I am a liberal.

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I am proud to call myself a liberal. Although, nowadays the term has come to be associated with so many different positions on almost any political, social, or religious issue, I cannot find a more appropriate word to describe myself.

One of my favorite school teachers was a man called Helmut Dan Schmidt. Back in prewar Germany he had been a student of the political scientist Richard Koebner, who had made a study of imperialism. After the war and Koebner's death, Schmidt collected his papers and edited them into a book that was published in 1964 entitled *Imperialism: The Story and significance of a Political Word, 1840-1960*. (The authors are given as Richard Koebner and Helmut Dan Schmidt.) The gist of the book is the way a word, a term that was once regarded as positive, constructive, and benevolent came to be regarded as cruel, aggressive, and associated with dominance and cultural and human destruction. In some ways I feel the same thing has happened to "liberalism".

Growing up in the UK, there were three political parties. The Conservatives were associated with aristocratic, upper-class, snobbish, wealthy, toffee-nosed snobs and nouveaux riches, more often than not anti-Semitic and xenophobic. Upwardly mobile Anglo-Jews desperately wanted to be accepted by them. The Labour Party was the socialist party of the downtrodden and the poor, workers, intellectuals, and the one most Jews felt comfortable with. Although it too had its share of anti-Semites, such as Ernest Bevin, the postwar foreign minister, it also had philo-Semites such as Aneurin Bevan and his wife Jennie Lee, and a significant number of Jewish members of Parliament. These two parties dominated the political scene. There was a small Liberal Party that tried to hold the middle ground but rarely had any impact. Once powerful, now weak. My father used to joke that it was pointless to vote for a party that all of its members of Parliament could turn up in one taxi. It illustrated how politically unattractive the middle ground was and is. My family all voted Labour.

How things have changed. I don't think any self-respecting Jew could now vote for the Labour Party of Jeremy Corbyn, riddled with anti-Semites and anti-Zionists. The Conservative Party has become by far the more sympathetic to Jews and relatively pro-Israel (though it still instructs the delegation to the UN to avoid supporting Israel in public and can fire a minister for being seen as too friendly towards it). But it is as divided on itself as the Republicans are. Its hard to tell what they want. And the Liberals are still hanging in there, but no one takes them too seriously, and they too have their share of nasty, sick anti-Semites.

In my youth liberalism was the ideology of Hobbes, Locke, Hume, and Adam Smith. It stood for individuality, meritocracy, free trade, wealth, and personal responsibility. But it also had a very strong vein of utilitarianism that was predicated on finding a just, fair way of running society, which

both protected and supported trade and wealth, while at the same time seeking to protect the poor, the weak, and the disadvantaged (without overindulgence). In terms of philosophical outlook, it was empirical, scientific, and morally responsible. Its banner was freedom of action and choice, so long as others are protected. In other words, everything my Jewish tradition stood for (in theory, if not practice). The trouble is that extremists, in religion and in politics, are always more passionate, more single-minded, and more determined. The extremes attract dangerous, simplistic totalitarians.

My liberalism was and is open to good ideas coming from either side. Not being a relativist, that everything is just as valid as everything else. But being open to see if some idea or policy works or not. Listen to other points of view, relish debate, and avoid dogma. Socialism, on the other hand, has always been linked to dogmas that included command economies and nationalization, which simply did not stand the test of reality and have nowhere produced a society that is any more free of corruption than capitalism.

Yet unadulterated capitalism without welfare speaks only accumulation, greed, and selfishness. The only place in between was and is liberalism, with its emphasis on individuality and freedoms, as well as moral responsibility and a just society, which would be judged morally on how it treated the weakest of its citizens rather than the strongest or richest or most politically connected. This is where the wealthy who contribute to a better world by tackling specific challenges, rather than ideological ones, come from.

