

Where Religion and Politics Can Mix

What does it mean to be a *religious* person? There's something I hear from folks all the time: *"Hi Rabbi, I'm one of your congregants, but I'm not really that religious."* What they are generally trying to say to me is that they do not follow many Jewish ritual practices such as keeping kosher, observing Shabbat, or regularly attending services. And while I know what they mean to say, I often want to challenge their claim. Because while all of these ritual mitzvot are important, they are not the singular definition of what it means to be a religious person.

By definition someone who is a "religious" Jew is someone who cares about the ritual, ethical and moral aspects of Jewish practice and belief. In this sense, someone could be ritually observant and not "religious," and someone could be ethically observant and not "religious." The Jewish belief is that both ritual and ethics are critical components of what it means to be a religious person.

We need look no further than the well known prophetic text that we just read from the prophet Isaiah reminding us that ritual, alone, is not enough.

הַקִּזָּה ה' צוֹם אֲבַחְרֶהוּ יוֹם עֲנוֹת אָדָם נַפְשׁוֹ הִלְכֹף כְּאַגְמֹן רֹאשׁוֹ
וְשָׁק וְאַפֵּר יִצְעֵה הַקִּזָּה תִּקְרָא צוֹם וַיּוֹם רָצוֹן לֵה'

Is such the fast I desire, a day for man to starve their bodies?
Is it bowing the head like a bulrush and lying in sackcloth and ashes?
Do you call that a fast? A day when the Lord is favorable?!
No, this is the fast I desire. *To unlock the fetters of wickedness, And untie the cords of the yoke. To let the oppressed go free; To break off every yoke*

הֲלוֹא פָרַס לָרֵעַב לַחֲמֶךָ וַעֲנִיִּים מְרוּדִים תִּבְיֵא בַּיִת כִּי־תִרְאֶה
עָרֹם וְכִסִּיתוֹ וּמִבְּשָׂרְךָ לֹא תִתְעַלֵּם

To share your bread with the hungry, And take the wretched poor into your home; When you see the naked, to clothe him, And not to ignore your own kin.

אֲזַי יִבְקַע כְּשֶׁחַר אוֹרֶךְ וְאַרְכָּתֶךָ מִהֲרָה תִצְמַח
אֲזַי תִּקְרָא נְה' יַעֲנֶה תִשׁוּעַ וַיֹּאמֶר הַנְּנִי...

Then shall your light burst through like the dawn and your healing spring up quickly....

Then when you call, the Lord will answer; When you cry God will say:
Hineni, Here I am. **Isaiah 58:5-9**

Isaiah is preaching that to be religious is to heed God's moral imperative to heal the world. To put it more modern language, I imagine God saying something like this:

You fast and you pray and you expect me to forgive you and give you a fresh start?! NO. You want a fresh start. YOU want to have a meaningful year. Ritual is necessary, but not sufficient. Go look outside at the world around you and make my presence known. There are people who are

starving. There is poverty all around. There is racism alive and well in our midst. There are innocent people getting shot each day because of Gun violence. Society continues to struggle with equal rights and justice for all. And you are polluting My earth. You want to be forgiven- act like a truly religious person. You want to discover my presence in the world. Don't just fast and move on- act with a sense of Jewish ethics and morals; make a difference and get to work..

What is important here is that for Isaiah, and for the rest of our tradition, a religious person is someone who understands that Judaism can, and should inform *all* aspects of their lives- not just the ritual aspects.

As one of the greatest rabbis of the twentieth century, Abraham Joshua Heschel said:

*every Jew (should) become aware that Judaism can be an answer to the ultimate problems of human existence and not merely a way of handling observances....What is involved in being a Jew? Duties of the heart, not only external performance; the ability to experience the suffering of others, compassion and acts of kindness... **Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity, Teaching Religion to American Jews, 149***

When describing his involvement in the anti-war movement during the US military engagement in Vietnam, Heschel explained:

The more deeply immersed I became in the thinking of the prophets, the more powerfully it became clear to me what the lives of the

prophets sought to convey; that morally speaking there is no limit to the concern one must feel for the suffering of human beings. It also became clear to me that in regard to cruelties committed in the name of a free society, some are guilty, while all are responsible. I did not feel guilty as an individual American for the bloodshed in Vietnam, but I felt deeply responsible. "Thou shall not stand idly by the blood of they neighbor" (Leviticus 19: 15). This is not a recommendation but an imperative, a supreme commandment. And so I decided to change my mode of living and to become active in the cause of peace in Vietnam
Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity, The Reasons for My Involvement in the Peace Movement, 225).

