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The First Amendment Is...

The First Amendment is my savta, shakily covering her eyes as she whispers:

*Sh'ma yisraeil, Adonai eloheinu, Adonai echad.* Hear, 0 Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one. It is my saba, transitioning to Hebrew, the language of secrets, when he wants to make a racist comment that he knows I will not approve of. It is my synagogue, bold and beautiful, but also with a nondescript sign because persecution can still happen in a majority-Jewish neighborhood. It is *never forget,* despite the fact that most people don't quite know what it is they're supposed to remember. It is a mosque and a church and a synagogue within a few meters of each other, even though that one guy at temple asked, "when are those goddamn Arabs going to pack up their stuff and get the hell out of my country?" The First Amendment is freedom, comfort, and security. That is, until it isn't.

The First Amendment is crude. It is signs equating leaders to sexual objects and chants that reek of anger. It is football players taking a knee, it is "Black Lives Matter," and it is blocking the streets. It is a low, menacing growl of "Jews go home," when home is the overstuffed couch with the feathers poking out where I am watching these men equate my identity with the prayers that I don't even understand and the holidays that I celebrate more because of food than anything else. It is a line in the ground that we all know was crossed a long time ago but can't exactly say when. It is taking the high road, except that there is only so much space until there is nowhere left to go but down.

The First Amendment is infuriating. It is the middle-aged man with his beer belly peeking out from under his American flag t-shirt, spitting at the "pansy-ass protestors who need to shut the hell up." It is living in the greatest country in the world, except that we're 43rd on the World Press Freedom index, 14th in the World Happiness Report, and the 7th Best Country for

Education. It is people using "freedom of speech" as a defense for every word that comes out of their mouth, but balking when others do the same. It is the separation of church and state, except when it's not. It is Making America Great Again, even though there is nothing great about blurring the lines between freedom and hate.

The First Amendment is a dried-up piece of clay, shriveled from being poked and prodded and molded into so many different forms. The First Amendment is constantly being tested: though it is built to withstand the pressure, I fear that it is beginning to crack. My generation will be left with a First Amendment that is broken, like when a word is repeated so many times that it starts to lose its meaning. It is up to us to stay crude, brash, and infuriating, but also to begin to redraw that line. It's time that we start listening to each other, because only then will the First Amendment regain the potency that was gifted to this country. Only then will we be truly free.