

# THE PROPHETS SHUDDER

Yom Kippur 5773

In February, I was invited to lecture on *God and Politics* at a couple of Catholic Universities in Minnesota, with a specific focus on the role that religion ought to play in presidential campaigns. Before my first talk, a dinner was arranged for me to meet with the President and Faculty of the University – all Catholic theologians and clergy. It was truly lovely. At one point there was a lull in the conversation, so I took the opportunity to ask: *So how do Catholics really feel about birth control?* There was a prolonged hushed silence and I swear I could hear an ecumenical cricket chirping three floors down. We ended up having a very frank and fascinating conversation about the ways in which popular practice – both in Catholicism and in Judaism - often veers from official religious doctrine. Afterward, one of the professors approached me, smiling. “I’m sorry about that awkward silence,” he said. “You see, we’re not only Catholic – we’re Minnesotan. So we basically never say what’s on our minds.” “Oh,” I said, “I see. Well I’m not only a Jew, I’m also a New Yorker. So I basically always say what’s on my mind.”

Today I want to talk a bit about what’s on my mind.

It has to do – on one side - with a vigorous and renewed effort to galvanize what we call the religious vote – by parading religious figures and citing Biblical texts that will aggravate and frighten just enough to get people to the polls. It’s as if Moses and Jesus alike were single issue prophets: concerned first and foremost not with war and peace, not with life and death, but with the inevitable disintegration of society that will come when two men in a loving relationship are able to register for a Cuisinart at Williams Sonoma. There is a special brand of hyper-piety that makes its feverish recurring appearance in every national election these days – and it’s back this time around too.

And yet I find equally problematic the other side of this story - the rising tide of esteemed clergy and pundits arguing that religion – and religious leaders - ought to be apolitical. Should clergy members preach about matters of politics that will affect our country for generations to come? Distasteful. “The job of clergy,” Nixon once purportedly told Billy Graham, “is to change hearts and save souls, not to change governments.”

I understand a deep and ingrained resistance to the marriage of the religious and the political. When religion enters the public sphere it nearly always brings with it incivility, divisiveness, and distraction. I’m sure this is what has led many to wish – as one Jewish newspaper editor suggested this year – that “religion would take election years off.”

The reality is that the more discord is sown nationally by religious folks, and the more violence perpetrated globally by religious extremists – Muslim, Jewish, Christian - the more distrustful smart people become of religion altogether. And the wiser it seems to keep religion far from the corridors of power.

So it may seem odd that I would use this moment to call for not less but *more* religion in the public sphere. The misuse or abuse of religion ought not alienate us from religion, but rather strengthen our commitment to bring counter-traditions into the conversation. As Jonathan Sacks argues:

When religion is invoked as a justification for conflict, religious voices must be raised in protest...  
If faith is enlisted in the case of war, there must be an equal and opposite counter-voice in the name of peace. *If religion is not part of a solution, it will certainly be part of the problem.*  
(Sacks, *Dignity of Difference*, 9)

Or, more precisely: We all know that religion is part of the problem. The question is: can it be part of the solution?

Religion has always been a powerful and animating force – one that has been animated for evil and for good. As much as brutality and hatred are justified in the name of God, the greatest social movements – movements for dignity, freedom and equality – have also been driven by faith leaders and religious communities. They were driven by the persistent belief that enslavement, degradation and abuse are antithetical to God’s desires for humanity. And that we need to make this reality manifest not only in *olam ha-ba* - in the world to come, but *b’olam hazeh* - in *this* world.

Torah is an inherently political document. In the Book of Genesis we read a tale of two cities, Sodom and Gemorrah. God decides to destroy these cities because they are deemed irredeemably evil. I grew up hearing that the sin of Sodom was pervasive homosexuality, but this theory finds no support in the Jewish tradition. The real story, according to the Midrash, is that the land of Sodom and Gemorrah was blessed with rich natural resources - a blooming oasis in the midst of the sweltering desert, a land abundant not only food, but also gold and silver. So the inhabitants of Sodom said: “What need do we have to look after foreigners, who come to us only to deprive us of what is rightfully ours?” (*Sefer ha-Aggadah*).

Very soon the borders of Sodom were closed to outsiders. And the ethic inside Sodom and Gomorrah became: "*Sheli, sheli. V'shelakh, shelakh* - What's mine is mine and what's yours is yours" (Pirkei Avot 5:10). Every man for himself. Nobody in Sodom would step forward to take care of the weak, the sick and the elderly. And foreigners who were able to slip into town were greeted not only with disdain but with brutality. Very quickly, inhospitality descended into utter ruthlessness.

Until God finally said: “ITS NOT MY PROBLEM” - *IS THE PROBLEM.*

We sink or swim together - like it or not.

It’s that Midrash of the man travelling on a boat with a group of companions when he starts drilling a hole beneath his seat. The other travelers freak out, shouting: *Why are you doing this?* The man replies: *What concern is it of yours? I’m only drilling under my own seat.* But as water pours into the boat, they shout: *But you will flood the boat for us all!* (Midrash Rabbah, Vayikra 4:6).

