



URJ BIENNIAL 2017

DECEMBER 6-10 • BOSTON, MA

UNION *for* REFORM JUDAISM

Address to URJ Biennial 2017 by Massachusetts Governor Charlie Baker

This address was presented before the [74th Union for Reform Judaism Biennial convention](#) on Wednesday, December 6.

Thank you so much.

Let start by welcoming you all to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, which as I'm sure you knew according to U.S. News and World Report is the number one state in the nation.

We are honored to have you here and we hope you will find time to enjoy our culture, history and communities.

When I thought about what I might say tonight, I thought I would start with my mom, the Democrat, and my dad, the Republican. They taught me many things. The biggest of which is that humility is a virtue and that growth comes from dialogue. Now, my parents canceled each other out for 60 years. In fact, my mom was too sick to vote in 2014, but in 2010 when I ran I said, "Is this the first time you and dad vote for the same person? I am on the ballot, after all." My mom looked at me and she said, "You know, son, it is a secret ballot."

But I grew up in a family where the dinner table was literally a laser light show of conversation and discussion. And where people are actually engaging one another in an attempt to understand and to learn and to grow. It wasn't character assassination. Nobody's motives were being questioned. It was debate and dialogue about means, not about ends. And the thing I took away from it most of all was that nobody has the corner on every great idea. And sometimes if you pay attention, people who don't think the same way you do can help you change your mind. If all you do is spend all your time talking to people you agree with about everything, it limits and inhibits your capacity for growth.

The other thing I took out of it was: to celebrate diversity is to appreciate the work of our founders. When they put together this original institution here in the Commonwealth of Mass, they set it up to make it messy and difficult and complicated to get things accomplished. And they set up a big swathe of minority rights. Because as they said at the time, they were worried about the tyranny of the majority.

They built what I call a distributed decision making model. And I think that's a good thing. I don't think that's a bad thing. I think the fact that you have to find a way to work with somebody who is your friend today and your foe tomorrow and your friend the day after and your foe the day after that, that's exactly what they had in mind in the first place.

And I would argue in many cases if you appreciate and value this notion that voices, many voices should be heard when you engage in the public square, you can accomplish a lot. Massachusetts has passed

landmark energy legislation that makes big investments in solar and hydro and the largest offshore wind project on the east coast on a bipartisan basis.

We enacted a pregnant workers protection law on a bipartisan basis. Enacted a pay equity law on a bipartisan basis.

And just recently enacted and I signed a reproductive rights law on a bipartisan basis.

And over the course of the past several years we've made significant increases in investing in at-risk families and children. We also passed major legislation to battle and fight the brutal opioid epidemic here in the Commonwealth.

That legislation passed unanimously. Not a single person in the House or Senate voted against that bill. It was the work of a year's worth of work on the part of a lot of different people, led in many cases by families who literally have been through hell in dealing with this issue with their own family members and with friends and neighbors. That legislation was adopted by the National Governors Association, something that had never happened before: 46 other governors signed that legislation as a blueprint for dealing with the opioid epidemic in their own state.

Now, the good news, and in this particular issue everyone is always looking for good news because so much of it is bad. After 15 years of double digit increases in deaths from opioids in the Commonwealth. Over the first nine months of 2016, deaths are down by 10 percent, first time in 15 years.

Opioid prescriptions which we put a whole bunch of standards in place for and rules for are down by ten percent. Narcan, the overdose reversal drug, is more effective and has been effective in saving the lives of many, many people. And we put in place for the first place a core curriculum for anyone who graduates from medical school, nursing school, dental around opioid and pain management that you have to pass in order to practice in the Commonwealth.

Which is not to say, by the way, that we don't live in difficult times, because we do. As you all know the language and the tone of public discussion at times has been brutal and difficult and depressing. Charlottesville, the recent desecration of the Holocaust Memorial which stood for 20 years with nary a scratch. The irony to some extent on that was, when we put that memorial up originally 20 years ago here in Massachusetts, people built a whole series of extra panes of glass in anticipation that at some point they might need to use them. But for 20 years nothing ever happened. And this year, it happened twice. I don't need to tell anybody in this room about the other acts of hate and violence that have been delivered upon so many people over their religion, their race, their culture, their gender identity, and in some cases simply their way of life. It's one of the reasons why after literally almost 20 years I reestablished the hate crimes task force here in Massachusetts, bringing together religious leaders, community activists, and folks in public safety at the state, local, and federal level to start meeting and discussing those issues to be as proactive as we possibly can in dealing with these concerns.

