



***Eric D. Fingerhut Remarks to Cleveland City Club
December 8, 2023***

I can't tell you how honored I was to be invited to return to the City Club of Cleveland. And I knew my topic instantly.

I wanted to talk about the power of community to do good.

I learned about the power of community growing up in this great city. I learned it by watching business leaders and religious leaders and political leaders reach out beyond their specific constituencies to build partnerships and coalitions on a wide range of issues.

I watched and learned as these diverse leaders inspired each other to undertake big projects and challenges.

I also learned about the power of community while I was campaigning across the city and the suburbs for myself, for other candidates, and for ballot issues, whether we were building stadiums to keep our home teams from leaving town, increasing funding for schools, libraries, and community colleges, or providing public funding for the arts.

I wanted to share how I have been able to apply the lessons I learned in Cleveland in the role I am now privileged to fill with the Jewish Federations of North America, 146 Jewish communal organizations in the United States and Canada, who care for their own Jewish

communities and are committed to the well-being of the broader communities in which we live.

And I planned to tell you how proud you should be of your own Cleveland Jewish community, and the remarkable Jewish Federation of Cleveland. The Federation right here in Cleveland has historically and continues today to lead the way locally, nationally and globally. Anywhere I go in the world, the fact that I am a communal leader raised and trained in Cleveland, Ohio is a key section of my resume. It is what we Jews call good *yichus*, which loosely translates as a “good bloodline.”

But then came October 7th. Now I find that I must use my precious, limited time at this podium to appeal to the Greater Cleveland community – and through you to any others that may be listening - to tackle a project of the greatest urgency and the highest moral responsibility.

My appeal to you has two parts. First, I urge that we speak plainly and without equivocation about what happened in our world on October 7th, and that we acknowledge equally plainly what must be done in response.

Second, I call on us to unite against a clear and undeniable rise in antisemitism, which threatens to undermine the very foundations on which our communal enterprise in America is built – a society which is surely the most open, welcoming and inclusive civic enterprise in world history.

It is largely accurate to compare what happened to Israel on October 7th to 9/11. After 9/11, Americans quickly understood that Al Qaeda had meticulously organized and executed a plan to murder thousands of innocent civilians as they went about their daily lives, simply because they were Americans.

We were forever changed by this understanding.

It didn't matter what particular grievance may have been advanced by the perpetrators. Nothing could rationalize nor justify such a heinous and murderous terrorist act.

I was serving in the Ohio Senate on September 11, 2001, and my wife, Amy, was seven months pregnant with our first child. I remember wondering what would become of our world when such unbridled evil could be unleashed on a sunny, cloudless September morning.

The ways in which the attack by Hamas on October 7th exceed even the moral depravity of Al Qaeda's attack on 9/11 are hard to address in this or any other forum. But address it we must.

The Hamas terrorists did not commit suicide as they murdered others on October 7th, but rather were vicious rapists and murderers who burned babies alive, raped and beheaded women, slaughtered entire families in their homes, threw hand grenades into shelters crowded with teenagers fleeing from a concert where hundreds others were murdered, and committed other atrocities too numerous to recount in the time I have available. They killed more than 1,200 Jews that day – more than in any single day since the Holocaust.

And, of course, these rapists and murderers took hostages, including infants, children, and women, many of whom remain in captivity more than two months later, without having been seen by the Red Cross or any other international aid organization. At least when 52 Americans were held hostage in Iran for 444 days beginning in 1979 we knew where they were – in the United States Embassy. Hamas is holding these hostages captive in tunnels and cages underground.

Last weekend I was with an Israeli soldier who was among the first to arrive at a kibbutz near Gaza attacked by Hamas on October 7th. Here are his words: “Honestly, I have no way to describe it. Destruction, fire, shooting and the smell of death everywhere. In the first house I saw a woman on the floor, naked and tied because she was raped, her head was cut off. Her baby whose body is charred and whose head is cut off. In the third house a room with the bodies of the members of one family -- father, mother and three children lying on top of each other, in a huge pool of blood. And I’ll stop here.”

