



### ***Politics, the Pulpit and “the Messiness of the World”***

This past summer, Alan Dershowitz published his latest book: *Electile Dysfunction: A Guide for Unaroused Voters*.

Who would deny the widespread feelings of despair, disgust, even embarrassment over the state of American presidential politics? We believe in tolerance and truth and mutual trust, ideals for which America at its best has always stood, but which neither Hilary Clinton nor Donald Trump seems to inspire in a majority of the electorate.

According to the Pew Research Center, nearly two-thirds of registered voters are dissatisfied with either candidate.<sup>1</sup> How many people have told you they were just going to sit this one out?

Entering our magnificent synagogue, we might almost forget for an hour or two the election and the troubled world out there – where security fears are rising; where faith in government is plummeting; where Israel’s isolation is intensifying. But we cannot escape these crises, not even here. Especially not here. The Talmud requires that synagogues have windows<sup>2</sup> so that we not hide from the challenges of our time, but rather rise to meet them.<sup>3</sup>

So this is a sermon about why we can’t just sit this one out.

Emily Post once warned: “Never discuss politics or religion in polite company,” and certainly never the two together. Nonetheless, the intertwining of religion and politics constitutes my theme: their healthy intersection; their inappropriate, even illicit conjunction; and the sacred duty each of us has to vote.

#### *“The Messiness of the World”*

In his poignant tale, “The Kerchief,” Israeli author and Nobel laureate Shai Agnon writes of a boy raised in a loving, Jewish household. His father, away often for work, returns one day with a gift for his wife – a beautiful, snow-white handkerchief – which she wears each *Shabbat* and every Jewish holiday and keeps immaculately clean. On the day the boy is to become *bar mitzvah*, the mother gives her son the handkerchief as a present, tying it about his neck. He wanders outside, and on the street he sees a beggar – bloody, hungry, dirty. The boy, withstanding his initial desire to run is overcome by another urge – to help. So he gives the beggar the handkerchief, which the man places on

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/09/12/already-low-voter-satisfaction-with-choice-of-candidates-falls-even-further>.

<sup>2</sup> B.T. *Berakhot* 31a.

<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook.

his bleeding leg. When the boy tells his mother, he worries that she will be upset with him. Of course she is anything but.

Commenting on the story, Rabbi Harold Kushner concludes: “For this... immaculately clean kerchief to be soiled because it’s given to the beggar, for Agnon, is not a sin or a sacrilege, it is the highest order of religious action.... There is something lacking in a religion that refuses to involve itself in the messiness of the world.”<sup>4</sup>

Judaism has never failed to involve itself in the messiness of the world. If this is in part because at times our very survival necessitated our political engagement, it is more generally so because our people’s story of enslavement and oppression has never lost its resonance: in every generation tyranny and bloodshed, poverty and hopelessness afflict populations near and far. And “silence” is not a word in our vocabulary. We are impelled by our own experiences into the world’s messiness.

Nor is politics inherently dirty or unholy. The Reverend Dr. William Sloane Coffin once observed: “There is a real temptation to think that an issue is less spiritual for being more political, to believe that religion is above politics, that the sanctuary is too sacred a place for the grit and grime of political battle. But if you believe religion is above politics, you are, in actuality, for the status quo – a very political position. And were God the god of the status quo, then the church [or the synagogue] would have no prophetic role, serving the state mainly as a kind of ambulance service.”

Judaism demands action, deplores indifference. No honest measure of Torah’s teachings accepts the distancing of Jewish interests from communal concerns.

We understand this. We always have, whether it was Temple Emanu-El’s past-president Louis Marshall speaking out for environmental protections, world Jewry, Civil Rights and civil liberties a century ago, or our Women’s Auxiliary supporting British and American troops during the Second World War.

Today, our *tikkun olam* efforts touch every corner of this city, and reach beyond it. We support HIAS and the Immigrant Justice Corps. We march in the Gay Pride Parade. And we lead New York’s religious institutions in interfaith dialogue, to penetrate the city’s racial and ethnic barriers with candid conversation about the historic and contemporary struggles of blacks in America, Jews in America, and Muslims in America. Last month, on September 11<sup>th</sup>, we organized a multi-faith solidarity walk to remember those murdered fifteen years ago and affirm religion as a force for unity and peace, not a license for terror.

From the pulpit, I have sought to lift up and examine each of these issues through the prisms of Jewish text and Jewish history, for I believe that with this pulpit especially comes the duty to speak out.

To speak about gun violence and our moral failure to stop it.

To speak about racism, and the chasm that divides blacks and whites in housing, health care, education, jobs, social mobility, voting rights and policing.

