

# RABBI FORA

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Chair, Vice Chair(s) and members,

When I was a young queer person, growing up in semi-rural Texas, the library was the one place I found words for what I was feeling. In the landscape of Friday night lights, church socials, the quiet stacks of the public library offered a different kind of sanctuary. It wasn't just escaping the heat, it was about escaping the crushing weight of feeling utterly alone in my own skin. Within those pages I found fragments of recognition. These words didn't magically solve anything, but they provided a map. It was the beginning of understanding, the first step towards self-acceptance, facilitated by the simple, radical act of open access to information.

People often recite "Knowledge is power", but don't often think about how one gains that knowledge. To restrict access to books is to restrict the pathways to this power. Regardless of one's personal beliefs, a requirement for a fair, free, open society is an exchange of ideas. Even ones we find personally abhorrent. This is the litmus test. It's easy to defend the expression of ideas we agree with; it takes genuine commitment to principle to defend the right of ideas we detest to exist and be debated. Tolerating abhorrent *ideas* is not the same as tolerating harmful *actions*, and the distinction is critical.

Engaging with difficult or offensive concepts in the controlled environment of a text allows for critical dissection and rebuttal, which is far healthier than attempting to suppress them, often lending them a forbidden allure. This exchange is the lifeblood of democratic discourse and intellectual progress. It's how we test our own assumptions, understand opposing viewpoints (even if only to refute them more effectively), and collectively grow towards better understanding. Shielding ourselves or others from ideas we dislike doesn't make them disappear; it merely fosters ignorance and allows unchallenged notions to fester. The strength of a society can be measured by its willingness to engage with complexity and dissent.

I personally understand capitalism to be the underpinning construct which upholds the vast amount of suffering in this society. This is a deeply held conviction based on my analysis of economic inequality, social injustice, and historical patterns. It informs my politics and my worldview significantly. However, you do not see me signing a petition to ban Ayn Rand.

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Context, however, is equally important. The way ideas are presented, the forum, the intent – all these factors matter. And it is here that recent events have moved from concerning to genuinely shameful. I am deeply embarrassed by the actions taken on the floor surrounding this bill. The specific incident speaks volumes about the degradation of our political discourse. A representative was allowed to read sexually explicit material on the house floor; a clear protest against this bill. This act was not about engaging with complex themes found in literature; it was a deliberate, decontextualized stunt designed to shock. Their intent was clearly to equate challenging library content with public obscenity, and derail a serious conversation about access to information and age-appropriate materials.

While I expect antics like this from a party that doesn't value critical thinking skills, a party seemingly more invested in performative outrage than substantive policy debate, what embarrassed me was the democratic response. Rather than acknowledging the difference between contexts, clearly articulating why a passage in a library book intended for voluntary reading by appropriate audiences is worlds apart from a non-consensual, out-of-context public reading aimed at political provocation, they timidly acquiesced in case the "scary" minority tried to make a case against this bill. This failure to stand firmly on principle, to clearly explain the crucial role of context, felt like a strategic blunder and a failure of nerve, effectively validating the opposition's distorted framing.

Are you in the majority or not? Do you have public support or do you not? Democratic leadership at all levels of government needs to step it up. This means articulating clear values, forcefully defending democratic institutions and norms, and refusing to be cowed by bad-faith attacks and manufactured outrage. The stakes are very real. While you're trying to delay or stall a bill with broad public support, the other side started arresting judges.

So, let me be crystal clear. Any of you who relied on my support, to show up in your communities, talk to your constituents, and meet them where they are; any of you who used my queerness as a means to an end who vote against this bill should expect me to put twice as much energy into anyone who primaries you.

The support I offered, the time, the travel, the emotional labor, the willingness to be visible and vulnerable as a bridge to voters, was not given lightly, nor should it be taken for granted. Using marginalized identities for electoral gain while abandoning the principles that protect access to knowledge and self-discovery for those same communities is a betrayal that demands accountability. The energy once used *for* you will be redirected *against* you.

Do your job.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ravi For". The signature is stylized with a large, looped "R" and a cursive "For".

#### CONTACT

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