There is yet another difference between 9/11 and October 7th. Unlike 9/11, October 7th was planned not from a faraway land, but from literally across the street. Gaza stretches 25 miles along the coast of the Mediterranean, surrounded by Israel and Egypt on the other three sides. The size and location of Gaza is the equivalent of carving out a strip of land along the coast of Lake Erie from Lakewood to Eastlake.

Imagine if an organization funded by America’s enemies built military bases along the lakefront, dug underground tunnels and command centers under the MetroHealth Medical Center, armed the tunnels with missiles and rockets, booby traps, and assault rifles, and then launched an attack across West 117th Street into Lakewood, killing more than 1,200 people and kidnapping more than 240 others.

Imagine if they shot thousands of rockets at Parma, Shaker Heights, Medina, Strongsville, Westlake, and communities all across Northeast Ohio. Imagine that they launched missiles at the Cleveland Clinic so that those injured by the other rockets couldn’t be evacuated to the hospital. I was personally at a hospital in Ashkelon, not ten kilometers from Gaza, three days into this war, where missiles from Gaza were aimed at a maternity ward, missing it by feet and instead destroying a walkway that connected the maternity ward to the rest of the hospital.

Imagine if they slaughtered hundreds of our children attending a rock concert at Blossom Music Center.

Imagine if they systematically raped and tortured women in every northeast Ohio suburb, your mothers and sisters and daughters? As Peggy Noonan writes in today's Wall Street Journal, "the rape, torture and mutilation of women looks as if it was part of the battle plan. Hamas used sexual violence as a weapon."

What would we do if all this happened to us? Would we allow this organization to maintain its capacity to destroy? Not in a million years.

There is no room for equivocation or explanations. Only clarity.

The war Israel is waging in Gaza is to accomplish one goal, and one goal only – to eliminate the military and terrorist infrastructure that planned and executed the attacks on October 7th. They are doing this so that another October 7th can never happen again.

That war is proceeding on pace, with careful planning, extraordinary care for innocent civilian life, and unbelievable courage. It will be completed successfully.

Contrary to the accusations and false claims being circulated on the internet, the protection of innocent lives is a constant goal of Israel's war strategy. To be clear, I am not a military expert, but neither are most of the political figures in and out of government who are trying to instruct Israel on how to prosecute this war. It does not take military expertise, however, to understand that this war could be over already if Israel was not taking extraordinary measures to protect the lives of innocent civilians. Israel has the capability to level the centers of Hamas' terrorist infrastructure with bombs and drones, including the hospitals, schools and refugee camps that Hamas uses as its bases of

operation. It could do so without ever putting a single Israeli soldier at risk in hand to hand combat. The fact that Israel instead does put its soldiers at risk, and has lost so many, is all the evidence to the contrary that we need.

The American people support Israel's war against Hamas because we understand that Israel's fight against Hamas is no different than America's fight against Al Qaeda or Isis. The same people who beheaded Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl, who shout Death to America and burn American flags, would do the same and worse to us as Hamas did to Israelis on October 7th if given the chance.

They must not be given that chance. Ever! Never! And is there any doubt what America would do if we were the victims of an attack such as occurred on October 7th? Not in my mind there is not.

To the Jewish community, Israel's fight against Hamas is nothing less than the fight against the Nazis of today. All who live in community with us in every corner of America must understand this. After Oct. 7th, Hamas is to Jews everywhere the 21st Century version of the Nazis hellbent on exterminating Jews in Israel and everywhere.

Which brings me to our situation here at home. As someone who actively and proudly participated in the political life of this community, I have never seen or expected unanimity on any subject. I understand the role of protected speech and debate, like that in which we are engaged at the City Club today. But protected speech and debate is not what the Jewish community in America is experiencing today.

I hesitate to give examples, because there are so many and the problem is everywhere. But it helps to give you a picture. A picture of a teacher in a public high school in Queens, New York, who is chased down the

halls by 400 students, gets locked in room, and has to be protected and rescued by the police. Why? Because she posted on her personal Facebook page, “I Stand With Israel.” A picture of a well-known falafel restaurant in Philadelphia attacked in a pogrom-like demonstration because its owner is Israeli. And a picture of a Jewish student at Ohio State who is assaulted for – well -- for being Jewish.

