

The Non-Election Election Sermon

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Today I am going to answer the question on the minds of many. I know it is a topic of interest because so many people have approached me in recent weeks to ask if I am going to speak about the election on the holidays. They point out that there is so much to say about the upcoming election, the campaign and the candidates, how the battle is being waged, the unusual nature of the contest and the gravity of the consequences of the outcome for our nation, our people and the world.

Let me declare unequivocally at the outset my personal opinion and what I intend to do. My goal and theme is for us to be “stronger together” so we can “make Judaism great again.”

Four years and eight years ago I delivered sermons in which I articulated a Jewish approach on some of the issues facing our nation at the time. The suggestions I offered were Jewish perspectives, but not **the** Jewish view, because there is no such thing as one unified Jewish perspective on matters of public policy. Opposing positions can both lay claim to being what Judaism says on almost any given topic, which may be the source of the joke in *Fiddler on the Roof* when the rabbi is asked who he agrees with in a legal dispute. He says, “Chayim is right.” When pressed further by the other litigant, he demurs and says that guy is right. A bystander objected and said, “Rabbi, how can they both be right?” To which the rabbi replies, “You also are right!”

Most decisions we make have an element of truth in both sides and are not clear cut, black and white choices. The conclusions we reach depend upon which source and rabbi one chooses to cite, and which precedent or principle one chooses to apply. I agree with one of my colleagues who said that she does not think it appropriate for rabbis to “cherry pick” texts to fit their preconceived conclusions.

Although I chose and weighed my words carefully and intentionally did not express a preference or endorse a candidate, after each sermon people speculated and tried to surmise who I favored.

While a rabbi is permitted and entitled to have an opinion and to publicly express and even endorse a candidate, to do so on the bema in the context of a service, would be wrong. For one, it would jeopardize the tax status of the institution. This would not only hurt the synagogue, but could have an adverse impact on the tax-exempt status of contributions made by donors, (especially those who pay taxes.) Furthermore, I do not think it makes sense to alienate congregants and make those who would support the candidate not endorsed feel uncomfortable, excluded, rejected or disenfranchised. Additionally one can question how much of an impact a rabbinic endorsement carries. And finally, people come to shul not to hear political messages or commentary, but to hear and be inspired by the message of Judaism – to which I reply: that is my *raison d’être* as a rabbi: to uplift and inspire, to share my passion for Judaism, but also to show ways in which Judaism is relevant and has something to say about contemporary issues facing us.

My primary purpose in previous quadrennial election cycle sermons was to encourage people to be involved in the political process and to vote, and to cast their ballot with Jewish values in mind, because

I think Judaism can and should be involved in all aspects of our actions and the decisions we make. That is why I believe the candidate you support should have views consistent with your understanding of what Judaism teaches and who you think is most qualified to lead our nation. Then as now, I express the hope that this will include factoring in who you think will be the strongest defender of the security and well-being of the only Jewish nation in the world, the state of Israel and of strengthening the alliance between Israel and the United States.

But what about this year? Rarely have both candidates had such high negative ratings. Many are appalled and disgusted by the nature of the campaign and vitriolic rhetoric being hurled. In a poll conducted a few weeks ago in which voters were asked if they preferred Clinton, Trump or a meteor striking the earth, 13% chose the meteor, and 7% were undecided. Are the circumstances, campaigns and candidates so different, the stakes so high, and the contrasts in style so great that I should violate this practice and make a public endorsement?

Some of my colleagues feel it is the role of the rabbi to be a prophetic voice and are speaking this year about issues being discussed in the campaign. While most of those who do so are avoiding any specific mention of the candidate they prefer, they are hoping their congregants will read between the lines and get the message of who they support. Many are avoiding the topic altogether.