Vietnam, Civil Rights- these were issues that Heschel cared deeply about because he understood that the Jewish faith was about much more than observance and synagogue attendance. The question for us is-how can Judaism inform the pressing moral and ethical issues of our day? How *must* Judaism give voice to the many injustices and inequalities that face our country and our world on a daily basis?

People often feel that religion and politics shouldn't mix. But the truth is that they have always mixed and this is not necessarily a bad thing. Of course Jews and Judaism can not be defined as Democrat or Republican, or anything else for that matter. But when it comes to policy, and the issues of the day- Judaism has *many* values, and beliefs that can and should inform our individual decision making. Using a Jewish lens to approach social issues has been a Jewish value since the time of the Bible. It is our responsibility

as Jews today *to learn what our tradition says*, and to use what we learn to guide our votes, our voices, and our actions.

Let's get more specific, and take a quick look at some of today's most pressing issues and see how this works.

Hunger.

There are 48.8 million Americans who struggle to put food on the table each day. That is 32.6 million adults, and 16.2 million children- nearly 1 in 6 American men, women, and children. Global poverty is even more extreme, though we know very well that there is an abundant food supply around the world, more than enough to feed everyone on earth.

So what does Judaism have to say? Generally, we know that the Isaiah text, among many others, exhorts us to act as God's partners in this world to ensure that all who are hungry get fed. But how?

The Torah required that landowners set aside a portion of their harvest to ensure that the poor would have enough to eat (Lev. 19,23, Deut. 24).

Once we moved out of an agrarian society, Maimonides taught that *"each city must appoint tzedakah collectors each week who will go door to door before shabbat, gathering up resources from everyone, and then*

redistributing them among the needy so that they will be able to purchase enough food for seven days." (MT laws of contributions to the poor, 9:1-3)

After every meal we praise God as "*hazan et hakol*," The One who provides enough food and sustenance for everyone. Though we see widespread hunger in our world, we must remember that God **is** *hazan et hakol*, but we, as God's partners in this world, must step up and take responsibility to do what it takes to ensure a more just and equal distribution of the sustenance that God provides.

Marriage Equality.

This afternoon we will read the well-known and discomfoting passage from Leviticus 18 prohibiting a man from lying with a man as he does a woman. This is the traditional verse prohibiting homosexual relations between men in the Torah. While many seek to use this verse to defend homophobia and discrimination, times change, Jewish law evolves, and we need to understand this verse in the historical context in which it was written. As I have said many times- we are rabbinic Jews, and not biblical Jews. As Conservative Jews, we are responsible for both Conserving the tradition (hence our name) and living in modernity. The Bible has verses about stoning stubborn children and stoning people who break the Shabbat- but we certainly don't do that. We know today that being gay is not a choice any

more than being straight is a choice. So how do we as Jews think about a contemporary issue like marriage equality?

Jewish tradition continually emphasizes the overarching idea that everyone should be treated *b'tzelem elohim*, in God's image. We also are taught *k'vod habriyot*, that we must honor and respect all of God's creations. Our tradition demands that individuals are all to be treated with justice, fairness, and dignity precisely because they *are all* God's creatures. This is the core concept that, I am proud to say, finally led the Conservative movement to fully embrace our Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender individuals into our synagogues and communities, and to celebrate those who want to become rabbis, cantors, and educators in our movement. So too should we be guided by these core concepts--*every* person is holy and therefore every one of God's creations is due equal and fair treatment--when thinking about policies around personal status. Certain nuances of what form this equality takes may be up for discussion, but the notion that individuals should be guaranteed equal treatment under the law by the government, regardless of their race, gender, or sexual orientation, is well-aligned with Jewish tradition and thought.

Guns

In 2010, there were more than 30,000 deaths by guns. While mass shootings like Newtown capture our nation's attention, kids and adults die everyday from gun violence -- it is something that is so commonplace, we hardly notice it in the news. Guns and gun control are complicated issues, but again, we must look to Jewish tradition to guide our thinking and our approaches to voting and public policy. My colleague Rabbi Michael Knoff summarized the complexity succinctly:

"Judaism emphasizes the obligation to save lives, and yet the Mishnah calls weapons 'an embarrassment' for a person. Jewish law prohibits its adherents from hunting animals, no less owning a weapon to do so. At the same time, Judaism obligates the individual to defend himself, even if doing so means killing an assailant before he kills you. This obligation implies the right to bear arms, for one's ability to defend himself means little if the other person who threatens him wields more sophisticated weaponry."

