

Faith based initiative, intelligent design, family values, private accounts, Roe vs. Wade, same sex unions, stem cell research, Terry Schiavo, the pledge of allegiance, school prayer. It often seems that our country is being defined and divided by the intersection of religion and politics.

At the Kehillah we have tended to be careful not to let potentially divisive public policy debates that are “out there” mar the peace of Shabbat in here, in this sanctuary. We often see our synagogue, in fact, as primarily a Jewish spiritual safe haven of learning, celebration, prayer and compassionate connection, giving us a reprieve from the increasingly contentious public sphere.

As we enter a new year, I believe that keeping these two worlds separate comes at a high cost. Our faith, our religious values—the precious inheritance of thousands of years of collective wisdom, of intellectual and moral refinement—could be – can and should be—a touchstone and a compass to navigate these complicated issues. Our liberal Jewish perspective can add much to the discussion in the public square. Yet, the voice of liberal Jewish communities has been barely audible in the ongoing controversies regarding the separation of Church and State, and to what extent public policy should reflect religious values. As a result of our silence, we have ceded the discourse on issues that deeply affect all of us to others. Further, we have missed opportunities to link arms with those of other faith traditions who share our concerns.

Why has the liberal Jewish community not found its collective voice? Part of the problem is that the separation of church and state is complex. It is no small feat to balance that critical constitutional principle with the expression of religious values in public life. Controversies of this sort fill up the docket of our judiciary. Without some degree of clarity it is difficult to delineate a liberal Jewish approach to questions of religious morality and public policy.

Today I'd like to take a step forward and begin this conversation here at the Kehillah. We will start by teasing out some of the finer points on the thorny issue of separation of church and state. Then, we'll explore one example of how our tradition can provide moral and ethical guidance in addressing a primary issue in the public square.

If you are like me, you may not have read the Constitution in a long time. In part, the first Amendment guaranteeing freedom of religion reads:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof;

Article 6 of the Constitution itself reads: The Senators and Representatives before mentioned, and the Members of the several State Legislatures, and all executive and judicial Officers, both of the United States and of the several States, shall be bound by Oath or Affirmation, to support this Constitution; but no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States.

The founding fathers created a government that was secular and seeking secular purposes. They did so because they knew all too well the bloody history of sectarian violence in the Europe that they had left. They wanted to ensure that America would never be a Theocracy, and they understood that if one religion received preferential treatment, or a religious test was required to hold office, it would lead to religious tyranny in which no religion would be protected. To sponsor one religion over another would threaten pluralism and the foundations of democracy.

In the words of constitutional scholar Isaac Kramnick:

“...both in writing the Constitution and in defending its ratification debates, [they] sought to separate the operations of government from any claim that human beings can know and follow divine direction in reaching policy decisions. “

Public officials, then, must be careful about the boundary between personal beliefs and imposition of those beliefs in the public sphere. “Because I believe it is the will of God” can never be a valid reason for an elected official to set public policy.

As Krammnick goes on to note, though, it is profound that the Founders created this secular government “...despite their enormous respect for religion, their faith in divinely endowed human rights and their belief that democracy benefited from a moral citizenry who believed in God.” The founders did not want a godless people, just a godless Constitution, and sought to protect freedom of religious expression. This respect for diversity is echoed in Jefferson’s words:

“The legitimate powers of government extend to such acts only as are injurious to others. But it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods or no God. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.”

Thus, the public expression of religion, or of no religion, is to be protected, with neither favoritism nor persecution toward any group or groups. Being members of a minority, we have directly experienced the blessing and benefit of America’s protection of religious diversity. Our community has flourished in this country after a being a persecuted in so many other countries of our dispersion.

