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I would love to believe in petitionary prayer. Especially when life and death are at stake, a God who hears my supplications would be deeply reassuring. Despite my skepticism, I never pass up a chance in shul to say a *Mi Shebeirach* — the Jewish prayer for healing — and to name aloud the people I’m pulling for. It can’t hurt, I tell myself. You never know.

Lately, though, it’s been more than loved ones I’m just-in-case praying for. It’s America.

These are hard times. So many bodies have been bludgeoned by the lives they’ve been living; so many spirits have been broken by the horror show they, we, have been glued to. But that sickness is not only clinical, private, individual. It’s also civic, public, communal. Our “body politic” — our institutions of self-government; our rules and norms; our shared values — that body needs healing as well.

The crisis of American democracy is as much a public health crisis as anxiety or suicide, as [opioid addiction](#) or [gun violence](#). The disorders of our bodies and the dysfunctions of our body politic mirror each other.

You can see it in the language we use. Here's a headline about a recent American Psychiatry Association [study](#): "America Really Is in the Midst of a Rising Anxiety Epidemic. It's not just you." An epidemic. Like Ebola. Forty million adults in the U.S. — nearly one out of five — [have serious anxiety disorders](#), as do one out of four teens. Forty percent of us feel more anxious than we did a year ago, and that's on top of a 36% spike the year before.



**Forward**

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## Oh Kaplan, My Kaplan

Another [headline](#): "Suicide is a national epidemic. We need to treat it like one." More Americans will die of suicide this year than were killed in action during the entire Vietnam War. It's the second-leading [cause of death](#) among U.S. teenagers. It [kills](#) more Americans aged 10 to 24 each year than cancer, heart disease, liver disease, stroke, meningitis and HIV combined.

We characterize our social justice failures the same way we talk about Zika or Fukushima. [Hunger](#) is a public health crisis. So is [homelessness](#). So is [loneliness](#). So is the leading cause of those conditions: economic inequality: "[The widening chasm between the rich and the poor is killing us. Not in a spiritual way. Literally.](#)"

We say "public health," but what does it mean? At its root, Laurie Garrett writes in "Betrayal of Trust," her history of the field, public health is a function of trust, a covenant, a bond. It's a belief in the community's values, like "We belong to one another. Facts are real. Truth matters."

It's also a bond between community and government. In a plague or a hurricane, protecting the health of one — the lowest among us, or the highest — requires protecting the health of all. Government tells us what to do to be

healthy and safe, and because we trust it to do no harm, we do what we are told. Vaxxers, of course, opt out of the covenant; they don't trust the community's truth, so they don't follow the government's rules. What would happen if government itself were to opt out of the public health paradigm — if government did not believe in facts, if it belonged not to the community, but to the 1%? That's where we are now.

Consider deregulation. It sounds sensible. Who doesn't want to cut red tape? But in the hands of the Trump administration, deregulation is killing us in slow motion. Here are four of many examples.

1. The Interior Department voided a rule preventing [methane](#), a greenhouse gas 86 times more powerful at trapping heat than carbon dioxide, from escaping into the atmosphere from oil and gas rigs.
2. The EPA fought to lift the ban on [chlorpyrifos](#), a pesticide that damages children's brains, and to permit notoriously toxic [fluorinated chemicals](#) to be dumped in drinking water.
3. The Department of Health and Human Services is doing all it can to sabotage [Obamacare](#) by deregulating the insurance industry, which will leave millions with pre-existing conditions unprotected.
4. In the wake of the Parkland slayings, Trump pledged regulations to raise the minimum age for rifle purchases to 21, and to expand background checks, but within days he [abandoned](#) those promises and swore loyalty to the NRA.

Deregulation is the tip of the iceberg. The legitimacy of our elections is in doubt. With over 5,000 lies in his first 20 months, Trump is sidelining truth — and explicitly attacking the free press that depends on them. A breathtaking level of corruption has been normalized: Not only has he failed to put his assets in a blind trust or to release his tax returns; his hotels, golf clubs, restaurants and properties have taken more than [\\$16 million](#) in political and taxpayer money. National unity, the e pluribus unum that makes democracy possible, is being jeopardized by poisonous partisanship and resurgent racism, anti-Semitism, misogyny and xenophobia, all tarted up as swaggering nonconformity to political correctness.

Those are among the symptoms supporting the diagnosis of democracy in crisis that Hillary Clinton makes in the [Afterword](#) to the new edition of her memoir, "What Happened." Her answer to "How did we get here?" is epidemiological:

Think of our body politic like a human body, with our constitutional checks and balances, democratic norms and institutions and well-informed citizenry all acting as an immune system protecting us from the disease of authoritarianism. Over many years, our defenses were worn down by a small group of right-wing billionaires... who spent a lot of time and money... undermining the common factual framework that allows a free people to deliberate together... [and opening] the way for the infection of Russian propaganda and Trumpian lies to take hold.

Against that disease, a prayer for democracy — a civic *Mi Shebeirach* — feels insufficient. That's what makes *tikkun olam*, the Jewish imperative to repair the world, so appealing. It puts on earth, not on high, the responsibility to heal broken vessels. It's the spirit that animates justice movements and voluntarism. It requires, and nurtures, empathy; it entails, and rewards, a belief in self-efficacy.

Maybe *tikkun olam*, and its equivalents in other belief and disbelief traditions, is enough to fuel resistance to the president and party who are poisoning the body politic as surely as they are poisoning our children's bodies, poisoning our wearied minds and poisoning our American hearts against other American hearts.

But what if Trump fires Mueller? What if Russians rig the 2018 election? What if yet more women accuse a confirmed Justice Kavanaugh? What if the president and coterie are indicted and he pardons his children and himself? What if he provokes civil unrest and treats it like a pandemic, seizing "emergency powers" to quarantine its secessionists?

It may be time to replace \**tikkun olam*\* with *pikuach nefesh*. That's the Jewish law that we have to save a life even if it means setting aside all the other laws. That violation isn't just permitted – it's actually **required** to break a law that conflicts with life or health: "For someone who has a dangerous illness, it is a commandment to break Shabbat for him. One who hurries to do this is praised. One who asks questions is a murderer."

What is the secular equivalent of *pikuach nefesh*? Civil disobedience, for sure; from colonial times to now, Americans have won rights and righted wrongs by nonviolent law breaking. But it's worth asking if there are other rules and practices, other institutional norms, we must hurry to set aside, lest we be accomplices to the murder of democracy.

Journalism may prove to be a pathfinder. In NBC anchor Chuck Todd's recent [Atlantic piece](#), "It's Time for the Press to Stop Complaining — And to Start Fighting Back," he observes that a 50-year campaign to delegitimize the free press mapped out by Roger Ailes and Rupert Murdoch has left the Fourth Estate battered and bloodied. "If journalists are going to defend... the role [their work] plays in sustaining democracy," Todd writes, "we're going to need to start fighting back."

Truth is on the ropes. So is our Uncle Sam. Say a *Mi Shebeirach* for him. But the bullies who beat him up had better watch their backs. One who hurries to fight back will be praised.

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[The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, 1-800-273-TALK \(8255\), provides a free, 24/7 confidential service that can provide people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress, or those around them, with support, information, and local resources.](#)