Hello everyone. It’s so good to be here with all of you on this special, this sacred day.

Over the next few minutes, I want to offer you some reflections on the Torah portion that the Reform movement has chosen as our morning reading, from Deuteronomy (29:9-14; 30:1-20). In it, Moses, who is about to die before the Israelites enter the Promised Land, speaks to all of them, pleading with them to uphold the covenant with God that they first made at Mount Sinai.

He tells the people that what he’s asking them to do isn’t too hard or too distant: “For this mitzvah, which I command you this day, is neither beyond you nor far away. It is not in heaven, causing you to say: ‘Who will go up to heaven on our behalf, get it for us, and let us hear it, that we may do it?’ And it is not across the sea, causing you to say: ‘Who will cross the sea on our behalf, get it for us, and let us hear it, that we may do it?’ No, this is so very near to you—in your mouth and in your heart—that you can surely do it.”

And he concludes with these lines that continue to ring through the ages: “This day I call heaven and earth to witness: life and death I have set before you, blessing and curse. Choose life—so that you and your children may live.”

It isn’t hard to understand why we would be reading this passage on this very special day, on Yom Kippur. For it depicts a moment in the Jewish people’s sacred narrative when the entire people was asked to reconfirm its deepest commitments as it was about to enter into the Promised Land. And in a sense this is true of us too: this day of reflection and atonement asks us
to reconfirm our deepest commitments. Of course, those of us gathered here are just one Jewish community, and truth be told, even among us there are many different ideas about what the covenant with God might mean, or even what we mean by “God.” Still, we can probably agree that this day of Yom Kippur—and indeed, the whole ten days of the High Holidays—is meant as a time for us to reflect on our lives and recommit ourselves to our deepest values as we make the transition into the new year. It’s a time when we get to reflect on what matters most, what we really stand for, and how we take a stand—which is what I want to talk about now.

I want to focus on the first verses of the parashah:

_Atem nitzavim hayom . . ._

“You stand this day, all of you, in the presence of Adonai your God—your tribal heads, elders, and officials; every man, woman, and child of Israel; and the stranger in the midst of your camp; from the one who cuts your wood to the one who draws your water—to enter into the covenant of Adonai your God, and the oath that Adonai your God makes with you this day, to establish you as God’s people and to be your God, as promised to you and sworn to your ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And not with you alone do I make this covenant and this oath, but with each one who stands here among us this day in the presence of Adonai our God, and with each one who is not here among us this day.”

I want to call your attention in particular to the use of the word “stand” that appears twice in this passage: In the first sentence (as translated into English), it says, “you _stand_ this day in the presence of God.” And in the second sentence, it says, “I make this covenant with each one who _stands_ here.”
A number of modern commentators call attention to these appearances of the word “stand,” using the word as an opportunity to raise the question, what do you stand for, what do we stand for? “Stand” is a really interesting word, isn’t it? It gives us language to talk about what our commitments and values are. So we not only say that we “stand for” something, or “take a stand for” something, but also that we “won’t stand” for something. And of course there are many other phrases involving the word “stand”: stand up, stand out, stand down, stand over, . . . “Stand” in general seems to be a metaphor for being present, for showing up.

But it’s also a physical reality, as when we literally “stand up to be counted”—for example, when we march as a form of celebration or protest. Let me also acknowledge, thought, that not everyone can literally stand; some people use wheelchairs or may be bed-ridden. But as you’ll see in these remarks, I’m using the physical act of standing in part as a metaphor, as a way to talk about how we commit to things, how we show up.

Given today’s political challenges (which you can list as well as I), it’s definitely a time for all of us to decide what we stand for—and equally, what we won’t stand for—and what we’re going to do about it. I imagine that some of us, as part of our High Holiday reflections, have already been doing some of this work.

But there’s another interesting detail in these first verses. For if you look at the Hebrew, there are actually two different words being used, both of which are translated with the English word “stand.” The first sentence begins *atem nitzavim hayom* (you stand here this day). Here the Hebrew word is *nitzavim*. But in the second sentence, where God says that God makes this covenant with “each one who stands here,” the word is *omeid* (which in the plural is *omdim*).
As various commentators point out, this use of two different words is hardly accidental. The word *nitzavim* carries the sense of “standing firm,” or “standing with anticipation.” It’s an active form of standing that suits what the Israelites are being called to do, namely to assent to and recommit to the terms of their sacred covenant with God. The word *nitzavim* appears rarely in Torah, and when it does, it is always with this sense. *Omeid* or *omdim*, by contrast, is the word for “stand” that appears most commonly in the Torah. And in certain passages, rather than suggesting “standing firm” it seems to suggest a more passive form of standing, a kind of standing to receive.

But I now want to push this idea one step further. I’ve already talked about the importance of knowing what we stand for and what we won’t stand for. But isn’t there another question, namely *how* we stand? The parashah seems to give us two different ways to stand, one active and firm, the other more passive and receptive. But surely there are lots of different ways to stand for something, to take a stand. And doesn’t it seem likely that how we stand will affect how effective our stand actually is?

