

Ideological Warfare in America: What Judaism Can Teach Us in 2016

Rosh Hashanah, Day 1 (Burke Sanctuary) & Kol Nidrei (Paul Family Social Hall)

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What I am about to tell you is not a joke. I know I sometimes begin my sermons with a joke, but this...this is 100% true. On May 17th just about four months ago, the Richmond Times Dispatch, that's been the primary newspaper of the Richmond, VA area for the past 150 years or so, ran the following obituary for the dearly departed Mary Anne Alfreind Noland. Before I read you the obituary, you should know that the late Mrs. Noland was a wife, a sister, a mother to 3 sons and a grandmother of 10 beloved grandchildren! She was a nurse, a faithful, church-going Methodist who lived in Virginia all her life. So thus reads the opening of the obituary for this remarkable, accomplished woman. I am reading it exactly as it appeared in the newspaper on May 17, 2016 (you can Google it if you don't believe me):

"Noland, Mary Anne Alfreind. Faced with the prospect of voting for either Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton, Mary Anne Noland of Richmond chose, instead, to pass into the eternal love of God on Sunday, May 15, 2016 at the age of 68..."¹

Now isn't this the quintessence of this particular moment in time?! Let me ask you all a question...How many of you, by a show of hands are really enjoying this election season? How many of you wish there could be just a few more debates; you haven't quite gotten your fill yet of all the discrediting, the slurs, the smearings, the shamings...

And how many of you are so sick and tired of this election that you wish it would all have been over with yesterday? This is the 7th presidential election I have been eligible to vote in, and I know many of you have been casting ballots for a lot longer than that...But I cannot remember a time when an election season has been infected with more meanness, more divisiveness, more crassness and crudeness that it is now. We are faced with the two most unfavorable presidential candidates in the history of taking that poll. Well over half of Americans express deeply negative views of both major candidates. But it's not just the candidates. Campaign rallies have turned into slug fests, facts have been wildly distorted, the truth has become completely relative,

¹ http://www.richmond.com/obituaries/article_c21b60bc-1153-5abd-b3c8-268cfd32eb57.html

the rare apology sounds empty and insincere, and we've been bombarded by the most repugnant slurs that I've been hiding the newspaper from my kids!

I've been wondering over these past several months how God would vote, if God happened to show up on Election Day at my polling station at Hoover Middle School. I think there's at least a chance that God is a Republican...after all the Torah explicitly permits self-defense, even lethal self-defense, when your life is threatened; capital punishment is prescribed for a number of crimes; the Torah is not shy about getting involved in intimate details of our personal lives; and there's a robust nationalism and militarism throughout the Hebrew Bible. Not only that but God has spoken to Republican candidates and specifically told them to run: George W. Bush, Sarah Palin, even the Jewish Republican former-Senator from Minneapolis Norm Coleman said on a radio show in 2008 that God wanted him to serve. But then God let Al Franken win his seat in that election, which makes me think that maybe God is a Democrat.

After all there's all the environmentalism of Genesis, *l'ovdah u'leshomrah*, that we must protect and care for the world; Leaving the corners of the fields for the poor to glean sounds like an ancient welfare system, and the mitzvah of paying workers their fairly earned wages on the same day sounds like the beginnings of union organizing. Of course, the Torah is unquestionably concerned about caring for *the ger, yatom, ve'almana* the stranger (some translate that as refugee), the orphan and the widow among us, so God may well be a Democrat.

That being said, though, about 40% of the Torah's laws deal with property rights, and tzedakah is ideally meant to be given directly to the recipient, not through a proxy or government, so maybe God is a libertarian.

Look this much I know, as the old Yiddish expression goes, "If God lived here on earth people would throw rocks at his windows!" You wonder why God lives above and beyond the world, way up in the heavens, that's why! Because people would throw rocks at His windows.

