

As the election cycle heats up with a major “midterm” election, I want to address something that I’ve seen happen here in the synagogue, in my Conservative Rabbi’s discussion group, and in other forums as well.

Some of us feel that the set of Jewish values demand affiliation with a particular political party, and claim that those who vote the opposite way are betraying Jewish values - or worse, are not authentic Jews. Others of us feel that support for the State of Israel demands that we vote a particular way, and that those who vote for the other party are betraying the state of Israel - or worse, are voting for another shoah that will lead to the destruction of the over 6 million Jews living in Israel.

It is not uncommon for the Jewish community to align itself with the Democratic party. Perhaps it is the case that historically, the Democratic party best represented the social justice positions of the Jewish community. In the time of institutionalized racism, segregation, and a lack of opportunity for those in minority groups, perhaps it was correct that Jews supported the Democratic party, which pro-actively encouraged or mandated inclusion through affirmative action, to correct the historic exclusion of women and minorities.

However, as the landscape of our country has changed, it is worth asking the question whether the positions of the Republican party do not also represent legitimate Jewish positions. The answer is clearly yes. The number of committed Jews who are Republican is too significant to dismiss. We can’t dismiss all Jewish Republicans as fringe, as seduced by the prospect of “free money” (in the school voucher debate), or as one issue Israel people. They are sincere individuals who have looked at the Jewish positions on fighting poverty, encouraging business growth, and supporting faith communities and decided that the Republican position has Jewish merit.

At the same time, the charge that Democrats are not doing enough to support Israel is also without merit. Neither side should say to the other, ‘you do not represent Jewish values.’ Yet, time and again, in our Jewish community and elsewhere, on a local and on a national level, that’s what we are saying to each other. Democrats are saying that to be a Republican is a betrayal of Judaism. Republicans are saying that to be a Democrat is to weaken support for Israel. Liberals say that conservatives lack the values of *Tikkun Olam* and *Hesed* - compassion. Conservatives say that liberals lack the values of responsibility and regard for the sanctity of life.

Each of us could do better at taking and discussing political issues so as not to cause those on the other side of the issue to feel uncomfortable, even rejected, in a religious community that ought to nurture and support spiritual development in every individual, not just in those whose politics match our own.

I recently gave a talk at an interfaith dialogue program on the questions of ‘How can religious wisdom inform our sense of struggle with the great issues of the day?’ and ‘What do our faith traditions contribute to a progressive society?’

I heard a progressive religion defined as one which sees the potential for the

acquisition of new knowledge. The opposite view would be that all truth has already been revealed. In Jewish terms, that we have nothing important to learn that was not revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai.

The starting point for our conversations about politics ought to be the idea that most religious communities in the Western World, while there is a huge variation in theology and practice, share a fundamental approach to religion that could be considered progressive in the sense that they are open to using new scientific and medical discoveries to better understand God's will. They subscribe to some extent to a belief in progressive revelation, in which God's word, or Torah, is continually unfolding in ways unforeseen 5, 10, or 100 generations ago. We ought to approach political conversation from the same religious perspective - that the Torah of politics is progressive - that we do not know all there is to know about any given issue.

Let's take a look at some Jewish values that ought to help guide us when entering these political discussions:

The value of *shmirat halashon*, guarding our speech. The Torah warns us not to be a talebearer, not to engage in gossip (Leviticus 19:16), and our rabbinic tradition adds, 'even if it is true.' Damaging a reputation is as serious as murder, in the rabbinic mind. Using hateful, angry, and sarcastic speech is a type of *lashon hara*, negative speech

The value of peace, shalom. There are more prayers for peace in our siddur or mahzor than for anything else -- *sim shalom, oseh shalom bimromav, shalom rav*, may the one who makes peace up above in the heavenly realm grant us and our world a great and beautiful peace, shalom, wholeness. We know that we won't always agree - but picking fights just for the sake of the argument destroys the shalom without adding anything else of value.

The value of life. The Torah commands us to choose and affirm life. A rabbinic teaching says that one who saves a single life, it is as if he has saved an entire world. Remember that we are created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God, and that you are engaged in dialogue with another human being, no less vulnerable than you, whose life is no less valuable than yours.

However, above all keep in mind that the most important of religious teachings is that no value is absolute. The game of rock, paper, scissors, is a metaphor for the idea that all values have limits to their application. Each item - the rock, the paper, and the scissors - loses to one of the other items. The *nimshal*, the lesson, is that no matter how powerful any one of our values might be, there will be occasions when it is trumped by another value. The only absolute, in this metaphor, is the hand -- that is God. The hand, or God, transcends the the rock, the paper, and the scissors, transcends the values. For example:

The reverence for life is not an absolute value. There are times when many of us believe we are commanded to kill. If any of you today had the power to kill an individual before he had the chance to board a crowded bus and detonate himself,

wouldn't you do it?