Again, clarity is needed. Lawbreaking must be met with immediate and serious consequences. We must send the strongest message of deterrence each and every time, not just for the most serious hate crimes. Just as tolerating small acts of shoplifting, or drug sales on street corners, leads to an epidemic of lawlessness and the decimation of our urban environment, so too will the failure to punish threatening behavior lead to the demise of our civil society if we look the other way.

But a successful community does not merely draw a line at what is legal. A successful community has a higher standard – a standard of respect and of personal conduct that knows the difference between right and wrong.

Here’s a real example. A major public university has a long tradition of political protests being held in a designated area on the college green, in full view of anyone who wishes to listen or learn. These protests occur almost daily, on a wide range of subjects. But instead of using this forum, the anti-Israel pro-Hamas protestors move their protest to the public sidewalk in front of the Hillel building on that campus. From that vantage point, they proceed to scream invectives at the Jewish students entering the Hillel building and those trying to meet or study inside.

Is this legal? Most likely. Is this how we want university students to behave? I hope the answer to that is a resounding no. If we don’t have any effective mechanisms as a society to condemn and discourage such

behavior, or worse yet we defend it as an exercise of free speech, then we have given up every tool besides law enforcement that makes a community function.

College campuses are perhaps the most troubling sector of our society seeing the dramatic rise in antisemitism, and of course this is a subject that is deeply personal to me. I am proud of my tenure as Chancellor of the Ohio Board of Regents, and then as CEO of the Hillel International system on college campuses. I came to truly love our public and private colleges and universities, and to appreciate their role in building and sustaining a vital civil society. Both the public sector, through our state and federal tax dollars and charitable deductions, and millions of families, through tuition payments and donations, are deeply invested in the success of America's colleges and universities.

How do we impact the uniquely complex environment of higher education? Is it university presidents who must lead, contrary to the examples we witnessed in a Congressional hearing this week? Is it Trustees? Donors? What about legislators and governors who help direct higher education funding?

The answer, of course, is all of the above. Everyone must insist that higher education contribute positively to building and sustaining civil society, and not be allowed to ignore destructive behaviors.

I am well aware of the pressures that many students and parents feel about going to the "right" school. I have two children in college myself, and my eldest is a proud Ohio State Buckeye. But, as someone who has spent time on hundreds of campuses, and with the students and graduates of nearly every college and university in America, allow me to let you in on the dirty little secret of higher education – there are many, many places where your child can get a terrific education, and there is no one right school for anyone.

It's time that we base our decisions about the colleges and universities we attend and support not just on the academics or sports teams or the physical facilities, but also on the manner in which faculty and students treat one another and contribute to building our civic culture. Today, we are seeing too many universities failing that test.

Social media also offers a serious challenge to maintaining the cohesion of civil society. It's omnipresence in our lives is indeed a phenomenon we haven't faced before. I remember that, while running campaigns in this community, we would occasionally see anonymous flyers containing what we would today call "fake news" show up on the windshields of cars in shopping centers or church parking lots. It was frustrating and hard to deal with, but we were safe in assuming that the impact of these flyers was limited. Today, of course, fake news can reach close to 100% penetration and the truth can never catch up to a lie.

While there are certainly legislative and market-based strategies to impact social media companies, and they should be pursued vigorously, the ultimate answer to the ubiquity of social media is the willingness of community leaders to use their resources, reputations, and social capital to be clear about what is right and wrong, no matter where the misinformation comes from or how prominent it might become.

As a Clevelander, I was raised to be an optimist, especially on Opening Day. So, I want to be clear that I am optimistic that both Israel and our American civil society will learn and apply important lessons from this moment.

When I flew into Cleveland yesterday, I went through the airport security procedures that we take for granted and that finally seem to be getting smoother with new technology and screening tools. Despite the

fact that we have not had an airplane hijacked since 9/11, I hear no one calling to dismantle these procedures.

Similarly, our Jewish communities, operating in the greatest tradition of public/private partnerships, are working with law enforcement and government officials to strengthen the security of our institutions, and to support our young people and our most vulnerable community members who are targets of antisemitism. Security and fighting antisemitism are permanent additions to the Cleveland Jewish Federation's portfolio, as they are of every Jewish Federation in North America.