Protection of religious diversity appeals to us not only because it protects us in America, but because it is consistent with Judaism’s respect for other faiths. The Torah begins with Genesis, the creation of the world, of the first Adam and Eve, not with the narrative of Abraham and Sarah. Our God is named as the God of all creation, of every people. The rabbis posited that the Torah tells the story of Adam so that in the future, during times of strife, we will remember that we all descended from the same ancestor, that we all reflect the divine image and thus we will be able to find pathways to peace. Before God’s covenant with Abraham, God establishes a covenant with all peoples through Noah. Later, in the prophetic tradition, Micah declares a vision of the world perfected in the time to come:

...nation shall not lift up sword against nation, nor shall they learn war any more. But they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree; and none shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken it. For let all people walk everyone in the name of his god, and we will walk in the name of Adonay our God forever.... (Micah 4:3-5)

In addition to the universal messages of our core texts, our liberal Jewish faith accepts and honors that there are many pathways to the One. As a non-absolutist faith, we do not claim exclusive knowledge of the truth. In modern times, Jewish thinkers, among them Mordechai Kaplan, whose philosophy of Judaism became the basis of the Reconstructionist movement, spoke powerfully about the validity of different religious pathways, and the necessity of honoring these different ways to God. Kaplan wrote:

“We Jews have no monopoly on the wisdom of life. On the contrary, the wisdom which should display as synonymous with “Torah” should consist of our learning from the wisdom of all peoples, both ancient and modern, aquired by them in the course of their striving for the fulfillment of human destiny.” Kaplan, *A New Zionism*, pg. 155-156.

Here, then, is the crux of our confusion. We believe that there is more than one religious truth and that individuals should be free to express their beliefs. Yet, candidates who run on a religious agenda, or who promise to make policy decisions on the basis of religious tenets, are not playing by the rules that the Founders had in mind. They would use their power to impose their beliefs on others who may not share their religious assumptions.

On the other hand, we citizens who elect candidates, or who take positions on specific issues, based on our religious beliefs are making use of freedom the Founders intended. Our morals and values may affect how we approach every aspect of our lives, including our reaction to issues of the public square.

Let us remember that religious conviction has been at the heart of our greatest social change movements -- the abolitionist movement, , the suffragist movement, the child labor laws reform movement and the civil rights movement.

When we give political voice to our religious values, we do so in an American context. That is, by choosing to live as American citizens, people from whatever faith tradition agree to work toward the civic goals laid out in our constitution. After all the complexities of implementing a policy are taken into account – does the policy ultimately serve the common good, for instance by promoting life liberty, and the pursuit of happiness? We may not agree with one another about the meaning of these terms—but as Americans we agree that these are the rules we all play by.

In the words of the scholar Robert Bellah, one of our country’s premier interpreters of religious and ethical questions, “...it is perfectly appropriate to base one’s political stand on the particular faith tradition to which one is committed and to explain that tradition in arguing one’s case...the only caveat is that one’s argument must appeal to general moral principles in persuading others. One does not have to demand that that others accept the tenets of one’s own faith in making political decisions....”

Where does this leave us? As Jews and as Americans, we must participate in the discussion about the appropriate lines of separation of Church and State. This discourse is too important for us to withdraw from it. We have seen that appropriate separation is consistent with universalist Jewish values. As such, in arguing for both separation from the governmental, and freedom of religious expression for American citizens and groups, we act as Jews should. Of course, appropriate separation combined with freedom of religion also protects us as a minority, and protects all other religious minorities. By advocating for it, we act as good American citizens. In the perennial question, “is it good for the Jews?” the answer is yes, and good for everyone else. It’s good for America.

At the same time, we must refine our liberal Jewish response to the current debate about “morals and values” in public policy, and make our voices heard in the public square. We are inheritors of a rich legal, ethical and moral tradition that can and should enrich this public discourse. When we do so we will find partners across the religious spectrum and we will not be standing alone.

So: how can our religious values drive our political stands? Recent events provide one compelling example. Hurricane Katrina was a storm of biblical proportions, and it revealed a communal failure of biblical proportions as well. There it was laid bare before us -- the vulnerability of children, the sick, the elderly, the poor. And before us also was our failure to protect them from harm. The waters covered rooftops, but they revealed the truth of our society where the disparity between the rich and the poor is higher than in any other country in the developed world. As Barak Obama said, “I hope we realize that the people of New Orleans weren’t just abandoned during the hurricane, they were abandoned long ago—...to substandard schools, to dilapidated housing, to inadequate health care, to a pervasive sense of hopelessness....” To paraphrase Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, we may not all be guilty, but we are all responsible.