The pursuit of peace is not an absolute value. There are times when peace is broken for the sake of justice. Are we wrong to call for intervention on behalf of the powerless in Darfur, even if it means using military means to stop the murder?

The prohibition against engaging in *lashon hara* is not absolute. If we know of someone who is dangerous, abusing a spouse or children, we are obligated to speak out.

The claim that there is only one truth, that one political party has a monopoly on what's right, or that any one value is paramount or sacrosanct is false. The Nobel prize winning physicist Niels Bohr said, "The opposite of a fact is falsehood, but the opposite of one profound truth may very well be another profound truth." Scientific truth theorizes that the Universe began as a point of light, pure energy, and from this came the matter which became our stars and our sun, our planets and our home. This truth gives us the microchip, fiber-optics, and someday will give us clean, renewable sources of energy. This truth though is meaningless when I consider the question of my own existence -- why am I here? The non-scientific, non-historic, religious stories of creation teach me about my life and my purpose -- my relationship with other human beings, my responsibility towards other animal life and the environment. Both truths, scientific and religious, can stand side by side.

How can religious wisdom inform our sense of struggle with the great issues of the day? To put the question another way, how do we speak about political issues in the synagogue without name calling, or otherwise delegitimizing those who hold different opinions? How do we use Jewish values to talk to others who have made different political choices?

Here's a central text:

For three years the Academy of Shammai and the Academy of Hillel argued. Each said that the halakhah is according to [their ruling]. A Divine voice came and said: 'Both rulings are the words of the living God, but the halakhah is according to [the ruling of] the Academy of Hillel'. If both of them are the words of the living God, why was the Academy of Hillel entitled to have the halakhah established according to [their ruling]? Because they were kind and modest, and taught [both] their words and the words of the Academy of Shammai. In addition, they placed the words of the Academy of Shammai before the words of the Academy of Hillel.

What does Hillel's method teach us? When engaging in political dialogue, we ought to be able to explain the point of view with which we disagree.

For example: On the issues of gay relationships and gay marriage, abortion and stem cell research there are legitimate religious positions on each side. Those who read the tradition differently will likely never agree. The gap in practice and therefore in what we believe ought to be law ultimately may be unbridgeable.

No matter what you believe on these most controversial of issues, you ought to be able to articulate the other point of view convincingly, without using the words stupid,

thoughtless, dangerous, homophobic, anti-women, anti-family, or any other negative description. Not only that, if you are speaking about the issue, you might explain the opposing side before you explain your own position. If you give the other side this level of respect and understanding, you are less likely to engage in destructive, rather than constructive, political dialogue.

Pirkey Avot (5:19) also teaches us how to disagree Jewishly. "A dispute which is for the sake of Heaven will have lasting value, but a dispute which is not for the sake of Heaven will not endure." A dispute for the sake of heaven is an argument or discussion intended to discover truth, or at least one which is open to the possibility of learning something new. Before engaging in political dialogue - especially before criticizing another's politics - ask yourself the questions, "Am I being critical simply to prove that I am right and the other is wrong? Am I entering this discussion for the sole purpose of proving my superiority?" If the answers are yes, then I suggest that you refrain from entering the fray.

Also in Pirke Avot (4:1), Ben Zoma taught "Who is wise? One who learn from everybody." A pluralistic religious community demands a theology of understanding and inclusiveness. As religious people, we need to let go of our claim of the sole ownership of the Truth and adopt a posture of humility, with the goal of spreading our attitude to the wider society and to the political process.

We need to begin today, right here in shul. We need to practice supporting each other spiritually, even if we disagree with each other politically. We need to do sincere teshuvah, apologize, for those times when we engaged in *lashon hara*, used words thoughtlessly and hurtfully against another person, just because we disagreed with him or her politically.

According to our tradition, the motto of Aaron was:

אוֹהֵב שְׁלוֹם וְרוֹדֵף שְׁלוֹם, אוֹהֵב אֶת הַבְּרִיּוֹת וּמִקְרָבָן

Loving peace and pursuing peace, loving people and drawing them near to the Torah.

Especially in election years when partisan politics tends to fracture us apart, may we live our lives in blessing and wholeness, in shalom and *berakha*. Amen