We’re all in this together, says the religious sensibility. And this is even more than a plea for shared responsibility among neighbors and even countrymen. As the world grows smaller –our responsibility grows bigger.

Over the past few months, debris from last year's earthquake and tsunami in Japan has begun to appear along the western seaboard of the United States. One of the first items to be washed on shore was a soccer ball that had been owned by a Japanese teenager. The boy's name was written on the ball, and when the man who found it posted a picture of it on his blog, the Japanese child saw it and recognized that it was his. The tsunami hit his village hard and destroyed his home. This was the only item he recovered after they lost everything. How silly is the myth of radical individualism? The waves hit a world away – and yet the debris is right on our shore.

Don't think it's not our problem. A storm in Fukushima echoes in Alaska. Gunshots in Mumbai send shockwaves through Brooklyn. A bomb Bulgaria destroys worlds in Tel Aviv.

And so Torah offers a counterpoint to the celebration of selfishness in Sodom and Gemorrah. In Deuteronomy, we read the strange case of a dead man found out in the wilderness (Deut 21:1-9). The elders of the city closest to the corpse slaughter an *eglah arufah*— an axed heifer, then they wash their hands and recite: "Our hands did not shed this blood, nor did our eyes see it done" (Deut. 21:7). Not spillers of blood? Why would we have even thought them responsible? The Rabbis of the Mishnah explain: Maybe he came through our town and we were not welcoming enough. Did we offer him food? Did we even see him? If only we had treated him properly - offered to accompany him on his way to his next destination, the leaders say, he would not have been left vulnerable to attack (Mishnah Sotah 9:6). Imagine political and social structure in which accountability is taken that seriously. Each of us is responsible for all of us.

In AB Yehushua's bleak and yet penetratingly beautiful novel *A Woman in Jerusalem*, nobody comes to identify the body of a woman killed by a suicide bombing. She has no identification other than a pay stub from the bakery where she worked, and even there, nobody seems to have any idea who she is. She had lived in the city for years, but nobody noticed when she disappeared. A community, a city that allows its inhabitants to be completely invisible. Such a thing ought not be.

Sodom and Gemorrah is in the beginning of Genesis. The *eglah arufah* is near the end of Deuteronomy. It took hundreds of years – most of it spent in Egyptian enslavement - for the Children of Abraham to learn what kind of society they didn't want to live in. Finally, as they stand on the cusp of the Promised Land, they are able to articulate the kind of polity/ society they *do* want to build.

I can imagine a spiritual practice that is simply and strictly about personal enlightenment, mystical elevation, spiritual contentment. But Judaism is not that religion. The Jews have survived for the past 4000 years because our texts and rituals and traditions come to teach us how to be human beings in the world. How to create societies of justice and righteousness, compassion and dignity. Flowing through the Jewish legal system, its calendar, its sacred narratives and its ritual practices is a potent and timeless religious message: history progresses *m'avdut l'herut, mei'afeilah l'or gadol*— from slavery to freedom, from darkness to light. The human heart yearns for freedom; the human society is obligated to honor that yearning.

One of my colleagues recently wrote that for rabbis "to burden their communities... with their own political opinions is misguided."

We've heard this before. Clergymen called civil rights demonstrations in 1963 "unwise and untimely." One white preacher famously said, "The job of the minister is to lead the souls of men to God, not to

bring about confusion by getting tangled up in transitory social problems.” But the two defining religious voices of the era were Martin Luther King, Jr and Abraham Joshua Heschel – who awakened the religious conscience, reminding us that the greatest concerns of God are precisely those transitory social problems – the blights of society, the affairs of the marketplace (Insecurity of Freedom, 93). They taught us that *God is concerned with everydayness, with the trivialities of life.*

In other words, God is concerned with the parents who woke up this morning praying that their children wouldn't get sick, or fall off a bike, or get a cavity, because they know they can't afford the medical bills. God is concerned about the leagues of unemployed with their growing list of worries, with the child incarcerated for life without parole for a crime he committed when he was 16. God is concerned not only with kings and prophets, but with the most vulnerable – the widow, the orphan, the poor, the elderly. The Sudanese refugee in Tel Aviv, the Mexican immigrant in Los Angeles.

Over the summer, after the shooting in Colorado, I went online to try to see just what it would take to buy a gun. Not because I wanted one – but because I wanted to know what an angry or lonely or heartbroken person would have to do to get his hands on one. Here's what I found: a brand new Semi-Auto Pistol with 6-Inch Barrel, which, if I ordered within the next 36 minutes, I could receive by tomorrow afternoon. If I wanted to wait 2 days, I could get a Spyder .50 Caliber Stormer Semi-Automatic Military Marker. All for under \$100.

Ought we really not speak of such matters? Is this really not relevant to our religious convictions? Or maybe concern that weak gun control laws will inevitably lead to the murder of innocents is not pro-life enough to merit the attention of the politically engaged religious?