I also believe there's a more fundamental issue at stake here which I want to talk about for a minute. I led a delegation to Israel about a year ago this time. The delegation was designed to go over and learn from the folks there about cybersecurity, technology, digital healthcare, and what they saw as the next act in the internet. And the reason we went was because I believe digital healthcare has huge potential to be an enormous asset to patients and families and providers in the 21st Century. For it truly to be successful,

people need to believe that their data and their information is secure and that the systems that they would rely on can be trusted. With so much money and so many state sponsors investing in cyber terrorism, I thought we should go talk to the people who knew the most about this, which frankly were the folks in Israel and the folks at Tel Aviv university.

So we took a group over there. We had a wonderful experience on these issues and we actually brought a bunch of folks back and did a follow-up conference at Harvard earlier this year to continue that discussion. But I also had a chance to visit Yad Vashem while I was there. It is unlike any museum I have been to in my life because it is not designed to be the kind of place that you go in and wander around and see what they have; it's a journey. They set that museum up so you walk in the door and you start in the late 1800s. You work your way through that museum into the early 1900s, 1920s, 1930s. Over the period of time that you walk through the museum, you can see the elements that built brick by brick, day by day, community by community, person by person, what ultimately led to the Holocaust. It is all there. And it starts with the pebble in the water, which is why it is so important in this day and age that we all take seriously acts of violence, aggression, and hate against any particular group because if you leave it there it will grow.

If it grows, we all suffer.

Now, Israel, as you all know, is an amazing country. Somebody said to me, "what was the most interesting thing about it?" I said that I've never been to a place that has the capacity to honor its past, which is spectacular and important, and at the same time rush at a thousand miles an hour towards the future. It is truly a great nation filled with people who are doing amazing things.

I also had a chance to visit the Western Wall while I was there. I happened to be there on the Sabbath. Somebody said while I was there that I should write down a prayer which I should put in the Wall, which I thought was weird, but I did it anyway. I wrote a note. It was a prayer for a friend of mine who has a son who has a terminal illness. So I walked down to the Wall. There's a lot of people there. It's dusk. It's cold out. I walk up and put my hands on it. And the Wall was warm. It felt alive. It was the most unusual experience I can remember. I took that piece of paper and I put it in the Wall. And I really believed at that moment that it meant something. It was faith. And I understood for the first time why that Wall was so important to the Jewish community. And I understood why that Wall was so important to anybody who believes in a higher power and who wants to be able to practice freely their faith.

As I stood there I thought about the people, some 400 years ago who got in a rickety boat and sailed across an ocean to practice their faith freely here in this country. Faith is an incredibly powerful tool around which people can build great and meaningful lives. If they follow the teachings of those who share their faith and they believe that others should have the freedom to follow their teachings as well, it gives everybody a sense that there is something bigger than just themselves in the moment here. And that they are playing on a larger stage with an opportunity to be part of something great.

Freedom of speech, of religion, of the press. Those aren't just words. Properly understood and appreciated, they create an open door to diversity of opinion, of culture, of religion, and they make it possible for very different people to find common ground on which they can create and do great things.

It is to be celebrated. My favorite book of all time is a book called to kill a mocking bird, which was written by Harper Lee. The hero is a trial lawyer named Atticus Finch played by Gregory Peck in the movie, for those of you old enough to remember that.

At one point in the book Atticus turns to his daughter scout and says, "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view, until you climb into his skin and walk around in it."

I have this unique opportunity as a public figure holding a statewide office to try to find opportunities every day to walk around inside somebody else's skin and see things from their point of view. It is an honor that I cherish. And I wake up all the time absolutely stunned at the people of Massachusetts who gave me this chance to share with them and to walk around in their skin. And to understand where they are coming from and where their point of view takes them. Part of why I'm here tonight is because I believe that organizations like yours and people like you get that. You believe in the notion that discussion is good, that debate is good, that persuasion is good. and that honor and respect from more than one point of view is good. And in the end, we get stronger when we walk around in somebody else's skin. And learn a little bit about somebody else's point of view.

I really hope you all have a wonderful time here.

This is a great city, a great state. And I really appreciate what you folks are trying to do every single day on behalf of the communities and the people you serve. God bless.