Prior to entering the rabbinate, I worked in rural areas of South Carolina, developing a small home ownership program in low-income communities. I remember visiting individuals raising small children while living in rundown shacks with exposed electrical wiring and without running water. Some were out of work for reasons like the primary earner being hurt on the job and not having access to adequate healthcare, or because the only car they had to get to work was broken and needed expensive repairs. Some were working, struggling to survive in low paying jobs. The gentle and awesome expanse of pine forests and deep blue skies was a surreal contrast to the harsh, grinding

reality of people's lives. And I remember thinking each day – how can this be? How could we have grown to accept this?

The Torah declares in Deuteronomy “There will always be poor in the Land....” No matter how wealthy you feel. No matter how sweet the honey and rich the milk in the land of your destiny – LOOK UP and see the face of the other, your brother, your sister who is hungry, who is without.

The biblical text continues, There will always be poor....On account of this I command you, saying: you shall open you hand to your brother, to your poor, and to your indigent in your land.” Deut. 15: 11

At the heart of this injunction is a core principle of Torah that our wealth is not our possession. We can not claim any of the earth's bounty as our own. All of it belongs to God, and God demands of us that we steward this wealth in a way that acknowledges that all life is sacred. We are especially commanded in Torah to attend to the most vulnerable, typified in Torah by the poor, the orphan, the widow, and the stranger for the most elementary reason of all: “Be Holy for I, Adonai your God am holy.”

Further, the experience, the very possibility of abundance hinges on us fulfilling these obligations. In the words of my colleagues Rabbi Fred Dobb and Rabbi Toba Spitzer:

“Judaism hold as its social ideal the covenantal society, in which individual members are obligated to the well-being of the community and the community is obligated to care for the individual. Further, the blessing of economic abundance is contingent upon covenantal obligations that include care for those without access to wealth. Jewish tradition states that the rights of property ownership are tempered by the obligation to support the community in general as well as to care for those members of the community who are most in need.

Having worked in affordable housing, and with agencies seeking to address homelessness, I know there are no quick or easy solutions to complicated societal issues such as how to break the devastating cycle of poverty. But I know with equal clarity that a fundamental problem lies with us. And it is found right here (point to eyes) with our discomfort with opening our eyes and taking responsibility for inequity.

Hurricane Katrina has shown us the resilience of survivors and the compassion of so many who brought them aid, but it also has forced us to see the faces of suffering and poverty that – in our increasingly stratified society – have been all too easy to ignore. This tragedy has once again placed poverty back in the spotlight. Undoubtedly, there will be and intensifying of discussion and debate on how to address these issues through public policy. We have a moral imperative to bring our voice, our Jewish voice, to the public square. And these principles that we have discussed ---the dignity of each person created in the Divine image, the responsibility to care for and protect society's most vulnerable, stewarding our wealth to create a just, humane society -- are Jewish, but they are not exclusive to the Jewish tradition. They connect us with others across the religious spectrum. Together we can be a force for change.

Tonight I've tried to tease out some of the complexities of the debate regarding the separation of church and state. I've noted that while public officials must not use their religious beliefs to dictate policy, citizens can and should bring their religious values to the stances they take on political issues. I've also given one example of the way that Torah ought to motivate us to advocate on behalf of the most vulnerable in our country.

In the coming months, I'll be visiting these and other topics again. The controversy over same sex unions is a central civil rights issue of our time. Sanctifying loving partnership, giving gay and straight couples equal protection under the law – these are moral issues that are informed by liberal Jewish values. This year, when we study the obligations of an employer to employee found in Torah, we'll be inviting speakers to talk to us about the fight for a living wage right her in the Triangle. Let us begin the new year resolved to act, as Jews and as Americans, in accordance with the best that is in our tradition, and the best that is in ourselves. Shana Tova.