

Obsession

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Time for a rant! Living in the USA today is to live in an atmosphere of obsessive neurosis. Wherever you turn, wherever you look, whatever you see, whatever you hear, you would think that the most evil man who ever walked the earth is running the affairs of the United States and is about to singlehandedly unleash an economic, ecological, and atomic disaster on the earth. I am no fan of Donald Trump. He represents everything I despise in gross materialism, self-preoccupation, and self-promotion. Trump's retweeting of racist, anti-Muslim propaganda this week only confirms that either there is something wrong with his moral compass or his sense of reality. But there are factors at work that long predate him.

What we are experiencing is the zeitgeist of the world we live in. This pathology has been bubbling for many years. But it is now progressively getting worse. It was probably just like this as the Roman Empire began to collapse. Except that we now live in a democracy, which means that just as one side gets and holds power for awhile, so the other side gets a chance to win and either make matters better or worse. And unlike dictatorships and autocracies, there are always checks and balances.

Why is it so much more neurotic now? One answer is the American love for displaying everything in public—the Jerry Springer model for baring oneself without constraint. No filter. That started in the USA and then seeped over into Europe and now “reality shows” (actually unreality shows) are everywhere. Another is the obsession with social media. Everyone has access to everything. They can feed off each other, encourage each other, and persuade each other that they alone are right. And most people are hooked on gossip and have been since the caves. After all, the Torah saw fit to try to legislate against it. It is just that the opportunities and tools have grown exponentially in the internet era.

Why does the New York Times or MSNBC not let one day go by without an article or an item attacking, demeaning, and vilifying Donald Trump and his family? He certainly deserves some, maybe a lot. But every single bloody day? On TV, in the papers. I no longer want or need to watch or read any of it. Even George W. Bush didn't get quite as much abuse, and there have been plenty of stupid, incompetent, sexually compromised presidents before that the USA has survived. This current exaggerated neurosis seems to me to be a kind of political pornography.

We are witnessing a society of sore losers, crybabies, and spoilt brats who don't know how to lose, because they were brought up to believe they are all winners, and if “all men are created equal” under the law, we must treat them as if they were all the same in mind too. The arrogance of the left that believes it has all the answers and every right to impose its values on everyone else does not help.

The social media dominate so many lives. From fashion to flash mobs of fans to millions of demonstrations against Arab oppressors, to encouraging psychopaths and religious fanatics to kill innocents, to spending hours vilifying anyone or any idea one disagrees with (or one's friends do) without ever actually engaging in honest debate or researching the facts.

Teenagers spend NINE HOURS a day on media! If ever there was proof of *Bittul Torah*, wasting time that could be better spent more creatively, this is it. No wonder Steve Jobs would not let his kids have iPads or use social media. You will no doubt double-check all this! Adults, too. On the street, in the elevator, in the train, on the bus, the fingers and thumbs are caught up in a St. Vitus's dance of urgent attention to triviality (or spending money). Never before has the need to put away one's phones, tablets, and computers for at least 25 hours a week become more urgent and necessary. Thank goodness for those rabbis who had the foresight to see that energy and electricity need disciplining and controlling.

All the evidence is that we are damaging our children's ability to communicate verbally and interactively with other humans. (If you don't believe me read the book *Irresistible* by Adam Alter, for details, sources, chapter, and verse.) If our children have picked up amazing technological skills at such an early age, they are losing so much more. They cannot write or express themselves in structured language or learn the silent rules of reading facial expressions or the nuances of conversation. Even relationships have now been distorted to conform to algorithms. They are suffering through bullying, ridicule, and the desperate attempt to look, sound, and communicate like their pathetic role models who are the most banal, vapid apologies for human achievement that we have seen since the days of real idols. Youngsters imitate the worst of sexist materialism they feel obliged to aspire to and in the process, demean themselves, and then feel terrible about who they are. No wonder more and more people rebel either by taking drugs, committing suicide, trying to change their identity, or by retreating into safe spaces or like-minded ghettos—which were once imposed on us but now are options.

The media confirm how dishonest humans can be. We learn that we cannot trust what is said, printed or broadcast and we know most of us live in echo chambers being fed what the algorithms think we want to hear. Most identities, ages, faces, histories are fake and lies. Our images are cultivated, polished, airbrushed, and distorted. We have long known we cannot trust politicians. They govern short term to gain immediate electorate advantage regardless of the long-term consequences. Wherever they are on the spectrum, they crave power, money, and influence. They jump to the demands of their financial backers or pander to their would-be voters. The only recourse we have is the ballot box. Even then, the losers refuse to accept its results if it differs from their wishes.

The result is we obsess on identity politics, on single issues to the exclusion of all others, and we blind ourselves, because we have no sense of perspective or proportion. Instead of focusing on doing good, we are focusing on doing bad.

There is so much in Jewish life I find offensive (true of all religions, all

politics, and all absolute ideologies). But I find living a life according to Torah, itself, so empowering, soothing, restorative, and so calming that it enables me to function regardless of the noise and the hatred and the inhumanity I see around me everywhere. As C.S. Lewis wrote in *The Screwtape Letters*, "When you think about what is wrong with people around you all the time, you will never be able to rise spiritually from the gutter."

Sadly, the disease has spread so widely that most humans are already too invested to escape. Thank goodness a remnant remains, committed to honesty, good deeds, and helping to keep the world and humanity from consuming itself. We must learn to shut this out at least occasionally. Oh, for the desert, for the quiet, still voice.