

This week the Jewish community was put on edge by our president's comments that, "I think any Jewish people that vote for a Democrat, ... shows either a total lack of knowledge or great disloyalty." I don't think it is helpful to spend much time talking about the current occupant in the White House, but I do think it is important to unpack why his remarks were so inflammatory and to use his remarks as an opportunity to reflect on what it means to be "a loyal Jew".

Of all the things he said, it was the accusation of disloyalty that triggered our collective outrage and fear because that accusation has been a standard of anti-semitic attacks on the Jewish community for the last 3,500 years!

This is how the book of Exodus begins:

Ex. 1:8 A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. ⁹ And he said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are much too numerous for us. ¹⁰ Let us deal shrewdly with them, so that they may not increase; otherwise in the event of war they may join our enemies in fighting against us and arise from the ground."

The Israelites had been in the country for many generations – this is before they were enslaved – and yet they were seen as a possible "Fifth Column", in other words, disloyal.

The accusation of disloyalty begins in the Torah and follows us throughout history. Everywhere we went we were accused, persecuted and often murdered because we were considered "other", "a threat", "disloyal". Rome, The Arabian Peninsula, Spain, Europe, etc... In modern times the most famous instances of this anti-Semitic trope were the Dreyfus affair in France..., the infamous Protocols of Zion here in America and then of course the Third Reich...

So, when our current president used the word "disloyal", any Jew with any knowledge of our history was put on edge. A few days later he attempted to clarify his remarks by saying, "If you vote for a Democrat, you're very, very disloyal to Israel and to the Jewish people."

In other words, when he said “disloyal” he did not mean it in the classic anti-Semitic way – disloyal to your host country – but rather disloyal to the Jewish people and to Israel.

I’m not sure what qualifies him as the arbiter of what makes one a good or loyal Jew, but I do think his remarks offer us the opportunity to reflect on the question, what does it mean to be true to Judaism and the Jewish people?

This is a big subject with obviously more than one answer, so I will try to cut to the core of the issue. Let’s start with what he seems to be implying; that unquestioning support of Israel – Israel right or wrong – equals being a loyal Jew.

My thoughts first turn to Rabbi Michael Robinson z”l, who retired to Sonoma County from Croton on the Hudson and was quite a rabbi! He marched with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. during the Civil Rights movement, he was an outspoken advocate for Gay Rights and Marriage Equality, he tirelessly defending the rights of the poor, the vulnerable, the homeless, where ever he lived including here in Sonoma County. He also built up Shomrei Torah from a struggling 30 families to 150 families in his 7 years of part time service to the congregation. During his whole rabbinate he said, “I’ve had a family quarrel with Israel”y. In truth, he was against nationalism of all kinds, including Jewish nationalism. He also served the Jewish people everywhere he lived with great distinction. Was he not a loyal Jew?

2nd, I think of what it means to be loyal in the general sense of the word like in friendship or in love; is true loyalty blind allegiance, unconditional acceptance without criticism or rebuke? Your spouse is an alcoholic, what does loyalty mean in the context of that relationship? Your friend is dishonest or abusive; what does loyalty mean in that context? I do believe that a full Jewish identity includes a connection and concern for Am Yisrael (the Jewish people) and Eretz Yisrael (the land of Israel) but I also believe it is absurd, dangerous and wrong to argue that blind allegiance to Israel defines Jewish loyalty. The ability to criticize is an essential part of what true loyalty means in any relationship including the American Jewish Israeli relationship.

There is a lot more that could be said here like what makes criticism valid and/or helpful? When has one crossed the line from criticizing to demonizing? Where

does BDS (the movement to boycott, divest and sanction Israel) fit into all this, and we simply don't have time to cover these topics tonight. I will say one thing which I learned from Dr. Moshe Habertol, one of the leading Jewish thought leaders in the world today. According to Moshe Habertal, to be an affective social critic, you must come from a place of love...