There is only one God, of course, but at different times we are presented different faces of God. Our tradition says there are 72.

Which face do we see on Yom Kippur? Is it God, Creator of the Universe? God the Shekhina, who dwells with us even in exile in the darkest night? God the Fierce Warrior, God the Maker of Peace, God the King of Kings, God the Teacher or God the Parent? Bursting through the pages of the mahzor, screaming through the legalities of sacrificial offerings and Priestly benedictions and confessionals on Yom Kippur is the God of Justice.

The God of Yom Kippur is the God of Isaiah – who despises religious ritual that is devoid of moral action. Listen to Isaiah: You think I care about your self-congratulatory fasting today? You think I want your religious rites, your perfunctory recitations - while you leave the tired, the hungry and the poor to starve on the streets?

The God of Yom Kippur is the God of Jonah –mocking the small-mindedness of a man who thinks he can run from the problems of the world because they are simply not his concern. Who may fight to protect his own, but fundamentally doesn't understand that all human beings are his own.

The God of Yom Kippur is a God who is desperate to convince us that our role in the world is to use all our strength – spiritual, intellectual and political – to challenge *any* power structure that denies the basic dignity of the human community.

This is a God who not only sees an arc to the moral universe, but also who recognizes the fiercely urgent need to address the banal, unpoetic questions of how the most vulnerable in any society will receive the care, support, protection they need.

There is no avoiding the God of Justice on Yom Kippur. Why this face of God, now? Because on Yom Kippur, when we peer over the edge and imagine our death but then are brought back into life, we are called to consider what it would take to build a life of meaning *right here, right now*. And that answer is both personal and political.

I wouldn't dare try to convince you who to vote for.

I *would* dare to remind you – and us – that we must bring to the ballot box our American Jewish tools – prisms through both Torah and the Enlightenment - tools of social responsibility, compassion, equality, dignity.

I want to remind us that we are called to use our power – our extraordinary and unprecedented privilege as Jews in America – not only for our own benefit but for good in the world.

This is not about breaking down the wall between church and state. This is about making political decisions based on whether or not policies and politicians pass or fail basic moral tests:

Is this war or military action a moral necessity?

Will this legislation promote and preserve human dignity for all, or does it privilege one demographic over another?

The rabbi ought not be political?

The more violence on our streets, the more desperate the social and economic woes of the world, the more convinced I am that religious life teeters on the cusp of meaninglessness if we don't work to make our core commitments a tangible social reality.

It means nothing to recite Biblical texts about the widow and orphan each year if we take no steps to translate those sentiments into real commitments to improve the lot of the vulnerable elderly and children in our country.

We make a mockery of the kingdom of heaven if we don't fight to bring heaven down to earth.

The prophets shudder to see us deign to engage in matters of the spirit while not doing everything in our power to alleviate actual human suffering.

At a library book sale years ago, I once got my hands on a tattered copy of a limited edition book by Abraham Joshua Heschel called the Insecurity of Freedom. Only when I got home and opened it up did I see just what a treasure I had received. The book had been donated to the library by one of Heschel's friends and colleagues, who had saved in it original newspaper clippings (including Heschel's obituaries), in addition to faculty memos and personal notes from and about him. One of these letters, dated October 20, 1972, hand typed on the stationery of Rabbi Abraham J. Heschel and yellowing, reads in part:

*Dear Colleague:*

*The forthcoming election confronts every one of us as American citizens and as Jews with a truly momentous decision. Our country today is in a state of profound moral and political crisis. In a free society, some are guilty – all are responsible. At this serious moment of American history, I feel a deep sense of responsibility for the moral decline and confusion in our sense of priorities.*

*If the prophets Isaiah and Amos were to appear in our midst, would they accept the corruption in high places, the indifferent way in which the sick, the poor, and the old are treated? Would they condone the indifference to gun control legislation that has allowed some of our finest... to be shot dead?*

*Surely it is the duty of any religious leader to help change a society that tolerates [this].*

He then goes on to endorse one of the presidential candidates, arguing that “the needs of America and the values of our Jewish heritage demand it.” (Needless to say, his candidate didn't win that year...)

But his letter, and moral leadership, pose a great challenge to us:

Some read narrow snippets of Scripture to justify denying others their basic rights.

But our religious life is one propelled by Scripture's repeated insistence that all human beings are God's children, equal in dignity and worth.

Some want to relegate religion to the inner sanctum of the heart. They think it ought to nourish the spirit and stay exclusively in the walls of the sanctuary.

But our religious life is one in which the sanctuary has no walls.

As an American, I believe that the greatest act of patriotism is to hold our country accountable to the fulfillment of its deepest aspirations: truth, justice, equality.

As a Jew, I believe that the greatest act of piety is to speak, act and live from our tradition's deepest aspirations: to make God's presence manifest in the world by creating conditions in which all human beings can live in full dignity.

There is only one way to do that – in the here and now. *Ken yehi ratzon.*