I am concerned that if I do speak about certain Jewish values or concepts, without mentioning a particular candidate, as some of my colleagues are doing, I run the risk of jeopardizing our neutrality, for people might assume I am making a statement or endorsement. If, for example I address the value called *derech erez*, the requirement to treat and speak about others with respect and restraint, or if I talk about the importance of not being a bully, and of what Judaism teaches about how we should treat the stranger in our midst, then some may think I am speaking about one of the candidates. And if I preach about the importance of transparency and openness, of trust and the need to take responsibility for our actions, then people might interpret those comments as a veiled reference to one of the candidates.

I think, however, I am on pretty safe ground and won't get into too much trouble though if I say that whoever is elected should at least know where Aleppo is and why it is important.

Or I could do what I did at the Chanukah celebration last December at the Governor's mansion in Annapolis when in the thick of the primaries, I incorporated the names of all the candidates into the Chanukah story. It went like this:

When the O'MACABEES, or as they were called in those days, the HUCKABEES came marching up the HILARY to the Temple, they found that the SANTORUM had been desecrated, so they rededicated and CHRISTIED the altar. They searched under a BUSH and looked in the SANDERS nearby to see if they could find a CRUZ of oil. They RUBIOed the oil lamp to see if a genie would come out, but the oil in those days was not like what we use today. It could not be used to run your CARLY or your CARSON. Nor could it be used to RANDomly PAUL a tractor. The oil burned

for 8 days, longer than anyone anticipated, and thereby TRUMPED all bets as to how long it would last.

Rather than speak about specific candidates or address specific contentious issues, such as immigration policy or health care, I want instead to speak today about a problem which is endemic and at the core of what plagues our political system. The message is germane and appropriate to the election, and what is transpiring in our nation, but also applies to our own lives as well, and relates to themes of the holiday of Yom Kippur. These comments have nothing to do with either candidate, but everything to do with all the candidates, and what ails our country, our politicians, and us.

Something I read in the inside page of an article in *The New York Times* "Week in Review" section from May 22 earlier this year by journalist Nelson Schwartz grabbed my attention. The article said the following, "Republicans, including Mr. Trump, have long argued that regulatory zeal kills jobs and undermines economic growth. Democrats (on the other hand) maintain it is necessary to protect employees from abuses and risks, while imposing checks on the power of big companies." It goes on to say, and here was the ah-ha moment for me, "Both arguments contain elements of truth."

Reading those few sentences in a lengthy article about the election and public policy made sense and helped me realize how Jewish values can and should play a role in our political system. The author is absolutely correct. We need both. We need people to argue for regulations to protect the public and employees, and we also need people to advocate for policies which are not so restrictive they hamper economic growth. And then we need to come up with legislation and regulations that incorporates the concerns and meets the needs of both sides.

Reading that helped me realize that the reason things are especially divisive, contentious and intense today is because there is no desire for reconciliation or accommodation. These two elements are absent from today's wrangling on matters of public policy, and all too often in our personal lives as well. We are so intent to make our point we do not hear anyone else, nor do we even associate with people who disagree with us. Our sources of news and information are segmented, as is who we befriend and hang out with.

We need to foster greater tolerance and respect for those with whom we disagree and to conduct our public discourse and debates with greater civility. Too often we do not listen but talk past each other in platitudes and polemics. We need to try to understand and appreciate where people we disagree with are coming from, and to recognize that their intentions and motivations are no less worthy or noble than ours. People should seek to see the points in common and recognize that ultimately the mutual goal should be to work for the greater common good.

Judaism embraces and emphasizes a willingness to compromise and to work to understand the other perspective, two of the very values absent in our current environment. If we applied the approach of our faith and acted with more tolerance for the principles of our adversaries, we would relieve the stagnation and obstructionism that paralyzes our current system of government and which makes governing so difficult. Greater understanding and cooperation would reduce some of the stress and tensions we are all feeling and would allow us to make progress on perplexing and complicated issues.

By way of example, it has become increasingly clear this past year that despite the tremendous progress we have made in the area of civil rights and affording greater opportunity for all, our nation remains deeply divided on many issues, including the fissure along racial lines. This is an area where the kind of understanding I am advocating would help reduce tensions tremendously.