To speak about anti-Israel bias on the college campus, in academia, in the United Nations, and as we witnessed in its platform fight, in some quarters of the Democratic Party.

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<sup>4</sup> Rabbi Harold Kushner, “The Kerchief,” *Faith and Family*, p.162; Rabbi Janet Marder, “Solid Gold,” March 11, 2005.

To speak about fear-mongering, and the climate of McCarthyist suspicion and xenophobia infecting American life. We Jews know better than any people the dangers of nativist ideologies and national origins quotas.

“We cannot be silent, not rabbis or any...Jews,” writes Rabbi Peter Rubinstein. “We speak from the strength of our Jewish history....Moses challenged Pharaoh. Prophets raged against their own kings. Isaiah preached against injustice and inertia....Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel vociferously condemned segregation....From our inception Jews have engaged in expressions of political concern....”

*“The Mighty and the Almighty”*<sup>5</sup>

But there is a line, and when it is crossed, the conjunction of religion and politics raises both legal and moral questions.

In 1934, the United States tax code was amended to stipulate that “no substantial part of a [house of worship’s] activities constitute...propaganda or otherwise attempt...to influence legislation.”<sup>6</sup> Legally we may, if we choose, promote public policy that reflects our religious values as long as those efforts do not comprise a “substantial part” of our overall activities, which they do not. From the pulpit, clergy may, if they choose, address the political issues of the day as clergy have throughout American history. What they may not do is advocate on behalf of one candidate or party.<sup>7</sup> This is because in 1954 then Senator Lyndon Johnson championed a bipartisan amendment prohibiting houses of worship<sup>8</sup> “from directly or indirectly participating in... any political campaign on behalf of...any candidate for... public office.”<sup>9</sup>

Lost in the din of the current presidential contest however, was a Republican pledge to repeal the Johnson Amendment. The new plank in the party platform defends “the right of America’s religious leaders to preach...according to their faith,” and continues: “Republicans believe the federal government, specifically the IRS, is constitutionally prohibited from policing or censoring speech based on religious convictions or beliefs.”

The argument, ostensibly constitutionally grounded, is nonetheless specious. Of course the First Amendment protects the right of America’s religious leaders to preach according to their faith. But the effort to encourage clergy – and the target is evangelical pastors – to stomp and thump for candidates marrying religious fundamentalism to political power is bad for politics, bad for civil liberties, and bad for religion. God-on-our-side triumphalism brooks no contest with competing moral claims, the very debate a healthy democracy requires. It encourages the legislation of sectarian doctrine on matters as private as women’s reproductive health, gender identification, gay marriage, and the

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<sup>5</sup> Madeleine Albright, *The Mighty and the Almighty*.

<sup>6</sup> Judith E. Kindell and John Francis Reilly, “P. Lobbying Issues,” p.264 cited in Emma Green, “Trump Wants to Make Churches the New Super PACs,” *The Atlantic*, 8/2/2016.

<sup>7</sup> Ronald Sisk, *Preaching Ethically*, Alban Institute.

<sup>8</sup> As in the 1934 amendment, the prohibition applied to all section 501(c)(3) organizations.

<sup>9</sup> Kevin Baker, “Living in L.B.J.’s America,” *The New York Times*, 8/28/2013.

rights of the dying. And when politicians co-opt the pulpit, they pervert the prophetic message of both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, delimiting faith's concerns to the narrowness of their partisan political agenda.

"The best contribution of religion is precisely not to be ideologically predictable [or] loyally partisan"<sup>10</sup> writes Reverend Jim Wallis. "Faith must be free to challenge both right and left from a consistent moral ground."<sup>11</sup>

This caution, by the way, needs to be heard by our own Reform Movement, which some argue has so aligned itself with the Democratic Party we have alienated many of our members, implicitly and unjustly suggesting that liberals are the only ones who care about society's downtrodden. We should no more attach ourselves to one party than should the religious right.

### *"Electile Dysfunction"*

I remember as a young child how my parents would take me with them into the voting booth to teach me not just how all the levers worked, but how democracy worked.

For Jews of an earlier America, voting rights came as a sacred privilege. The diaries of our forebears on the Lower East Side describe how many would wear jackets and ties to the polling place as though they were coming to *shul* on Rosh Hashanah. The ability to participate in the electoral process in this new Promised Land they treated as a *mitzvah*, a holy obligation.<sup>12</sup>

It is still a holy obligation. As the late Leonard Fein reminded us, "In the era of the modern state, there is no path to the fulfillment of Jewish interests and ideals that does not lead through the halls of government."<sup>13</sup> What we do, or don't do, now through Election Day will determine the character of the nation and the nature of the society we leave for our children and their children.