But now in the minds of many, liberalism has come to be associated with dogma, too. Liberal Judaism has come to mean abandoning Jewish practice. Liberalism now means you cannot agree with any kind of nationalism. But I think some nationalism can be good, as well as bad. Liberalism has come to mean you have to be pro-choice, which means you cannot not also be pro-life. I am both. I think abortion may be legitimate under certain circumstances, but I also think the fetus should be regarded with sanctity and respect. I hate capital punishment. But I despise prison systems, except for those who threaten the lives of others. The American justice system fails both sides. I think people should donate organs, but I object to imposing it universally. I hate the very idea of killing animals for food. But I would not dream of imposing my preferences, or indeed my religion, on others. I think the Second Amendment of the American Constitution might have had a purpose to fend off the British army 200 years ago, but now it is clearly detrimental to the lives of thousands of Americans each year.

What is often called Classical Liberalism is in favor of free markets and free choices where they do not impinge on the lives of others. Liberals have come to recognize the importance of welfare for society but strive to avoid dependency. They recognize that without creating wealth, welfare cannot be properly funded. In contrast to the left, liberalism values obligations over rights. In Jewish terms again, it is the distinction between what I can achieve and what I can receive.

The liberal sees government as responsible for protecting its citizens and

enabling them, creating the conditions that afford the possibility of fulfilling as many dreams as possible, in whichever way they personally desire that does not detract from others—given that some people simply cannot or will not take advantage of such benefits.

The trouble with the left is that it often seeks to destroy customs, traditions, and differences, either in the name of market efficiency or to pander to vested interests. To give a current example—the perfectly laudable pursuit of autonomy and the recognition of different sexual, religious, racial, and cultural preferences has led to a situation where when one group feels hard done by, it tries to silence or impose its prejudices on others. Democrats fairly and reasonably wanted to remove sexual and religious restrictions. But in so doing, they ended up coercing religious and social sentiments they deemed antipathetic. For example insisting that Catholic adoption agencies cannot discriminate in favor of those who uphold Catholic values. That's what the Soviets and Maoists tried. The liberal says protect, by all means give rights, but do not impose one set of moral or religious values where another set of individuals' rights are not being threatened. There is minimum interference and maximum interference. The liberal is in favor of minimum, knowing it is not perfect, but it is the lesser of two evils.

People of color or various ethnic and religious groups can and must legitimately insist on being validated and demand that those whom they live amongst have no right to discriminate. But they are often insisting that anything they perceive as a slight must be eradicated. That cannot be acceptable. Why can't whites validate their history, warts and all, as much as blacks can and should, with their warts and all? Christians, Muslims, Jews, and the rest? History is predicated on different narratives. What needs to be injected is respect for another narrative, even if it has made mistakes. Who has not in human history?

One of the reasons American society is so confounded by Trump is that he is neither Left nor Right. He can sound like both and neither—perhaps because he does not know himself, for certain. In which case he, too, might be a liberal, if he were cable of thinking that through.

The liberal solution is to try to work towards reconciliation and compromise rather than a fight with a winner-take-all outcome. Engagement rather than conflict. Knowing that there is no such thing as perfection or a solution that pleases everyone. Wherever we look, this seems hard to achieve, but this is what we must strive to do. It is this give-and-take that has enabled humanity to thrive so far, despite the awful setbacks. We fail precisely when one group tries to obliterate another. Perhaps this why the Torah refuses to give its approbation to any one model of governance. We have examples of aristocracy, meritocratic, judges, kings and rabbis and now democracy. None is perfect.

To hell with politics, I often think. Except, we need someone to govern. It doesn't happen automatically. But why do we humans make such terrible messes of it all? I comfort myself with the thought that I can't solve everyone else's problems. But at least I can try to take care of my own.

My Haredi friends like to tell me that those who walk in the middle of the road will get knocked down. I reply that my way I can get a view of the shop windows on both sides of the street. Which is why I so value liberalism, why I am still proud to call myself a liberal…on my terms!