

## **The Holiness of the 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment**

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Erev Rosh Hashanah 2022

My first exposure to fundamentalist evangelical Christianity was over 40 years ago, when I was about ten years old. Shortly after my sister went to college she became a “Born Again Christian” and was eager to share her new faith with the whole family.

My grandmother made it clear to her that if she wanted my brother or I to be able to spend time with her, or spend the night at her place, she couldn’t take us to church or try to convert us. She promised, and then broke her promise every single time we visited her.

In her mind, what she was doing was ok, because she felt that what she was doing was for the greater good, because it was for the sake of our eternal souls. Visits with her consisted of going to church, endless stories of hellfire and damnation, and an apocalyptic view of the world’s imminent demise, and her fervent need to save us, whether we wanted to be saved, or not. For her, and for many with the same belief system, the ends justify the means. No matter who is hurt in the process, or how much hypocrisy is engaged in.

Ever since then I have been wary of evangelical Christianity. This was the early 1980s, and it was also at that time that I became aware of how it was creeping into mainstream politics and policies because of the so called “Moral Majority.”

For the most part, I didn’t feel threatened by it. This is probably because throughout my life, the majority of my closest friends have been Christian, and they have never tried to convert me. On the contrary, they always showed the utmost respect and support for my Judaism, sometimes more than my Jewish family did.

We would ask questions about each other’s faiths, celebrate each other’s important lifecycle events together, and support each other’s beliefs. Beliefs where our values always overlapped, even though our theologies were different. And because of this, it never worried me to be part of a religious minority because I didn’t feel threatened by the majority. My sister’s Christianity seemed to be a fringe interpretation, and not part of mainstream American life, because her way of expressing her faith was so different than how my friends practiced theirs.

But things have changed.

The nature of faith in the public square has become steadily and increasingly belligerent and aggressive, and at times violent. The fig leaf of “Judeo-Christian” values, which gained popularity after WWII, has been striped away and replaced by a partisanship and a whitening of faith to such a degree that what we have seen in some states, and in more and more school districts, is political policy driven by people who want to impose their faith on others, as well as to delegitimize not only other religions, but even the beliefs of other types of Christianity.

This worries me to no end. I'm worried because there is a significant group of extreme fundamentalists who have made great progress in hijacking the name "Christian" and trying to redefine it, and our nation, in the process. They take their religious beliefs into the public square and use them like a sword striking at the very heart of democracy, wounding our Constitution, and breaking down the First Amendment, and by doing so, putting all minorities at risk.

This disturbing interpretation of Christianity that we have seen more and more of is known as Christian Nationalism. But I believe that a better name for it is White Christian Nationalism because of its strong ties with and the promotion of, a white supremacist theology.

There are three key elements to Christian Nationalism.<sup>1</sup> First, is the belief that the United States was founded as a Christian Nation. Second, an understanding of Jesus from the Book of Revelation, where he is described as a warrior with eyes like "flames of fire" and "a robe dipped in blood." And lastly, a belief that there is such a thing as a "real American." And just in case you're wondering who a "real American is," if you're in this room, it's likely that it is not you.

Why, you might be asking, is the rabbi talking about Christian Nationalism on Erev Rosh HaShanah, the eve of the Jewish New Year? Because Rosh HaShanah has never been the "Jewish" New Year, that is what Passover is. Rosh HaShanah is the day that we recognize the universality of life, and God, and our place in the larger story of humanity. On this day we celebrate creation itself and are reminded that we are all descended from the same human being, all children of the same God, all of us responsible, one for the other. And the machzor, the High Holiday Prayerbook, reminds us that it is not just the Jewish people that is being judged in this season of repentance, but the whole of humanity.

We are reminded on this day that our belief of interdependent human responsibility is deeply embedded in who we are as Jews. It is at the core of what *tikkun olam* – repairing the world is all about. It is what is meant when we are commanded *tzedek, tzedek tirdof* – justice, justice you shall pursue – meaning that we have an obligation to ensure that there are fair courts of justice for all people, not just ourselves, but for everyone. And, it is what Hillel the Elder meant when he said that the entire Torah can be summed up by saying "what is hateful to you, do not do to another." Not simply to another Jew, but to any other person.

These three things, have we engaged in repairing the world, have we pursued justice, and have we behaved like decent and compassionate human beings, this is what each of us individually, and all of us collectively, are being judged on during the High Holidays.

At this moment in history, our status, and the status of all minorities, with equal protections under the law, as well as the separation of church and state is at great risk, and it rests on the important understanding that while this is a nation where the majority of its citizens are White Christians, it is not a White Christian nation.