In the meantime we are smashing each other's windows...sometimes metaphorically, and sometimes literally. The rhetoric of this campaign is toxic and dangerous and it is pulling our country apart. And I know that some of you are thinking that rabbis, particularly this one, shouldn't be talking about politics...that it has no business coming from the pulpit. I can hear the break-fast conversations already! Can you believe that he mentioned politics, the

elections...But look, people ask me how do I come up with what I want to speak about each week and on the holidays. The answer is, that I have to speak about what's burning inside my kishkes...I have to talk to you about the issues I think are deeply important in this moment of time. Also, I completely reject the idea that religion and politics don't mix. If religion has nothing to say about the most important issues effecting society then what good is it? If religion doesn't help shape our national dialogue or our values, then what is it for? Judaism was never meant to be strictly an inward devotion or spirituality that is essentially personal and private. Abraham, Moses, the Hebrew prophets all spoke out with righteous indignation about the injustices they witnessed. They marched into the halls of power, they confronted pharaohs and kings and priests, they even railed against God. The only barrier that Jews erect between religion and politics is the one that protects people from practicing or not practicing whatever they choose. But to restrict religion to matters of ritual and ceremony is a tragic misreading of the Torah's universal message. And I think we have a lot to say, and a lot to teach society about this ideological warfare we find ourselves in today. My concern is not just for the next 28 days, it's about what happens after Election Day...when, no matter what happens, there will be a backlash; there will be anger; and I fear the breakdown of civil discourse in this country will persist!

If there is anything that Jews have mastered over the ages, it is the art of passionate disagreement. I recall being stunned, totally astounded when I first ventured into the study of Talmud and rabbinic literature. I couldn't believe that in every place and on every page where there was a disagreement about how to observe a mitzvah or apply an ethical principle from the Torah to everyday life that the minority opinion, the unchosen point of view was preserved alongside the majority, working opinion. What kind of religious community continues to circulate losing doctrinal arguments? You know what other religions call those losing doctrinal arguments...they call them heresies, blasphemy, sacrilege! But in Judaism they are perpetuated and studied! If you thought that all the rabbis were interested in was whether something was kosher or treif, ethical or unethical, permitted or forbidden—then you will be very frustrated by the Talmud. The rabbis were interested in far more than black and white answers. They were in pursuit of deep truths. And they had this radical idea that in order to arrive at those deep truths they actually had to consult all opinions; all viewpoints; all perspectives on a given subject. Divergent, opposing views, they said in Tractate Eruvin 13b all, in their own way, represent the

will of the living God! Even when the rabbis thought that an opponent in a debate was fundamentally mistaken, basically wrong on the facts or the interpretation, they still accorded that opponent dignity and respect and legitimacy. And by not erasing those minority views and teachings from the pages of history they further claimed that there was something to be learned even from the people you differ with; the exchange of ideas, the serious, intelligent engagement with people with whom you disagree!

And nobody disagreed more famously than the first century rabbinical academies of Hillel and Shammai. The Mishnah records 316 arguments where the Houses of Hillel and Shammai came to completely opposite conclusions on a particular issue of Jewish law. But in a beautiful statement in Tractate Yevamot page 14a, the Talmud claims that notwithstanding their widespread and serious disagreements about so much, their *kinderlach*, the children of the families of those two great Sages were permitted to marry one another. They refused to declare that their disagreements rendered one part of our people off limits to the other, because *their* truths are different from mine. I know some people who would totally plotz if their kid married a Republican or vice versa!

There *was* one famous episode where our Sages actually violated their own sacred principles. It was actually a discussion about Yom Kippur...In an age when Jewish holidays were determined by observing the phases of the moon, which was then verified by the testimony of witnesses to the religious authorities, there was a disagreement about what day Yom Kippur should be announced and observed. But when the religious leader of the day, Rabban Gamliel publicly shamed and humiliated his opponent who disagreed with his calculations, the rest of the Sages revolted against his leadership and voted to depose him! Not because he wasn't smart. Not because he wasn't qualified. But because he misused his power to flagrantly defame another human being. Can you imagine if the American people banded together and deposed leaders or disqualified candidates who publicly humiliated their opponents!

