

Shabbat Shalom,

The feast of Sukkot—The feast of booths is officially over. The sukkah decorations are put away, the palm fronds on the roof—have dried out—the myrtle and willow leaves fallen off the lulav, and the Torah covers have returned from their holiday whites to their everyday mantles. Life begins to return to its normal pace. No more Jewish holidays til Chanukah. But now our attention turns from one booth—the temporary booth of the sukkah to the voting booth. In less than a month we and our fellow citizens will execute our right to vote. We will choose the direction of our nation for the next for years. While some of you tonight no doubt were able to watch the debates between the Presidential candidates, surely it is a closely fought election. Neck and Neck as they say.

In addition to who will be the next President of the United States—there are many other issues before us on the ballot. Here in our own state of California, our system of ballot initiatives, cover a wide variety of topics, from gambling to bond initiatives, election reform to healthcare.

While it is impossible for me to go over every ballot initiative with you, tonight on the Shabbat Bereshit—this first Shabbat of the new Torah reading cycle, I would like to highlight one initiative that is on the ballot in November and to look it not from a partisan point of view but from a Jewish point of view. For if we must not only dwell in our sukkah—our booth for the week of the harvest festival but we must carry our Jewish values with us into the voting booth too.

Al tifrosh min hatzibur—Do not separate yourself from the community. This quote from Pirke Avot in the Talmud, The Ethics of our Ancestors, teaches us that we must be involved in the life and thinking of our society. We cannot just sit on the sidelines. Rather we must use our system of values, and ethics and bring them to the communal table. We must be involved in our community; our Jewish community and yes, our larger community of Los Angeles, of our State and of our nation. One way we do this is by voting. And so tonight—I am going to first remind you of your Jewish obligation to vote. GO VOTE. Get out your organizer, your date book, your Palm Pilot, your calendar-- and make sure that you write it in... on Tuesday Nov. 2. ELECTION DAY IS TUESDAY NOV. 2. before 8pm. If you can't go vote, then do it absentee. But don't sit out. Make your voice known. No excuses—for not voting.

Secondly, I want to call your attention to proposition 71 --Proposition 71 is called the Stem Cell research Funding proposition. 71 will authorize issuing \$3billion in bonds to establish a new state institute to regulate and fund stem cell research.

As you may know, Cells are the basic building blocks of the human body. These tiny structures compose the skin, muscles, bones and all of the internal organs. They also hold many of the keys to how our bodies function. Cells serve both a structural and a functional role in the body, performing an almost endless variety of actions to sustain the

body's tissues and organs. There are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of different specialized cells.

Specifically, stem cells are able to turn into other cells or tissues. Because of this trait, scientists are convinced they offer a revolutionary means of treating various diseases and repairing damaged tissues by replacing the ill cells. Stem cells are believed to be able to treat such diseases such as Parkinson's, Lou Gherig's Disease or ALS, there is even thought that Stem Cells might be used to treat diabetes and AIDS. Long-term research is still needed to find out the exact mechanism of this transformation, however. This initiative would help fund that research.

There are two general categories of stem cells. Those still found in adults and those found in embryos. For many years, scientists have conducted studies to determine whether the stem cells in adult tissue have the same developmental capability as embryonic stem cells. The general consensus is that adult stem cells seem to be less versatile. Scientists think that embryonic stem cells have a much greater utility and potential than the adult stem cells, because embryonic stem cells may develop into virtually every type of cell in the human body. Adult stem cells, on the other hand, may only be able to develop into a limited number of cell types.

Embryonic stem cells could be made available from the embryos that are at the present time stored away. Most often these embryos, fertilized in vitro, for use by those who are trying to conceive are thrown away. It is expensive to store these embryos over time and many families choose not to pay for and keep these embryos.

In August of 2001, President Bush gave a major speech and that set important policy of the federal government in regards to stem cell research. President Bush limited the number and use of available stem cells for research. He said:

“Embryonic stem cell research is at the leading edge of a series of moral hazards. The initial stem cell researcher was at first reluctant to begin his research, fearing it might be used for human cloning. Scientists have already cloned a sheep. Researchers are telling us the next step could be to clone human beings to create individual designer stem cells, essentially to grow another you, to be available in case you need another heart or lung or liver. I strongly oppose human cloning, as do most Americans. We recoil at the idea of growing human beings for spare body parts, or creating life for our convenience. And while we must devote enormous energy to conquering disease, it is equally important that we pay attention to the moral concerns raised by the new frontier of human embryo stem cell research. Even the most noble ends do not justify any means.”

President Bush's watershed policy statement allows federal funding for embryonic stem cell research but only on a limited number of stem cell lines that had previously been created. This was limited to existing stem cell lines and shut off the possibility of any new lines for research funded by the federal government. Thus frozen embryos—that

parents had conceived in a quest for bearing children—and that ultimately will be discarded, could be used to save lives are not available for research. Embryonic stem cells could be made available from these embryos that are at the present time stored away. Most often these embryos, fertilized in vitro, for use by those who are trying to conceive are thrown away. Parents cannot even make the decision to donate them once they have decided not to develop these cells. It is expensive to store these embryos over time and many families choose not to pay for and keep these embryos.

But the present federal policy won't allow for this research or use.

Our Jewish tradition reminds us that while only God can create life, God has charged humans with doing everything possible to preserve it. "I have put before you this day life and death. Choose life, that you and your children may live" (Deuteronomy 30:20). We just read this passage on Yom Kippur Day. As our Reform movement noted in a 1993 resolution on fetal tissue research, Jewish authorities have used the concept of *pikuach nefesh*, or the primary responsibility to save human life, which overrides almost all other laws, to approve a broad range of medical experimentation. Cutting off funding for medical research that has such tremendous potential benefits - even where, as here, it raises complex and far-reaching issues - is both immoral and unethical according to our tradition.

Our tradition teaches us that human life is of infinite value and that the preservation of life supersedes almost all other considerations. We, as Jews, believe that God endowed humanity with the understanding and ability to become partners with God in making a better world. The use of our wisdom to cure illnesses has been a central theme in Jewish thought and history. Jewish tradition would also embrace the notion of the community banding together to provide this research. While there are fiscal implications in the issuing of bonds to pay for this research, our tradition would also teach that the needs represented by those who seek help from stem cell research and stem cell therapies is part of our communal responsibility as well. The 3 billion dollar principal and 3 billion dollar interest of these bonds estimated over the next 30 years is warranted by the Jewish emphasis on encouraging scientific research and caring for the ill. Maimonides the great Jewish scholar and doctor, wrote extensively about medicine, research and the Jewish responsibility for making it happen.

While embryos have the potential for life. Jewish tradition does not believe that the clump of cells is yet life. Thus the embryos that would merely be destroyed or thrown out should be used for research—according to Jewish tradition.

That is why proposition 71 viewed from a Jewish perspective is a proposition I support. We Californians can do and should do what our federal government refuses to do—and that is save life.

We through our vote can give the gift of hope to millions who suffer at the hands of debilitating diseases. We can truly save a life. Let us go now from our *sukkat shalom*—

our booth of peace to a sukkat tikvah—to our booth of hope. For that is what the voting booth can be on Nov. 2 –in regards to stem cell research.

Shabbat Shalom.