This is not a mere matter of semantics, these are two radically different world views. One perspective allows for us to be full and equal citizens, and in the other we are, at best, a tolerated

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<sup>1</sup> An 'imposter Christianity' is threatening American democracy, John Blake, CNN, July 24, 2022

visitor, and at worst, well, just look at Charlottesville in August of 2017, Pittsburgh in 2018, Poway in 2019, Sacramento in 1999, or Washington D.C, on January 6, 2021, in order to get a taste of what the worst can begin to look like.

Let me be clear. I am not on this bimah advocating for any particular political philosophy. This is not about liberal vs. conservative, left vs. right, Democrat vs. Republican, or even Judaism vs. Christianity.

This is about democracy vs. theocracy.

Our country is in the midst of an existential struggle that will define our future as Jews in America. A struggle between secular politics and religious fundamentalism. And the bitter irony is that the single greatest threat to our ability to freely practice our religion is an America that is increasingly being governed by those who believe that they are enacting God's will by imposing *their* religious beliefs on all of us.

Is it any wonder that over the last 6 years more and more congregants have asked me, "Rabbi - How do we know when it is time for us to leave?"

This is not our first rodeo. We know how the story ends for us in a fundamentalist theocracy.

My fears about Christian Nationalism rose to the surface again this last June when many in the Jewish and the larger faith community felt like we were given a 1 – 2 punch in the gut, by two rulings that seemed to be clearly dictated not by settled law, and not by the dominant beliefs of the majority of our citizens, but by six Supreme Court justices who seem more loyal to their particular Christian interpretation of the Constitution than to the oath that they took to serve our country.

Like most of our congregants, I was upset and outraged when the Supreme Court struck down *Roe v. Wade*, and then quickly followed that decision with permitting prayer at the 50 yard line of a public high school football field led by a school employee.

And these rulings were all the more disturbing because it was against the backdrop of more and more school districts banning books such as the *Diary of Ann Frank* and pushing back against critical race theory saying that their children shouldn't feel uncomfortable when learning about American history. And by that, they meant what they wanted is a WHITE-washed version of American history taught in our schools.

And of course then there is Florida, because – well because there is always Florida. Florida passed a law trying to push the LGBTQ+, or Queer, community back into the closet and out of the public schools.

These events struck fear in me at every level of who I am, as a woman, as a Jew, and as an American, and I mean, I felt real fear. It reminded me of the fear I felt as a child when my sister would take me to church and try to convince me to become a Christian, and I was told by her, that what she was doing was out of love, and for my own good.

It didn't feel like it was for my own good then, and it doesn't feel like that now.

As a woman, I am scared because while equality is still an unreached goal, before the reversal of *Roe v. Wade*, I could at least feel comfort in knowing that I have more rights than my mother's generation, and she had more rights than her mother's, and my grandmother had more rights than her mother. But now I can not say to the next generation that they will have more rights than mine. Because they already have less.

And until just a few years ago, I never saw a conflict between being Jewish and an American. That is not to say that there is not anti-Semitism in America, but I wasn't afraid of it being codified into law or uttered by elected leaders without recourse and consequences. But now? Now, I am afraid that more Americans, and certainly more of our elected leaders, believe that this is a Christian nation. And the wall between church and state is not just crumbling, but actively being dismantled from inside our courtrooms, state legislatures and school boards, with well, almost space-laser like precision.

I now feel scared not only about the immediate impact from the Supreme Court rulings over the summer, but also about what the future implications of them might be.

The way that *Roe v. Wade* was struck down opens the door for states to try to strike down other pieces of settled law, such as marriage equality and interracial marriages, as well as putting women and people with uterus's back into a second class status where we have limited rights over our bodies and personhood. And God help you if you're one of those people with a uterus who identifies as a transperson, we have seen an increase in physical and legal attacks on that community for many years now.

And if a coach can lead a prayer on the football field, then why not in the classroom? When my son didn't feel comfortable singing Christmas carols in front of McClatchy when he was a freshman, his Spanish teacher said fine, he didn't have to, but it would negatively affect his grade if he didn't participate in this required class activity. You can't tell me that teachers don't have the power to coerce their students into engaging in religious acts against their will.

I do believe there is a moral majority in our country, and it consists of people from many faiths who believe that every person deserves to be treated with dignity, respect and equality, and who don't believe in religious coercion or racism and misogyny that is wrapped up in religious rhetoric.