African Americans are rightfully frustrated by the number of young, often unarmed black men shot and killed by police officers in cities across the country. What started as a slogan has grown and become a movement. One of the reasons people say "Black Lives Matter" is to express a point that should be obvious, but apparently, unfortunately is not. Not everyone agrees with the sentiment though, and some whites are offended by it.

Do you remember how angry many of us in the Jewish community were when the attacks on Charlie Hebdo in Paris occurred in January of 2015? We rightfully questioned why the targeting of a kosher Jewish supermarket at the same time was downplayed? We were justifiably upset when President Obama in his initial comments minimized the very real threat felt by Jews in France and referred to it as a random attack on a deli. Jews were disturbed that while people mourned the loss of lives of those who worked at the newspaper, and condemned it as an attack on free speech and free press, the targeting of Jews was barely mentioned. People carried signs identifying with the victims at vigils saying, "*Je suis Charlie*", but rare was the proclamation of solidarity that said, "*Je suis Juive*." We were outraged that their lives were somehow not as important or that the attack was somehow not so terrible, since the victims were Jews. It was as if the assault was in some warped way, understandable and justifiable. It was as if they were implying that since in their mind Jews are implicated in the suffering of Palestinians, Jewish lives are expendable.

Therefore, in light of our experience of being marginalized, we should be able to identify and empathize with the blacks who feel frustrated by the discrimination and barriers caused by racism and racial profiling. The harsh reality that they must live with every day is real and difficult for us to imagine. In light of what has happened, they are entitled to feel that their lives are not valued.

I parenthetically hasten to note, lest some misinterpret what I have to say that the lives of fire fighters and police officers, (who risk their lives to save others, who are always the first to place their lives in harm's way, and who are also frequently under fire themselves) are also precious and sacred. I also am omitting discussion of the obnoxious venomous insertion in the platform statement about Israel which I deplore and the efforts of pro-Palestinian elements to hijack the cause. This may be the reason we need to reengage with the community. My point though is not to endorse a platform or statement in it, especially something that is so obviously the antithesis of everything I hold to be true, but to use this issue to illustrate the need for greater effort to understand those with whom we may disagree.

It is incumbent upon us to understand the level of anguish felt by blacks and why they have taken a slogan that should not even be necessary to state, and parlayed it into a cause. We need to understand why they object and reject the notion that all lives matter and why when they are told that all lives matter, they consider it to be belittling their cause and missing the point of what they are saying. They want us to know they are not invisible.

But I also think that supporters of the Black Lives Matter concept need to understand why some are offended and put off by the phrase. They need to understand the argument of those who feel that the correct way forward is to assert that all lives matter and that no one should be left out or singled out for special consideration when speaking of the sacredness of life.

Like the rabbi from Fiddler, both are right. There is ample justification to make a distinction, and there is ample reason not to make a distinction. My point is we would be better off as a society if we try understanding each other's pain and point of view.

Our tradition tells us that the loss of a life is the equivalent of the loss of an entire world. We are all created equally, in the image of God. Our rabbinic sources say the reason God created Adam, one person, was so that we would all have the same father. God wanted us to recognize our common lineage and that all humanity has a common source, so that no one race or people would feel they were superior to another.

I suggest when we have debates on controversial issues, whatever the topic, we should follow the model of the rabbis quoted in the Talmud. The Talmud is a record of countless debates and arguments among the rabbis on all kinds of points of law. Some of the conflicts were classic and went on for decades such as the ones between Hillel and Shammai and their disciples, who disagreed on just about everything. By way of example, Hillel said the mezuzah should be placed horizontally because we are commanded to say the shema when we lie down at night. Shammai, however said it should be placed on our doorposts vertically, since we are required to recite the shema when we rise up in the morning.