We learn in Pirkei Avot, that great collection of early rabbinic wisdom how our tradition defines someone who is wise. *Eizehu chacham? Ha'lomeid mi-kol adam.*² Who is wise? One who learns from all people--Not just the people with whom they agree; but also, and perhaps

² Avot 4:1

especially, from the people with whom they disagree. I've got news for you, you can be a good Jew and be a Republican; you can be a good Jew and be a Democrat; you can be a good Jew and be a libertarian... Truth and goodness and justness does not exist in only one party or one ideology. But if you want to be a *chacham*... if you want to be wise, you need to be open to discovering truth in all its different manifestations.

The National Academy of Sciences recently conducted a fascinating experiment. They studied the views of Democrats and Republicans in America, and Israelis and Palestinians in the Middle East. They learned from their 3,000 subjects that each side—Republicans and Democrats, and Israelis and Palestinians—believe that their own ideology is based on love, and automatically assume their opponent's ideology is based on hate. The scientists call this Motive Attribution Asymmetry.³ The belief that you and people you agree with are motivated by good, while those you disagree with are motivated by evil. Isn't that the rhetoric we've heard in America over the past year? In the time I spent in Israel this summer, I heard overwhelmingly that Israelis desire peace but that there is no one on the other side to talk to... no partner, no sincerity, no will from the other side, they hate us more than they want peace with us. Sadly, in this case, I think in large part that their speculations are accurate. Peace may still be far off on the horizon, but it will ultimately be made by the ones who have the courage to peel away from the asymmetrical feelings about the other, both here in America and in the Middle East, and break that cycle once and for all. People, visionaries, like Shimon Peres, of blessed memory.

Now look, I am not going to stand here and endorse one candidate or another. First of all, neither candidate asked for my endorsement, can you believe that? Second of all, I'd like to preserve Har Shalom's 501©3 tax-exempt status with the IRS, and third because I kind of enjoy the fact that roughly half of this congregation thinks I'm a bleeding heart liberal and the other half thinks I'm just to the right of Attila the Hun. I like to keep you guessing! What I really hope that you'll think about in these next grueling weeks of the campaign, and long after this election is why has this country, out of the 196 countries in the world, meant so much to us, the Jewish people? Why have Jews for the past 362 years so desperately wanted to come to these shores, to this country, to become part of this society far more than any other?

³ <http://www.pnas.org/content/111/44/15687.abstract>

Why did those 23 Jews who were expelled by the Portuguese from Brazil in 1654 get on a boat and sail to New York or New Amsterdam instead of going back to Holland, where they came from? Why did a quarter million German Jews, beaten down by persecution, restrictive laws and economic hardship set their sites on America of all places, in the 1830's? There were other countries that were a whole lot closer, a whole lot easier to get to, where they could keep speaking Yiddish... Why in the 1880's did Russian Jews who had endured waves of pogroms, not to mention crushing poverty come in a mass immigration to this country? What were they hoping to find on these shores? Why did they leave everything behind and sail 3,000 miles across the Atlantic Ocean to a land they had never seen but where they invested the entirety of their hopes and dreams? Why did Jews pack into squalid, ghetto-like conditions, overcrowded tenements and housing projects in America's major cities after they got off the boats from Eastern Europe? And why didn't Jews just stay quiet, just keep a low profile in this country, try not to make too many waves or be noticed by their neighbors? I mean after all the *tzurris*, all the persecution in other lands, just play it safe here in America, don't ask for more trouble! But they didn't! In fact Jews were not just involved, but at the forefront, the leadership, they were the visionaries of every single major progressive movement in the history of this country: women's suffrage, civil rights, gay rights, labor organizing, and social justice of all kinds! Why were Jews so disproportionately represented in these mass transformations in American society? Why have Jews fought and died for this country in every single war we have ever been involved in, from the Revolutionary War to the Civil War to today's military campaigns? Why in 1903 when looking for just the right sentiments to put on the base of the brand new Statue of Liberty in New York harbor was a sonnet written by a 34 year old Jewish woman, a descendant of America's first Jewish settlers by the name of Emma Lazarus chosen to represent the yearning all people have when coming to this great country? Why in 1964 did Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman give up their lives along with James Earl Chaney in order to combat bigotry and racism in the American South? And why did a Polish born rabbi, a descendent of a great Hasidic dynasty who came to America with his thick, eastern European accent at 37 years old whose name was Abraham Joshua Heschel link arms with a black Baptist preacher from Atlanta, Georgia named Martin Luther King and march together on Selma in 1965 for equal voting rights? Why, to this very day, do Jews feel so remarkably safe, so remarkably at home, so remarkably in sync with this nation in exponentially greater numbers than any other country in

