

Rosh Hashanah II

September 21, 2017

Four friends are sitting in a restaurant in Brooklyn. For a long time, nobody says anything. Then, one man groans, "Oy." "Oy vey," says a second man. "Nu," says the third. At this, the fourth man gets up from his chair and says, "If you guys don't stop talking politics, I'm leaving!"

This morning, I want to talk politics. Actually, not politics. I want to talk about talking about politics. My colleague David Wolpe is the rabbi of Sinai Temple in Los Angeles. He is arguably the most influential rabbi in America. Some months ago, he wrote an article in which he passionately argued that rabbis should not talk politics from the pulpit.

I am endlessly besieged by requests to take on this or that political

or social issue. After all, does not Judaism take a stand on virtually every aspect of life? If it is a left-wing cause, I will be rebuked for neglecting prophetic ethics, which is the guardian of the widow and the orphan (and the climate and the transgendered). If it is a right-wing cause, I will be reminded of the primacy of peoplehood and objective moral law (and the sanctity of unborn life and the free market). When the Torah counsels against being a talebearer, it is reminding us not to spread nasty rumors about Barack Obama. Or about Donald Trump. I have yet to hear that it prohibits both....

All we hear all day long is politics. Can we not come to shul for something different, something deeper? I want to know what my rabbi thinks of Jacob and Rachel, not of Pence and Pelosi.

Don't tie your Torah to this week's headlines. We are better, bigger and deeper than that.

Now I want to share a response to Rabbi Wolpe from my classmate Rabbi Sharon Brous. She is the founder of IKAR, a social action-oriented LA minyan:

Tell me this: can one really claim that Torah is not an inherently political document? This sacred scroll recounts the story of a band of slaves rising up before the most powerful and iconic ruler of the ancient world and demanding freedom and dignity. Is that not a political message? Four of the five books of Torah tell the story of the journey our people took from slavery to freedom, from degradation to dignity... along the way, they are commanded to establish a society that would be the antithesis in social policy and political reality of Egypt....

Why do we unroll the sefer Torah and parade around the sanctuary every week, reciting these words and repeating these stories? For nostalgia sake? To recall old family tales?

We read these sacred narratives to discern what it means to be Moses, Aaron and Miriam in a world of Pharaohs. What it means to be Tamar, when you are invisibilized by a misogynistic legal system that undermines your very humanity. How to hold grief and anguish, like Hannah; how to fight back against injustice like Abraham, even when you are but dust and ashes.

I have to side with Rabbi Brous on this one. I know it is sometimes controversial when I speak about political issues, but the Torah is meant to be lived. Every issue of consequence has a political component. 36 times in the Torah it tells us to love the stranger. I cannot put that aside when I think about immigration. The Sages argue with Rabbi Eliezer that a dress sword is not a decorative item but rather a disgrace. “They shall beat their swords into plowshares.” How can I not think about that when the issue of gun control comes to the fore? Torah is a guide for life. If we do not treat it as such, we are merely telling stories about

“Jacob and Rachel,” people of historical importance but of limited relevance.

As an example of powerful use of the pulpit in a fraught political moment, I want to share the words of a colleague after Charlottesville and President Trump’s response to it:

This is not okay. And anyone who says it is has lost his moral compass....

I never thought I would have to speak these words to a congregation but here they are: These are Nazis! These are the people who rounded up our people all over Europe and put them in gas chambers. And they marched in the streets of an American city. And people defended the silence of the leader of our country for a full day.

My colleague concluded by citing three mitzvot that occurred in that week’s Parashah:

The first is to judge [people] favorably, the second is to rebuke.

The third mitzvah is teshuva — repentance. The President of the

United States needs to repent.

Who was the rabbi just quoted? Rabbi David Wolpe, a few weeks after he criticized those who bring politics onto the pulpit. I submit this as evidence that Rabbi Wolpe's anti-politics stricture is impossible to maintain as an absolute.

So I cannot agree that rabbis should not talk about politics. But I think embedded in Rabbi Wolpe's words is a caution that needs to be heard. We all know that political arguments about major principles very quickly deteriorate into pettiness. Almost all politicians take ad hominem potshots at each other at some point. Religious leaders need to stay above this. There is always the danger of people perceiving that a clergyman or woman is "in the pocket" of such and such political figure. Or that religious figures will become as Machiavellian as politicians are sometimes believed to be. Rabbis must relate to politics as it relates to the holy. I will tell you right now that I believe it is wrong to spread Rechilut (questionable gossip) about either Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump. Part of kedushah is basing yourself on facts. I also never tell

Jews which party to support, in general. Jews do not have to be Democrats because Democrats think themselves nicer to the poor. Jews do not have to be Republicans because Republicans believe themselves more supportive of Israel. I try to speak about issues, not individuals. Although I will be honest and say that this president's personality has tested that principle, for me. Finally, I note that no one rabbi has a monopoly on telling you what Judaism says about something. After all, as you know, the Talmud makes a point to quote even minority opinions. If you don't agree with something I said, look up the sources and come to your own conclusions.

In Kabbalah, we speak of *shevirat ha-kelim*, cosmic vessels that broke at the time of Creation, when God's light was too much for them to hold. The tradition is that *nitzotzot*, sparks of holiness, have been scattered all over Creation. But they are covered with *klippot*, the broken potsherds that represent the all too evident lack of holiness in our world. Our job is *tikkun*, to repair the vessels and collect the sparks. This is what I think of when I speak about a fraught political issue. I am

trying to get at the sparks of holiness that underlie the aspects of politics that instinctively make us want to take a shower. Sharon Brous titled her response to David Wolpe, “What you call politics, we call Torah!” I speak about politics because I agree with her that the two are sometimes inseparable. May our nation and our people continue to have vigorous debate. Let the Torah’s command *Tzedek tzedek tirdof*, “Justice, justice you shall pursue” ring out in our community, and may we uncover the mystical sparks of holiness this year.