For example, even if you are a supporter of the BDS movement, which I am not, if you support that movement because you think it is the only way to end the occupation and save the soul if not the physical integrity of the country then, you are a loyal Jew. If however, your support for BDS is a means to the destruction of the state, you are an anti-Semite.

I would like now to move away from what our president said and implied and explore the more general question of what it means to be a loyal Jew granted I would never use such a judgmental framework!

Short on time so here are just a few examples of how our tradition addresses this question – let's start with the prayer book. This prayer is said every mourning... and is depicted in the stained glass windows of Shalom Hall when you walk in our building...

"Elu dvarim"... "These are the things that are limitless, of which a person enjoys the fruit of this world, while the principle remains in the world to come. They are: honoring ones mother and father, engaging in deeds of compassion, arriving early for study, morning and evening, dealing graciously with guests, visiting the sick, providing for the wedding couple, accompanying the dead for burial, being devoted in prayer, and making peace among people. And the study of Torah encompasses them all."...

That is one traditional definition of Jewish loyalty. Here is another from the prophet Isaiah which we read on Yom Kippur morning. Remember one traditionally fasts on Yom Kippur.

Is. 58:1 Cry with full throat, without restraint;
Raise your voice like a ram's horn!...

2 To be sure, they seek Me daily,
Eager to learn My ways.
Like a nation that does what is right,

That has not abandoned the laws of its God,
They ask Me for the right way,
They are eager for the nearness of God:

3 “Why, when we fasted, did You not see?
When we starved our bodies, did You pay no heed?”
Because on your fast day
You see to your business
And oppress all your laborers!

4 Because you fast in strife and contention,
And you strike with a wicked fist!
Your fasting today is not such
As to make your voice heard on high.

5 Is such the fast I desire,
A day for men to starve their bodies?
Is it bowing the head like a bulrush
And lying in sackcloth and ashes?
Do you call that a fast,
A day when the LORD is favorable?

6 No, this is the fast I desire:
To unlock fetters of wickedness,
And untie the cords of ^athe yoke^a
To let the oppressed go free;
To break off every yoke.

7 It is to share your bread with the hungry,
And to take the wretched poor into your home;
When you see the naked, to clothe him,
And not to ignore your own kin.

8 Then shall your light burst through like the dawn
And your healing spring up quickly;
Your Vindicator shall march before you,
The Presence of the LORD shall be your rear guard.

9 Then, when you call, the LORD will answer;
When you cry, He will say: Here I am.
If you banish the yoke^a from your midst,
^bThe menacing hand,^b and evil speech,

10 And you offer your compassion^c to the hungry
And satisfy the famished creature—

Then shall your light shine in darkness,
And your gloom shall be like noonday.

We are not used to the poetry of the prophets, so just in case you got lost in the language, Isaiah's message is to be a loyal Jew is to take care of the most vulnerable in society:

To let the oppressed go free;
To break off every yoke.
7 It is to share your bread with the hungry,
And to take the wretched poor into your home;
When you see the naked, to clothe him,
And not to ignore your own kin.

And finally, I would like to share one more take on "Jewish loyalty" written by my colleague and our neighbor Reb Irwin Keller

Oath of Disloyalty

I am a disloyal Jew.
I am not loyal to a political party.
Nor will I be loyal to dictators and mad kings.
I am not loyal to walls or cages.
I am not loyal to taunts or tweets.
I am not loyal to hatred, to Jew-baiting, to the gloating connivings of white supremacy.

I am a disloyal Jew.
I am not loyal to any foreign power.
Nor to abuse of power at home.
I am not loyal to a legacy of conquest, erasure and exploitation.
I am not loyal to stories that tell me who I should hate.

I am a loyal Jew.
I am loyal to the inconveniences of kindness.
I am loyal to the dream of justice.
I am loyal to this suffering Earth
And to all life.
I am not loyal to any founding fathers.
But I am loyal to the children who will come
And to the quality of world we leave them.

I am not loyal to what America has become.
But I am loyal to what America could be.
I am loyal to Emma Lazarus. To huddled masses.
To freedom and welcome,
Holiness, hope and love.

Shabbat Shalom...