

Election 2016

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

All complex societies are fragmented. Democracies particularly so. Dictatorships and autocracies act as if they were not. They try to suppress dissenters, which they can often do in the short term but not forever. Consider the autocrats from China to Russia to Turkey. Would you bet on their lasting? Ask most human beings where they would prefer to live. The overwhelming majority will opt for an open society, one in which one can choose how to live one's life. Yet in open societies there is always tension and prejudice against and between minorities, classes, and incomes. Prejudice is impossible to eradicate. But the law is the crucial issue. And in most free societies the law protects the rights of minorities.

Britain under Margaret Thatcher was a tense, divided country as it transitioned from old industries to new. Remember the riots in France in the 1960s and look at the hold the left-wing unions still have on the country. Spain has only now agreed on a government after a year without one. And after two elections in two years.

The USA has always been riven with the clashes of different interest groups and occasional outbursts of violence. I am reminded of the upheavals that took place between 1964 and 1970 throughout the USA. They started as protests against the Vietnam War and the drafting of young men to serve. The 1964 race riots in Los Angeles led to the burning and looting of the Watts neighborhood. The 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago became a murderous battleground. Protests at universities culminated in the shooting dead of students at Kent State University and Jackson State College.

The USA, in common with other countries, is going through another phase of social tension. Well before the election, the Occupy Wall Street movement raised the issue of income disparity, the 1%. The deaths of unarmed blacks by police opened up the wounds of racial discrimination. The push towards legalization of all kinds of sexual identities clashed with religious standards. As does the issue of abortion. The safe-space movement on campuses focused on avoiding any kind of conflict (except against Zionists). The issues of immigration and security against Islamic terror emphasized other fault lines in American society. Discourse concentrated on rights, on demands to be heard. At the same time, major issues of debt, taxation, infrastructure, and alienation from government have not been addressed.

What became clear was that things were not working as well they should on many levels, and when that happens pressure for change builds up—as it has, to howls of protests and demonstrations from those who wanted to preserve their vision against any other.

I do not know for certain which vision is right. Perhaps both, none, or a combination. I can see the good and the bad. The only thing I do know is that when a system does not work it needs change. If that change doesn't work, we

need to change again until we find one that does. The political process exists for this, even if, like any human process, it is flawed, corrupt, and often fails.

Jewish life, wherever you look, is fragmented too. In the USA in general, Conservative and Reform Jews vote Democrat. That is the legacy of long social tradition in Judaism. Orthodoxy tends to vote right, both to protect religious choice and to support Israel unreservedly, but there are anomalies such as the Satmar Chasidim in New York which demonstrate against Israel and vote Democrat, while Chabad lines up solidly with the Republicans. Jews, particularly visibly Orthodox Jews, are used to discrimination, name-calling, and hate crimes. Interestingly Jews still remain the most affected. It is true there has been a spike in anti Muslim incidents this year but they are still way behind the amount of petty hatred directed at Jews. You wouldn't know it from the press. They feel alienated when other minorities seem to garner greater attention and concern. But just because they put up and shut up, that does not necessarily mean that others should.

Israel too had its protests against inequality. Social and religious divides between those one might call open (openminded, open culturally, and open politically, as opposed to those who are closed socially, closed religiously, and closed politically). It is fractious, furious, and unpredictable. It wants peace. It wants security. It wants compromise. It wants none. And the same goes for religion. One wing rejects any change, and the other pushes for more. Israel has a model of religious authority and power which is different from that of the diaspora. Wherever one looks, the conflict and tension continue. Meanwhile each side strengthens its own core.

We all preach peace and goodwill, yet there is precious little wherever one looks. This is not new. The Talmud itself reflects this dichotomy. "Wise scholars bring peace to the world." That's one view. "Any wise scholar who is not as hard as iron (or does not attack like a snake) is no wise scholar." If the Talmud is confused, it is no surprise that we are! We might hope for compromise, for a willingness to rethink one's position. There is no sign of it yet. But I can guarantee it will happen. History might work slowly, but there are always cycles. Human society has shown itself perfectly capable of change for the better when it sets its mind to it.

You can't have a democracy if only one side always wins. What does make sense is to bounce back and prepare for the next battle. Crying foul or making exaggerated claims of racism, concentration camps, and mass deportations is just childish. If one loses one election, the onus is to create a better platform for next time. Democrats have failed this time. They now have to decide what kind of party they want. Will they do as the Labour Party in Britain has done and turn further left to the point where they become unelectable? Or will they go back to the drawing board to rethink core doctrinaire and politically correct policies and find more attractive representatives? An effective opposition is the core of a healthy democracy.

Is there a solution to internal conflict? It will never go away. People will continue to fight for what they believe in. Some will choose to go into politics. And may the best man or woman win. There are politics of parties

and ideologies and politics of issues and causes. In free societies they clash and push against each other all the time. Good, effective politicians look for consensus and cooperation. Divisive ones prefer bludgeoning.

We as individuals can have our say in two ways. We can push to increase our influence, to protect our interests all the time, every day, every year. But we also have occasional elections to express our approval or disapproval and to try to change the order of things.

In almost all cases that I can think of, politics has failed to resolve conflicts permanently. Conflicts are only resolved when one side completely defeats the other. Or when people choose to meet each other, to decide not to hate, and to see the humanity in the other. Some humans choose that path. Others cling to hatred. As the old Yiddish proverb goes, "What common sense cannot achieve, time will."

So I am mightily embarrassed. Not so much by the result as by who now represents the USA. But I am not without hope. Democracy works, for all its limitations. Perhaps the new team will do a better job and learn that confrontation is not the best way to achieve things. We have many things to be give thanks for in our democratic societies. And in Jewish life we wake up every morning and say, "Modeh ani." "I am thankful" to be alive.