

*The Tipping Point*, Malcolm Gladwell's influential bestselling book, came out 20 years ago. My tipping point happened in the last two weeks.

Though the phrase has become part of our language, let's make sure we know what Gladwell meant by it. His goal was to explain "social epidemics," the reason some ideas, or products, or movements change the face of society. Gladwell says there are three main elements present in any tipping point. One is "The Law of the Few," meaning that social change is engineered by 20% of the people doing 80% of the work. But these 20% of the people have rare gifts that enable them to win over so many others. The second element is "The Stickiness Factor," in which a message is so adhesive to the memory that it becomes unforgettable. And the third factor is "The Power of Context," meaning that time and place are deeply influential.

As we watch the United States encounter its sharpest racial tension since—you decide when—the civil rights struggle of the 1960s, the aftermath of the Rodney King verdict in 1992, or last year—there must be something about the players involved, the power of the message, and the context that has led to this current response to an unfortunately familiar scene. An African American is killed by someone wearing the uniform of the state that is supposed to protect his or her civil rights. Trayvon Martin, Philando Castile, Eric Garner, Michael Brown. We can't forget the names. And now there are more: Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd. There have been demonstrations before, but for me, this is different. It's my tipping point. How so? Why now?

There are two reasons this moment is different for me. First: I have always sympathized with the Black Lives Matter movement, but never felt comfortable embracing it, or affiliating with it. That's because of a small plank in its official platform that pained me as a Jew and as a Zionist. I felt excluded from the movement, and so I withheld my support. I looked for other ways to build connections with the African American community, and to do my small part to fight racism.

But I certainly never embraced the "All Lives Matter" response to the movement, and I thought it was insensitive. BLM never suggested otherwise; it did not say that Black lives mattered more. They were saying they were tired of Black lives mattering less. In fact, I also felt the insult of one's own unique pain being minimized when included with everyone else's. Remember last year, when the House of Representatives couldn't pass a resolution condemning antisemitism and instead passed a broader resolution including other forms of bigotry? That moment called for a particular censure, coming as it did after offensive comments by Ilhan Omar. Instead, I felt, we Jews got "all lives mattered." I hated that feeling, and I wouldn't wish it on others.

Now, I feel called by my Jewishness not to reject the movement, but to assert its legitimacy. Black Lives Matter. That does not make me anti-law enforcement. Most police officers are good people, and they do dangerous work at thankless hours. But policing and the criminal justice system have flaws, and People of Color largely bear the brunt of those flaws, and it is long overdue for reform. Black Lives Matter. That does not make me a supporter of riotous behavior and looting. I condemn attacks on people and property, and not just because I think they're counterproductive. They're flat wrong. I grieve for police officers who have been killed and wounded, and for working people whose businesses have been destroyed. But please, know and affirm the difference between protesters and rioters.

Rabbi Avi Olitzky, who serves a congregation in Minnesota, said it well: "When those around me say 'Black Lives Matter,' they don't mean 'cursed be Israel.' They don't mean Jews are the enemy or

that Israel is an apartheid state. They mean: ‘We people of color have been oppressed for centuries. And you have not put us on your priority list of urgent changes in this world. And we are hurting and suffering—and our children are dying. Why don’t we matter to you? Why does it seem like we only matter to us?’

As a Jew devoted to the teachings of Torah, I feel it my religious obligation to declare that Black Lives Matter. The story of Creation leaves no room to debate that all human beings, no matter their religion, or race, or gender, or social status, are fashioned in the Divine Image. It is a sacred bill of rights, and it is boundless in its inclusivity. To suggest otherwise is a denial of a core religious principle—not just a universal one, but a Jewish one. This is not what some would call a Liberal lie. It’s right there in the Torah.

And speaking of sacred texts, there’s a second reason recent events are, for me, a tipping point. We all know that the Bible holds a special place in the hearts of many Americans. As Jews, it is our most sacred text. We might even be prepared to die for it. If a synagogue was on fire, we might even risk our lives to try to rescue the scrolls. That’s not just because it’s a symbol or a totem. The halakhic reason we would do so is to keep God’s name from being destroyed.

But Aaron Koller, a YU Bible professor who lives in our neighborhood, makes a powerful point about something in this week’s Torah portion, Naso. In the troubling passage about the *Sotah*, the woman accused by her husband of infidelity, the Torah prescribes a strange ritual. “The priest shall put these curses down in writing and rub it off into the waters of bitterness” (Numbers 5:23). The curses include the four-letter name of God; how could the words then be dissolved, thereby erasing God’s name?

This question arises in the Talmud’s discussion of exactly when one should risk one’s life to rescue texts with God’s name. In *Massekhet Shabbat* (116a) we find a discussion of what to do with heretical scrolls—sectarian copies of the Torah that include God’s name but, in the rabbis’ opinion, defame God’s reputation. The Gemara says they are not to be rescued from fire. While Rabbi Yose says that such a scroll should have references to God cut out and buried before destroying the rest of the scroll, Rabbi Tarfon objected vehemently: under any circumstances, I would burn that scroll, God’s name and all, if they ever came into my possession. Then Rabbi Yishmael comes to deliver the knockout punch. He said it’s obvious that Rabbi Tarfon is right. After all, if God’s name can be erased in a sacred, sanctioned ceremony whose purpose is to restore peace between a married couple, then obviously it can be destroyed when it was written for profane purposes. Dr. Koller calls this “the idea that God is willing to take a step back in order to bring love to society.”

Do we really have to wonder what Rabbis Tarfon and Yishmael would have thought of the idea of intimidating peaceful protesters with riot gear, pepper balls and smoke canisters to move them out of the way, and then to do the same to clergy on the steps of an Episcopal Church for the purposes of a photo op with a Bible? I imagine them saying to those whose eyes burned from the tear gas, “God is crying with you.”

We cannot allow religion—the Bible, the Torah, our unassailable Divine value—to be hijacked for morally bankrupt purposes.

Friends, I reached my tipping point. Malcolm Gladwell's three elements for change are here. No longer can I be complacent that a small fraction of the nation do all the heavy lifting in the battle to end systemic racism in our country. The message—Black Lives Matter—must stick. It can no longer go without saying. And today, this context, a time and place when religion is either used as a bludgeon to harm and divide or as a salve to unify and heal, I refuse to stay on the sidelines. I hope you will join me, not in waiting for justice, but in pursuing it.