Three years after the Constitution of the United States was ratified, the American Jewish community was still nervous about our status as full and equal citizens, and whether or not we could find *real* protection under the law in our country.

So on August 17, 1790, when President George Washington visited Newport Rhode Island, Moses Seixas, the head of Congregation Yeshuat Israel, raised the Jewish community's concerns to President Washington, and wrote:

“Deprived as we heretofore have been of the invaluable rights of free Citizens, we now ... behold a Government, erected by the Majesty of the People—a Government, which to

bigotry gives no sanction, to persecution no assistance—but generously affording to All liberty of conscience, and immunities of Citizenship: deeming every one, of whatever Nation, tongue, or language, equal parts of the great governmental Machine...<sup>2</sup>

To the delight, and relief, of the Jewish community, President Washington returned these sentiments, almost word for word, in a letter of response to the Jewish community, and added “The Citizens of the United States of America have a right to applaud themselves for having given to mankind examples of an enlarged and liberal policy: a policy worthy of imitation.”

While Washington’s sentiments were reassuring, it was the First Amendment, ratified more than a full year later, that enshrined our rights, and a sense of security, as Jews, in this country.

There is a reason why freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom to assemble, and freedom to petition the government for redress of grievances were the first Amendment made to the Constitution. It is because without these rights, none of us can truly be free.

Many of our nation’s founders feared that there would be religious zealots who might try to hijack our government, and knew from their own experience how dangerous the mixing of religion and government can be.

President Washington was correct in saying that this “enlarged and liberal policy” was “a policy worthy of imitation.” Our democracy has come to be seen by many around the world as a system that is worthy of imitation. It has inspired people around the world to create democracies, and it has served as a shining beacon guiding oppressed people, including many of our ancestors, to these shores.

During the High Holidays the entire world is being weighed in judgement. I shutter to think of not only what it would mean for Jews, but also for the nations of the world, if White Christian Nationalism becomes enshrined in American law and we witness the dismantling of our democracy.

What would become of us if the First Amendment becomes a thing of history?

Our faith compels us to act in times of crisis, not just to pray. We blow the shofar at the High Holidays to wake us up, to rouse us out of our complacency. In biblical times the shofar was a call to battle, but *now*, it is a call to action.

It is time for us to be awakened from a false belief that our democracy will last forever, or that Jews will never have to worry about our status in this country.

Now is the time for us to find ways to defend and protect this country and it’s Constitutional freedoms that have for more than two centuries *defended* and *protected* us.

Let us pay attention to what is happening in the world around us. (*Tekia*)

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<sup>2</sup> <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/05-06-02-0135>

Let us give ourselves permission to cry out in anguish and frustration at the things that are plaguing our country and mourn the social norms that have been lost. (*Shevarim*)

But let us also be open to hearing the urgent call to action so that we will be ready to engage in the work that is before us. (*Truah*)

And by the time we hear the final blast of the shofar at the close of Yom Kippur, may we have the strength and determination to continue to repair that which is broken, pursue justice for all who are in need, and to protect the precious legacy that we have inherited. (*Tekia G'dolah*)

**For further reading on the rise of Christian Nationalism in the United States:**

Right Wing Extremism in the 2022 Primaries, ADL  
<https://www.adl.org/resources/blog/right-wing-extremism-2022-primaries>

The Anti-Semitism of Christian Nationalists, Religion in Public  
<https://religioninpublic.blog/2021/01/26/the-anti-semitism-of-christian-nationalists-thanks-to-qanon/>

An 'imposter Christianity' is threatening American Democracy, CNN  
[https://apple.news/ATYGGxV9\\_RYSkxRCzfgUo3w](https://apple.news/ATYGGxV9_RYSkxRCzfgUo3w)

Marjorie Taylor Greene to the GOP: "We should be Christian Nationalists", Newsweek  
<https://www.newsweek.com/marjorie-taylor-greene-gop-we-should-christian-nationalists-1727445>

What the History of 'Judeo-Christian' can teach us about fighting Christian nationalism, Religion News Service  
<https://religionnews.com/2022/07/20/what-history-of-judeo-christian-teaches-about-defeating-white-christian-nationalism/>

These local Christian leaders reject Christian nationalism, LancasterOnline  
[https://lancasteronline.com/opinion/columnists/these-local-christian-leaders-reject-christian-nationalism-column/article\\_fc4fab1a-09b4-11ed-a8be-ff6b1972e721.html](https://lancasteronline.com/opinion/columnists/these-local-christian-leaders-reject-christian-nationalism-column/article_fc4fab1a-09b4-11ed-a8be-ff6b1972e721.html)