

# Midterms

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Everyone seems to agree that these midterm elections in the USA have been particularly bitter and antagonistic. But as an outsider who is now an insider, I am amazed at the current mood of anger, anxiety, frustration, hatred, injured pride and petty name calling. One shouldn't generalize of course but I see around me a bunch of spoilt children fighting in a playground where every one of them is a really sore loser. The pathology of a child whose favorite toy has been stolen by someone else. Blame everyone except yourself.

The results have shown us nothing new. The USA is a country seriously divided, between young and old, rural and urban, male and female and ethnic minorities. There are of course plenty of crazy, violent bullies everywhere, but in general most Americans, whatever their prejudices prefer to try to get on with others.

The split decision means we are in for another round of dysfunctionality in which, in all probability, vindictiveness will impede co-operation and progress. The Democrats did not win all they had hoped for and the Republicans did not lose as much as they feared. With the House of Representatives controlled now by the Democrats and Senate by the Republicans, we can expect another session of bitter conflict and little chance of solving any of the core issues and challenges that face the country. It is a sad sign of the times. At worst the Democrats will use up all their energy trying to impeach Trump instead of trying to fix things.

The USA is either like the giant cyclops, mortally wounded by Odysseus who drove a stake into his one eye, staggering blindly towards his doom. Or on the other hand, like Prometheus, bound in shackles, pecked at by eagles. Yet hoping for Hercules to come and release him.

Americans seem naïvely to believe in the purity of their constitutions and the probity of their founding fathers as if sanctified by God. Though, like Talmudic scholars, they all interpret this in different ways. They like to ignore the long tradition of antagonism, animosity, corruption and immorality which is more the norm in American history than the exception. According to Wikipedia, four presidents have been assassinated, two injured in attempted assassinations, and 30 planned and foiled attempts. Hardly a tribute to stable political life. And those who dream of perfect Presidents should just look back at some of the horrible examples of humanity who have occupied that position. And anyone who thinks the press is neutral or objective (anywhere) is an idiot.

Gerrymandering is endemic. Voting districts are engineered in such a way that only a few districts across America are genuinely democratic. Of course, what we mean by democracy is highly debatable. Some countries prefer constituency. Others have various forms of proportional representation. America also has an

electoral college which was designed to give the different States a degree of balance and equity within a federal system. But big States hate when they lose because they feel they should have more of a say than small ones. All variations have plusses and minuses. It has always been thus regardless of country or system. And midterms no matter who is in power, always tends to be opportunities to rein in or block the other side. The system was designed for chaos. Or checks and balances, whichever you prefer.

I was brought up in Britain where there was no such romantic notion of virgin political birth. It was always a matter of accommodation. And there was an aura of cynicism around politicians and politics. Whenever one party held power for too long, regardless of how efficient, popular, or ideologically dogmatic, there would come a time, inevitably, when the established order would be overthrown. Churchill won the war and lost the power. The Labour party under Attlee completely overhauled the social, political landscape, but still eventually lost to the Conservatives. Macmillan, Wilson, Thatcher, Blair, Cameron, the baton was handed over, usually with acrimony. Thatcher was hated, Blair was loved and is now hated. Remember Labour leader Michael Foot? Lovely man. Everyone liked him but he was a disaster. All conservative leaders were caricatured as aristocratic, snobs who only cared about supporting the aristocracy and wealthy. All Labour leaders were despised as lackeys of Marx and destroyers of the British economy. You could see the same cycles throughout Europe. And corruption at some level or other has always dogged every single administration and party. Yet Britain has survived and despite its current mess is still a pretty good place to live in. Even for Jews!

For all the USA's legislative deadlocks, different kinds of presidents, policies, systems, contradictions, prejudices, crazy individuals and dangerous lunatics, it is a great place for most people including Jews to live in. Is there antisemitism in the USA? You bet. Jews are still being and always have been attacked across the nation. So is every other minority. You only need a handful of hatemongers inspired by one Farrakhan or one David Duke to make it seem much more widespread than it is. And even so, America thrives and is a great place to live in. Otherwise, why would so many try so desperately to get in? The only alternative model antidote is of China. Authoritarian, meritocratic and doing very well economically and raising millions out of poverty to wealth. But who would want to live there other than for business? The flow of migrants is coming this way, not theirs.

It should be a given, that all members of the human species be nice to each other. But that never looks like happening. Politics, religion, any area of human activity, even sport, can descend into violent conflict. So why can't we all get on? We have been praying for peace for three thousand years. Why are we still praying every day for it? How come if everyone agrees that it would be good to "Love your neighbor as yourself" and "Do you would be done by," and "Make love not war," we are no nearer now than we were then. Politics is like people. A messy lot who get it wrong most of the time and get right only occasionally.

So, who do we blame? God or us? My advice? Be positive. As Monty Python's anthem goes. "Always look on the bright side of life." Look to yourselves and

fight to protect your values. As that great American intellectual Alfred E Neuman once said: "What, me worry?" So, I don't. And as a Jew, I think those other Jews in the USA who think Trump is bad for the Jews or indeed that Israel is bad for the Jews, are simply on the wrong side of history and the wrong side of Judaism. But hey, good luck to them. We shall see who survives.