

Rabbis and Politics

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Rabbis should stay out of politics! Here we go again with this nonsense. This may sound strange coming from me. I have consistently deplored religious politics and the negative, destructive influence that rabbis and religious parties have on Israeli life. But I believe there is a difference between party politics and political issues.

In Britain, there was always a convention that rabbis should not talk politics from the pulpit. Hypocrisy was a feature of Jewish life largely because of the centralizing control of the Jewish establishment. Religious figureheads were under the thumb of lay leadership who had different agendas. In the USA, the other hand, rabbis did argue from the pulpit for what they believed was in their community's interests. I think the American way is healthier, more honest and effective, if risky. Because a rabbi taking a political stand, is bound to offend at least some of the congregation. But then, which rabbi worth his salt does not sometimes?

I admired the example of the late Rabbi Dr. Professor Louis Rabinowitz. He publicly threw down his British war decorations in 1947. When he, protested the harsh and anti-Jewish policies of the [British Mandate of Palestine](#). He sacrificed his rabbinic career in Britain for his principles and was blocked several times from becoming Chief Rabbi. Later on as Chief Rabbi of South Africa he was a harsh critic of the Apartheid policies and was eventually forced to leave. What a man. What a rabbi. How we have lost the giants.

Much as I hate politicians of every color and affiliation, I realize that every society needs a structure, a rule of law and a way of governing. All citizens should be invited to have a say as to how they should be governed. Yet it is true that politics is a corrupt profession.

Religion in theory at least, represents a system of honesty, morality and incorruptibility. Which is why I oppose parties that claim to be religious. They will prostitute themselves for power and financial gain. That is why I would never vote for a religious party in Israel on principle. Despite being exhorted by endless "great" rabbis to do so.

I can't think of a worse example of dirty politics than the current situation in the USA. Spoilt, petty, vindictive, ambitious self-serving politicians on

both sides of the spectrum are more interested in doing damage than good (or defining good in their own ways). Losers refuse to accept the decisions of the electorate and devote their time to abuse and being dogs in the manger. It is said that a country gets the politicians it deserves.

This current election is the most divisive and dishonest I have experienced. There is so much anger and hatred that many people I know really fear for the future. I am more sanguine. There has always been corruption and gerrymandering. This year I have been called several times by people asking me to register for a postal vote in an entirely different State and told that this will not affect my voting in my own state as well. Of course they will only arrange this for me if I agree to vote for their favored candidate. This is corruption on a massive scale but it is not as if this has never been done before. Or that both sides do not try it.

The American system is known as "pork barrel politics." All the pigs have their snouts in the trough and suck out of it whatever they can for their own interests. "I will vote for your bridge to nowhere in your State if you vote for road going nowhere in mine." "I will agree to a bill about compensation for businesses owners if you vote for my bill about strengthening the Unions." Congress and the Senate will not agree a compensation package because everyone makes his or her pet cause a condition of signing off.

And so it is in the Jewish community. If one Hassidic community votes Republican and the other Democrat it is solely because it will get more funding from whoever it supports. The politics of self-interest may be the way things work, and sometimes actually does. No one can honestly say that there have been no moral, ethical or social advances in American society over time, even if we can agree there is a lot more to be done.

Israelis and Americans are currently facing some crucial political and moral decisions.

They both have political leaders who are populists and corrupt in different ways and to different degrees. They both have a significant percentage of their citizenry, that feels safer in their hands and have confidence in the future. While the other percentage thinks they are disasters morally and politically. In both cases they are animated by a desire to keep Israel secure and safe (regardless of whether we agree with their methods or policies). Whom should we vote for? And what if my congregants ask for my advice?

If I deplore rabbis participating in politics, how can I now say that they should get involved politically? There is a difference between Party politics and political issues. I believe Rabbis as much as anyone else, should indeed get involved in matters that concern and involve them, their communities and their people. They should explain to their congregations why they agree or disagree with specific politicians or a specific policies.

Because it is a system of self-interest and self-preservation, we should focus on issues rather than personalities. I can agree with many of the issues the democratic party supports, but not necessarily with their solutions. I can agree with some issues the Republican party advocates but not others. There are certain issues such as American policies towards Israel that matter to me specifically and I would certainly take them into consideration when deciding how to vote.

I will not try to tell my congregation whom to vote for. But I will ask them to consider what matters most to them, whether it is economic, social or political and vote for the party that they think will best serve their interests. And will also tell them that in my opinion and despite being a raving left-wing inclined peacenik, I happen to think that the present administration has done a great service for peace in the Middle East by refusing to follow a sterile path of appeasement. All other attempts over seventy years have alas not succeeded. Why not try something new? That does not mean that the issue of Israel should be the only factor in deciding. Economic and social issues matter too, very much, as ways of generating the wealth that a welfare-based society needs. All the more so if one wants to bridge the gap between the wealthy and the poor and rethink the environments that breed anger and disaffection. In addition to ecological challenges and the use and preservation of natural resources.

Voting is a privilege we should not waste. We know we Jews are divided and cannot all agree on anything. So it is up to us as individuals to do as we see fit. A rabbi's job is to encourage his flock to get involved on whatever level in trying to improve the state of society according to their moral and ethnic values. And may the Lord help us if we get it wrong!