so limited, we apply what we need to those on the other side of the aisle and assume that they are ignorant, misguided, or bigoted. This makes these voters invisible to us, in the same way that millions misconstrued the love between two pheasants.

We struggle to understand the *Umwelt* of animals, just as we struggle to understand the *Umwelts* of people who see the world differently from us. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't try harder.

The Role of Religion: A Call for Transformation

This is what religion is for, and certainly what Judaism is for: to transform our hearts, souls, and minds. It's not enough to tolerate differences; we must actively seek to understand them. Rav Kook, the first Chief Rabbi of pre-state Palestine, exemplified this idea. At a time of

deep polarization between religious and secular Jews, Rav Kook saw them all as part of a grand, interconnected tapestry. He created a religious vocabulary that helped others see what they had previously overlooked.

In our era, American Jews suffer from the same sort of division over Israel as they did in Rav Kook's day. We need a Rav Kook for our time.

The wisdom I have gained from meditation, my congregants, and my work with people like Ted, Sam, Sister Kathleen, and many of you in this congregation today, has led me to see that transformation is not about tolerating differences, but about working to understand them—and being transformed by them.

As we enter this new year, I want to challenge all of us to expand our *Umwelts*. This doesn't mean abandoning our beliefs or convictions, but it does mean we should actively question them while approaching those who see the world differently with curiosity, love, and humility. It means recognizing that our perceptions are limited and that we have much to learn from those who see things differently. This is an evolution of my commitment to dialogue. It is a desire to seek the mystery of the other. It is an admission that what we think and believe is conditioned by the vast ignorance we have of the lives of bats as well as those across the aisle.

Conclusion: A Path of Teshuvah

I no longer have use for the two party system. I want my *umwelt* to be larger, not smaller; the two party system is missing that spiritual pursuit while succumbing to the hubris of certainty. How can we find the solutions we need when those charged with doing so can't perceive the problem?

In the Bible, the rainbow represents God's promise not to destroy the world. In popular parlance, the rainbow has become a symbol of inclusion, particularly of the LGBTQ+ community. Both of these symbolic meanings are useful, but they don't go far enough. For now we know that there is also an ultraviolet rainbow, the one we can't see but which is more real than our political platitudes.

As we stand on the threshold of this new year, may we learn to see the world with fresh senses, thereby transforming our politics, our souls, and our hearts. In the words of *kermit hatzfardea*, Rabbi Kermit the Frog:

Have you been half asleep, and have you heard voices?

I've heard them calling my name.

Someday we'll find it,

the rainbow connection,

the lovers, the dreamers, and me.

May this be the time.

Shanah tovah