Through my weekly study of Talmud with my *hevruta* study partner I have come to see that much of the discourse in the Gemorrah are attempts by the rabbis to reconcile differences of opinion. If one rabbi says something that disagrees or contradicts the position of another rabbi, an effort is undertaken to reconcile their differences. Disciples and other rabbis seek to find common ground and attempt to show how the opinions are actually consistent and not contradictory because they must be referring to different situations. By trying to minimize areas of conflict they seek to reduce differences by looking for common ground and areas of agreement and consent. But it is even more than that. Ruth Calderon pointed out a profound insight in a lecture I recently heard her give. She explained that the rabbis were required to see the truth of the opposing side.

Just imagine what our debates would look like if we strove to carry on our disputes in the same enlightened spirit as the rabbis; what it would be like if we sought to recognize and appreciate the validity of a position opposed to our own.

I am reminded of the story I have told before in a different context about the synagogue where every time it came to reciting the *shema*, a big argument erupted. Some people stood, and some sat. The people who stood shouted at the people who were sitting down that they should stand up, and the people who were sitting shouted at the people who were standing that they were wrong, and should sit down. Each side claimed that theirs was the correct *minhag*, and was the way the congregation had always prayed. The bickering was so intense that the rabbi decided to resolve the dispute once and for all and put an end to all the bickering.

Unable to find anything in the archives, he found the oldest living member of the synagogue, 99 year old Max Silverstein in an assisted living home. He went and asked him what the tradition of the synagogue was. Max listened and then proclaimed, "That's it. That was the tradition." Puzzled, and feeling he did not know any more than before he came, the rabbi probed further and asked him to clarify. "What is the shul's tradition and original practice? Who is right – the ones who are shouting at the people that they should sit down, or the ones who are shouting that everyone should stand up?" The feeble, frail elderly gentleman, barely able to speak, very lucidly declared, "That was the tradition! Half the congregation would shout, 'stand up,' and the other half would shout, 'sit down.'"

We can be passionate about our differences. We can argue, but we can still respect those with whom we disagree, without feeling the need to shout them down.

The Talmud refers to the disputes between Hillel and Shammai as being *leshem Shamayim*, for the sake of heaven because they did not belittle the other side. Their contests were principled differences, not for personal gain or self-aggrandizement. Their disputes were sincere, and conducted in an intelligent and dignified manner in which they showed respect for each other.

And in regard to the mezuzah, who won that one? The rabbis compromised, which is why, to this day, the mezuzah is placed tilting, on a slant inward, to remind us of the importance of compromise in our daily lives, especially in our relations with members of our household and our loved ones.

I want to conclude with a passage from Tractate Berakhot of the Talmud. A favorite saying of the rabbis of Yavneh is one of my favorite passages. It expresses a noble vision of how we should live our lives, and how we need to appreciate our similarities and respect our differences. In an extraordinarily enlightened teaching written 2,000 years ago, they said:

I am a creature of God and my neighbor is a creature of God.
I work in the city and he works in the country.
Just as I rise early for my work, he rises early for his work.
Just as he cannot excel in my work, I cannot excel in his work.
Lest you say that I do much, and he does little,
We have learned that it does not matter whether a person does much or little, as long as each directs his heart to heaven.

The rabbis teach us an important lesson which applies to politics as well as to how we should conduct our personal lives. Mutual respect offers a path to more positive interactions and relationships. I know it may be naïve and unrealistic, but what if the major political parties adopted a pledge in their platforms in the spirit of the approach of the rabbis to be tolerant of the opposition.

On this day, when we think about our faults, what we need to correct, change and improve and the people and society we aspire to be, may we be inspired by the example of our rabbis. Let us strive to respect each other, to appreciate those with whom we disagree and those who are different than us.

May we recognize that we are all created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God so we can see the virtue and good inherent in all.

If we take these lessons to heart, and reject vindictive and invective, we can look for what unites us and what we share in common. In this way we will be strong together and thereby make our lives, our country, and the world great.

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