the world, except of course Israel, the only country in the world where there are more Jews than America? I'll tell you why...It's because this country was founded on biblical principles of welcoming the stranger, caring for and supporting those less fortunate...like the widow, the stranger, and the orphan. A country that has opened its doors to immigrants and refugees from all over the world, and has become a haven to those fleeing persecution, just as it was for many of our parents and grandparents. No country has tried harder to embody the words of Leviticus:⁴ *Mishpat echad yihiyed lachem ka'ger ka'ezrach yihiyeh*...There shall be one law that applies equally to the native born and the stranger among you; no country has striven more to uphold the words of Deuteronomy⁵ *tzedek, tzedek tirdof*, justice, justice shall you pursue *l'ma'an tich'yeh* in order that you may live...you and your families, your children and your elders, the wealthy and the poor, the healthy and those who need to be cared for.

You want to know who I'll be voting for...I'll tell you. I will be voting for the candidates and leaders and issues that will best preserve what Jews have always found so sacred in this country. I will vote for those who (in the words of Rabbi Eric Yoffie)⁶ summon America to its highest calling as a champion of liberty, humanity, and decency. And of course I will also be voting and lobbying and writing letters to the editor and visiting my members of congress on behalf of a strong and enduring relationship between the United States and the State of Israel. I am under no illusions that any candidate will be perfect, or impeccable in every way. We're not electing a *mashiach*, we're electing human beings...flawed, imperfect human beings. We may have different views about who the best candidates are or what those critical issues are that demand our support...but for God's sake, let's have some respect each other, let's have some humility and sensitivity for other people's heartfelt opinions and views, and stop questioning their patriotism or their character. As the great Eli Weisel, who was sadly taken from the world just a few months ago, once wrote: "I believe in man in spite of man. I believe in language even though it has been wounded, deformed, and perverted by the enemies of mankind, And I continue to cling to words because it is up to us to transform them into instruments of comprehension rather

⁴ Leviticus 24:22

⁵ Deuteronomy 16:20

⁶ <http://www.haaretz.com/opinion/.premium-1.743659>

than contempt. It is up to us to choose whether we wish to use them to curse or to heal, to wound or to console.”⁷

At the end of the Amidah, the standing prayer that we recite morning, afternoon, and evening our practice is to take three steps backward at the conclusion of the prayer as we say the words: *Oseh shalom bimromav, Hu ya'aseh shalom aleinu ve'al kol Yisrael, ve'imru amen*. As we say this prayer asking God to bestow peace upon us, we physically step back...as if to say that we can only achieve peace when we are willing to take a step back, and make room for other people, other opinions, other ways of understanding the world. And then, after we take those three steps back, we bow...but not just straight ahead like in other parts of the service, but to the right and then to the left. I want you to think about this the next time you finish the Amidah...maybe we are actually bowing to the people to our right and to the people to our left... to demonstrate our honor for them, and our conviction that achieving peace and harmony will only happen when we learn to respect not only those we agree with but also the people who are to our right of us and the people who are to the left of us. Then and only then will the One who makes peace in the heavens make peace for us, for Israel, and for all the world, as we say: together, Amen.

L'shana Tova.

⁷ Wiesel, Eli. *Open Heart*, 2012. Page 73