So we should be registering voters and getting them to the polls as many of you are; and assisting at election sites as non-partisan monitors as many of you do; and making certain our college-aged children and grandchildren vote.

And we should be speaking out when the crudeness, bigotry, obfuscation and outright dishonesty of this campaign trample our sense of right and wrong and our faith in government. How can we remain silent? Let us remind all who would listen what the Torah first proclaimed and America's founders affirmed: that all human beings are created equal, endowed by God with the same inalienable rights; and that leadership demands integrity.

Despite all the distrust and disgust directed toward Washington these days, and toward both presidential candidates, engagement in the process remains a sacred duty, even when decisions are difficult. Especially when decisions are difficult.

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<sup>10</sup> Reverend Jim Wallis, *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It*, p.3.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xxiv.

<sup>12</sup> Rabbi Jack Stern, "Sacred Voting," *The Right Not To Remain Silent*, p.242.

<sup>13</sup> Leonard Fein, *Where Are We: The Inner Life of America's Jews*.

In Genesis chapter eighteen, not long before the tale we read of Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah, God decides to address the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah, to wipe out their corrupt, heartless, and violent inhabitants one and all. But before God lowers the boom, he puts it to a vote. And Abraham, whom God has commissioned as his prophet, votes no!

Abraham, in one of the greatest examples of chutzpah in human history, challenges God: “Will you sweep away the innocent along with guilty? What if there should be fifty innocent *betoch ha-ir*, “within the city?” Will you then wipe out the place and not forgive it for the sake of the innocent fifty who are in it?...Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?”<sup>14</sup> God is moved by the argument, so much so that Abraham bargains God all the way down to ten righteous inhabitants. God concedes that if there are but ten righteous people living *betoch ha-ir*, “within the city,” Sodom will be spared. But ten cannot be found.

Now the rabbis ask, how is it possible that there were not even ten righteous people there? Not even ten?! And they answer: of course there were ten! But as the repetition of the phrase, *betoch ha-ir*, is intended to teach us, the tragedy was that those ten, and countless others like them, had no interest in what was going on in their own city!<sup>15</sup> They did not get involved, so they were not counted, and they were swept away along with the guilty.

The rabbis, in perhaps their harshest condemnation of human indifference, speak of a man standing in front of the doorway to his home. He looks around to the left and to the right, peering about at the community in which he lives. But seeing all of its troubles he thinks to himself, what does any of this have to do with me? And he goes back into his house and closes the door behind him. And the rabbis say, of this man, the Holy One Blessed be God declares, let him be damned.

*“Sitting on Our Hands is Not Enough”<sup>16</sup>*

At times the world seems a dismal place, beyond repair. The poverty, violence, tyranny and terror overwhelm us, hardening our views of humanity and the potential for it to live at peace with itself. Still, Judaism forbids that we shut ourselves off to human pain and human need.

“The ultimate measure of a [human being],” Dr. King once said, “is not where [one] stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where [one] stands at times of challenge and controversy.” The Bible tells us that when Abraham learned of God’s plans for Sodom and Gomorrah, he stepped forward *mimkomo*,<sup>17</sup> from what had been his comfortable place, to argue the cause of justice as he perceived it. He could have rejected

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<sup>14</sup> Genesis 18:23-25.

<sup>15</sup> Nehama Leibowitz, *New Studies in Bereshit*, pp.185-86.

<sup>16</sup> Rabbi Avraham Weiss, *Spiritual Activism*, p.8.

<sup>17</sup> Genesis 18:33.

that mission Elie Wiesel once noted. “Though chosen by God... he could have said, no, but he didn’t.”<sup>18</sup>

*V’nivrichu v’cha col mish’pachot ha’adamah*,<sup>19</sup> to carry blessing to all the other families of the earth – that was the mission. That will always be the mission.

Judaism demands our involvement in the messiness of the world. We Jews believe, not sanctimoniously but earnestly, that we have a story to tell and with it a set of values to share with the rest of humanity. And we believe that if we live out that story and live by those values that we can have a positive bearing on the future of God’s creation.

I’ve said it before: Though the world may at times appear deaf to Torah’s message of justice and compassion and peace, in this synagogue we shall proclaim it, and act upon it, and do what we believe must be done, to beat this broken world back into shape.

Amen.

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<sup>18</sup> Elie Wiesel, *And the Sea is Never Full*, p.147.

<sup>19</sup> Genesis 12:3.