Rabbi Knoff concludes:

"The Jewish tradition invites us to have a full conversation with each other about how to reduce gun violence, lift up the most vulnerable among us, and defend ourselves. (Huffington Post, The Idolatry of Gun Rights and Gun Control, February 10, 2013)"

Again, we may come to different conclusions, but our thinking must take Jewish teachings and values into consideration. In Genesis (4:9), after Cain killed Abel, he famously asked God: *Hashomer Achi Ani?* Am I my brother's keeper? The answer to that question is yes, we are all our brother's keeper. It is our job to ensure, to the best of our ability, that our fellow human

beings are safe from harm. As a tradition that places supreme value on the sanctity of life, doing anything less would be an affront against God.

Immigration:

As a nation of immigrants in America and a people whose very roots come from being a "stranger" in the land of Egypt, Judaism demands that we be concerned with the "strangers" in our society. The idea that we must be concerned for those who seek to join our society because we were once "strangers" in Egypt is mentioned over thirty five times in the Torah, making the value to care for the stranger the most repeated mitzvah throughout the Torah. To choose just a few verses:

You shall not wrong nor oppress a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (Exodus 22:20)

You too must befriend (love) the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (Deuteronomy 10:19)

You shall not subvert the rights of the stranger or the fatherless..... (Deuteronomy 24:17)

You get the idea. To look at immigration absent Jewish tradition and teachings is to ignore the very definition of what it means to be Jewish. When considering immigration reform efforts happening right now in congress, we must carry with us our history as a nation whose master story, the Exodus from Egypt, is entirely about a group of strangers escaping

tyranny, and coming to a new land, to a life of discovering the blessings, and responsibilities, of freedom.

The Environment

Day in and day out we hear discussions about Global warming, "going green", renewable energy, electric cars, etc. From a Jewish perspective, when it comes to the earth, we are all renters and the Bible makes it abundantly clear that we do not "own" the earth. In the words of the Psalmist that we say every time the Torah is carried around during the weekday service, "*The Earth is the Eternal One's and all that it holds, the world and its inhabitants* (Psalms 24:1)." And the midrash elaborates:

"In the hour when the Holy One created the first human being, God took the person before all the trees of the garden of Eden, and said to the person: "See my works, how fine and excellent they are! Now all that I have created, for you I have created. Think upon this, and do not corrupt and desolate my world for if you corrupt it, there will be no one to set it right after you." (Kohelet Rabbah 7:13)

Each one of us is blessed to be a tenant on this earth and we must approach this role in a responsible way. It is the height of hubris to claim that the earth is ours and that we can do with it as we see fit. And yet, while few people would ever make a claim like that, it is unfortunately the way we often behave. We need to take Judaism's teachings of our place and role on this earth seriously when we think about policy issues like renewable energy, fracking, electric cars, beach erosion, and recycling.

By now I hope that it is abundantly clear that no matter what the topic, our tradition has something of value to contribute to our decision making. To ignore these teachings, and to think that religiosity is centered around ritual alone- is to misunderstand what it means to be a Jew. I am the first to tell you that keeping kosher is an obligation, but learning about how our food consumption affects the environment, and working to ensure that those who picked the vegetables on our plate are treated fairly, is equally important.

Choose your issue. There are certainly plenty of issues for a religious person to be concerned with. I understand that this can feel overwhelming, but as Ruth Messinger, the Executive Director of the American Jewish World Service likes to say, "We cannot retreat to the convenience of being overwhelmed." It is up to each one of us here today to educate ourselves about what Judaism has to say about the challenges of the day, and then to act as individuals, and as a collective to make a difference. Our politics and our opinions on public policy cannot *and should not* be divorced from our Jewish identity. Judaism demands that we look at our daily lives, including the issues of our day, through the lens of Torah. While we may disagree about nuances of policy, let us always endeavor to use the wisdom of our tradition as our guide as we navigate through the challenges of our times. This is our responsibility, this is our privilege, and this is what it *actually* means to be a religious person. *G'mar Hatimah Tovah and Shabbat Shalom.*