Let me give you an example of what I mean. We’re all aware of the counter-demonstrations that have taken place—first in Charlottesville and then in many other cities, including Seattle—in opposition to the increasingly visible presence of neo-Nazis. And we’ve become aware of a group called Antifa (anti-fascists) who’ve been receiving a fair amount of press. Some members, at least, have been showing up armed and prepared to do battle. I don’t know about you, but I am worried about this subgroup—those who actually *want* to fight. I think their tactics are wrong, because they are actually playing into the hands of the neo-Nazis, who are trying to provoke a violent response from the protesters, much as the Nazis, the real Nazis, did in the 1930s as a political strategy. I’m much more comfortable with those who show up in protest but take a nonviolent stance—including those among Antifa whose goal is not to fight, but simply to have a strong counter-presence. You may disagree, but my larger...
point is that it’s not just what we take a stand for, but how we take our stand, how we show up, both physically and metaphorically, that really matters.

I also have a personal story about taking a stand, a series of events that took place three or four years ago. It actually involved me sitting, not literally standing, but the point is the same. Having just spent a couple of days at Middlebury College in Vermont giving lectures and workshops, I was driving to Amherst College in Western Massachusetts to attend a conference. It was late at night and dark, and I was driving on country roads without street lighting. I stopped at a T-junction and proceeded to make a left turn onto a larger road. I didn’t initially see the car that was coming from the left on the main road I was turning onto, and although I managed to make my turn, it was a little closer than I would have liked.

Then the car I crossed in front of slowed down and turned on the red light on its roof. It was a police car. As he made a U-turn to approach me, I pulled over to the side of the road, rolled down my window and waited for him. This big, burly policeman walked over to me. He was not happy. He asked to see my driver’s license and registration, and as I fumbled in my backpack for my license, he said, “Sir, you’re making me nervous.” I started to feel really frightened.

Clearly I was vulnerable to the whims of this angry, armed man. We were out in the middle of nowhere. He could arrest me, beat me up, anything. And it felt like he hadn’t yet decided what he was going to do. How our interaction played out would probably determine what happened to me.

I intuitively understood that I needed to find a balance point, a balanced way to stand in relation to him, or in this case to sit. I needed to be firm with him without coming across as aggressive or in any way questioning his authority, which would certainly provoke him. But I also needed to do
this without coming across as weak or cowardly. I needed to find my strength and authenticity without in any way seeming to challenge him.

We talked for another couple of minutes. Then he went back to his police car, presumably to look me up in his databases. A few minutes later he came back and handed me my papers through the open window. Without saying a word, he walked away, got in his car, made a U-turn and drove off. I sat there stunned, feeling the weight of this terrifying experience. I wondered if it was a trap, since he hadn’t verbally dismissed me. Maybe he was waiting for me to drive away so he could accuse me of leaving the scene. Finally, after about fifteen minutes, I got up the nerve to drive away, and headed off for Amherst.

That night I was staying with a friend in Amherst and when I got to his house I told him the story and we processed it together. For me there were two important lessons. One was the realization that my white privilege had helped me. Had I been a person of color all alone on that dark road, who knows what would have happened to me. The other was that I had indeed found that balance or middle point between aggression and meekness or weakness. And it seemed to have worked.

What if I had been a person of color? Well, in recent days we’ve been witnessing a remarkable process whereby people of color and their allies have been taking a stand against racism. I’m referring of course to the way that athletes have been protesting during the playing of the national anthem. Here again we see people literally taking a stand as a means of standing for and standing against. It began, as we all know, with Colin Kaepernick refusing to stand for the national anthem as a form of protest. And it has evolved into two different physical stances: kneeling and standing while linking arms. I don’t have the time to explore these two stances, so I’ll just say that they’re both pretty interesting and interestingly different. Both express, to my mind at least, a kind of dignified response to
racism, but they’re clearly different in the reactions they provoke. And they are made all the more complex because there are many people in this country who are threatened when people of color take a stand.

My larger point, then, is that it’s a tricky business to take a stand, and how we do it, both physically and metaphorically, will influence the way it’s received and the effects it’s likely to have. Especially when we stand against something, when we say, “No, I won’t stand for this,” it’s crucial that we find a kind of balance point: being too aggressive may be counterproductive and being too passive, standing back too far, may come across as weak and insufficiently committed.

My friends, my community, I am so happy to be standing (and sitting) with you on this special day. To be honest, I love Yom Kippur. Yes, it’s hard: the fasting, the standing and sitting, standing and sitting, the recitation of words that don’t always speak to me. My feet hurt, I’m too hot, I’m too cold, I’m tired—oy, oy, oy! But still, with all this, I feel the sacred power of the day, the chance I have to reflect and measure my life, to reconnect with my core values, to think about what’s important enough to make me take a stand. And it’s an essential part of this process that I do it with all of you—my Jewish community. As the parashah says, “You stand this day, all of you, in the presence of Adonai your God.” Indeed, we stand here this day, all of us, in the present of the Great Mystery. To which I say, Thank God.

I wish you all “G’mar chatimah tovah”—a good completion to this remarkable process of renewal. May we all be sealed in the Book of Life for a good year.