I have another source of optimism. On November 14th, almost 300,000 people, including thousands from Cleveland, gathered on the National Mall, in the front of the Capitol, to show support for Israel's fight against Hamas, to call for release of the hostages, and to fight back against the rise in antisemitism.

Speakers at the rally included Christians, Muslims, and Jews. The four top leaders of Congress – the Republican Speaker of the House, the Democratic Minority Leader of the House, the Democratic Majority leader of the Senate and a top-ranking Republican Senator -- appeared on stage together, arms linked to one another.

On what day, on what issue, have we seen such a high-level, bipartisan display in recent years?

As one of the main organizers of the march – the largest ever for a Jewish cause in American history -- there are two other notes from that day that make me optimistic for the future.

First, when a large group of people converge on any single location, there is obviously the potential for some damage or disruption. Yet

300,000 people came to Washington, and not a single sign was torn down, not a single arrest was made.

The national park service that manages the National Mall had an area roped off in the middle of the rally where new grass and flower bulbs had been planted – and not a single bulb was trampled on. The Washington Metropolitan Transit System that operates the Metro tweeted afterward that it was their busiest day for ridership since the pandemic, yet everyone waited in line calmly and politely.

My favorite social media post came from a policeman who was on duty that day saying he had been thanked for his service more in one day than in his entire career.

Political protest does not have to be violent or threatening. This is how a civil society functions. Communal leadership must stand with those who know how to exercise their democratic rights, not with those who harass and destroy to advance a cause.

Second, we came to Washington in the midst of the greatest rise of violent antisemitism in our nation's history. And we didn't just gather at a stadium or a convention center. We came to the National Mall, our nation's front porch, the most open, visible place in the country and one of the most open in the world.

We are deeply grateful for the protection of the law enforcement agencies who acted to guarantee the ability of all citizens to demonstrate in their nation's capital.

But the chosen location was also a statement – a statement that we will not be intimidated, and we will not be afraid or back down.

This is our country – we helped build it, we have served it, we love it, and we will not allow it to be overtaken by forces of hate. That 300,000 people made that statement with just one week’s notice inspires me and gives me the confidence that the forces of good in our society will prevail.

Today is the first day of Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights. I have been asked a question this week by the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, USA Today and more – Will Jewish Americans be afraid to light their Hanukkah candles in public, or have them visible in their windows?

What the reporters who ask me this question don’t know is that they are actually asking a profound and important question of Jewish law. The Talmud – that great compendium of Jewish law and tradition – teaches that we should light the Hanukkah candles in places where the public can see them. It’s called “pirsumei ha neis” or “publicizing the miracle” – the miracle of course being the success of the *Maccabees* who more than 2,200 years ago saved the Jewish people’s future.

There have been times in Jewish history, times of pogroms and inquisitions, when the leaders of the Jewish communities advised Jews not to light the Hanukkah lights in public due to safety concerns. But this is decidedly not one of those times. Just as we did by showing up on the National Mall, we will be more visible this Hanukkah, not less, we will light more candles, not fewer.

I have spent some time thinking about how it is that I ended up back at the City Club, not speaking about Ohio politics or debating a political opponent, but rather addressing this most serious topic on behalf of the Jewish communities of North America.

My friends know I am not “up” on pop culture, but I have been watching the new Apple-Plus TV show “Lessons in Chemistry.” Spoiler alert - the lead character, played by the actress Brie Larson, goes from being a lab chemist to hosting a cooking show, along the way becoming a single mother and a leading feminist in the workplace. When Larson’s character is asked how she ended up where she did, she responds, “It’s only when you look backwards that you see how it was all connected.”

Well, I didn’t plan this, not at all. But when I look backward, I do see how it is all connected. As a campaign manager and political candidate in this community, I was welcomed into homes and churches and businesses that I would never have been exposed to otherwise. I saw people oppose each other on Election Day and work together the next. I saw people protest without ever threatening their target or destroying property.

But most of all, I saw people proudly standing up for their own communities, ensuring that everyone had the opportunity to succeed, while understanding that when one of us is at risk we are all at risk.

And, so, I am here to stand up for my community, just as we stand up for others when they are attacked and at risk. That’s what I learned growing up in Cleveland, and what I now have the privilege of doing across North America.

Thank you.