

**The 2016 Election: What is at Stake?**  
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**Kol Nidrei 5777/2016**

I believe that a rabbi has a responsibility to speak about the most significant events of the day. So yes, I am going to talk about the election tonight.

On this night, the night we are to take a serious and honest look at our own lives, it is incumbent upon us to consider the presidential race in the context of Judaism, our values, and our priorities.

I know that most of us have made up our minds. At the same time, I believe there are moral aspects to this election that extend beyond what has been written and spoken in other settings. The presidential race prompts several important Jewish questions that I would like to address tonight.

The first question: ***Should a synagogue have a voice in politics? And if so, what should it be?***

There are those who argue that politics has no place in a synagogue. And they are right. A rabbi should never tell his congregation who to vote for. It is inappropriate for clergy to use the influence of religion and their purported understanding of God's will to dictate what their congregants should do when they enter the voting booth.

Equally important, I believe strongly in the separation of church and state enshrined in the First Amendment. Essential to that separation is the tax-exempt status granted to houses of worship. To endorse a candidate in any election would be to put our tax-exempt status in jeopardy and violate the boundary between church and state that we hold sacred. Again, there are churches and synagogues in certain neighborhoods that come perilously close to the line, and sometimes they cross it altogether. But I can assure you that as long as I am rabbi here at Temple Israel, you will never hear me endorse any candidate from this bima, no matter how much I may personally support him or her.

For all these reasons and more, a synagogue should *not* be a place of politics. But it absolutely *must* be a place of principles and values. So that's what we will focus on: the principles and values that are at stake, both today and in the future.

Our Torah portion for Yom Kippur morning also speaks about the choices we make and what is at stake. "I call heaven and earth to witness this day that I have set before you life or death, blessing or curse. Choose life, therefore, that you and your descendants may live."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Deut 30:19.

Well, when it's put in those black-and-white terms, the choice is easy. So too, there are many of us here who find it easy to stand squarely behind one candidate or the other. But I also know there are many here tonight who are not enamored of either of the major-party candidates. Some have said to me, "I just can't vote for either of them."

This brings us to our second question of the evening: ***What is the Jewish thing to do when faced with two difficult options?***

Some commentators on the current election have quoted Charles Spurgeon who said, "Of two evils choose neither." That is certainly a principled stand. However Spurgeon had the good fortune of being a 19<sup>th</sup> century upper-class Englishman. His being and his nation were wholly secure. So maybe *he* had the luxury of sitting it out. We Jews have never been so lucky.

In fact, throughout most of our history we Jews have had few good options at all. In pre-modern times our lives were severely limited. The ruler defined where we could live, what schools we could attend, what jobs we could hold, who we could marry. Even in the modern world we've often been faced with unpleasant choices. We were forced to choose between enduring persecution at home and facing uncertainty in a new foreign land. We were forced to choose between living openly as Jews and thus facing social limitations or concealing our Jewishness in order to advance in society.

Philosopher Isaiah Berlin explored the nature difficult choices. Life is full of "agonizing alternatives," he wrote. "We are doomed to choose, and every choice may entail an irreparable loss... How do we choose between possibilities?... Priorities must be established."<sup>2</sup> In a choice between two good options, we must necessarily sacrifice certain values for others that are of higher importance to us. Thus the inverse is also true: In a choice between two difficult options, we might do well to choose the one that forces us to sacrifice the *fewest* of our values.

Let us consider which of our values are in play. This leads us to the third question of the evening: ***What exactly is at stake?***

We all know what each candidate has proposed or promised regarding domestic or foreign policy. But a consideration of what is at stake extends far beyond the policy decisions the next president will or will not make.

Quite simply, the President of the United States is the most visible person on earth. The President's words and behavior are broadcast instantaneously around the world, and they reverberate powerfully.

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<sup>2</sup> Berlin, Isaiah. *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*.

On erev Rosh Hashanah I commented that politicians had long ceased to be moral exemplars for us. You all laughed. But that statement wasn't intended to be comic, it was intended to be tragic.

I would ask those of us who grew up here in the United States to think back. Who was president when you were starting elementary schools – say 6 or 7 years old? Whoever it was, I'm guessing that to some degree you looked up to him. Regardless of whether your parents voted for him, or whether he is remembered as a good president today, your emerging worldview was somehow shaped by that president.

Like it or not, the President of the United States is someone our children will inevitably look up to. Like it or not, we rely on the character of our President. Like it or not, our President defines who we are, how we see ourselves, and the tenor of our public dialogue.

So I ask you, what do we want our youngest and most impressionable to see and hear? What conversations do we want to have when we sit down at the dinner table with our children or grandchildren?

We have seen what happens when a president commits a crime in order to get re-elected. We have seen what happens when a president has an affair in the Oval Office. We have seen what happens when a president commits the United States to military action overseas on grounds that are flimsy at best.

Over the next four years, rather than talking about income tax evasion, wouldn't we prefer to talk about how to ensure that all workers can earn a decent living? Rather than talking about sexual advances, wouldn't we prefer to talk about how we can keep our country (and the State of Israel) secure in a world of uncertainty and instability? And rather than talking about who we will exclude from our country, wouldn't we prefer to talk about how we can create a nation that fulfills its promise of life, liberty and happiness for all its citizens?

All of this is what is at stake. The priorities we will pursue as a nation. The leader our children and grandchildren will look to as a model. The tenor of our public conversation in our homes, our schools, our places of work and yes our synagogues.

Our priorities and public conversation are so critically important at this time. We are all disappointed in the direction our nation is not moving in the right direction. Gaps between wealthy and poor have widened. Racial fault lines have emerged. Our standing in the world has declined. We're concerned about our children's future. And so we ask the final question of the evening: **Who will get us back on track? Who will solve the challenges we face?**

My mentor, Rabbi Peter Rubinstein, taught me an important lesson. Eight years ago he noted the enthusiasm that Barack Obama's campaign had generated and warned, "Beware of false prophets." It was not that Rabbi Rubinstein disliked Obama. Rather, he was of skeptical of any

person who claimed that he or she alone could solve our problems or who was held up as a savior.

In fact, we Jews have been warned time and again about false prophets. Deuteronomy says, “If a prophet... appears among you and announces to you miracles and wonders... you must not listen. It is the Lord your God alone you must follow and revere.”

Yet time and again we Jews have fallen for false prophecy. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> century Simon bar Kochba was hailed as the messiah as he led a doomed revolt against Rome. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century a charismatic figure known as Shabbetai Tzvi arose in Turkey. He was ultimately arrested by the Ottoman authorities, converted to Islam, and left his followers utterly disappointed.

Yes, Jewish history is littered with tales of false prophets – self-proclaimed messiahs who promised to solve all our problems. Each of them came to naught.

So who will the messiah be for us? There is a story...

One day Rabbi Joshua ben Levi happened to meet the prophet Elijah. Now in our tradition Elijah will one day accompany the messiah. So you can imagine that Rabbi Joshua was pretty excited. He asked Elijah, “When will the messiah come?” Elijah replied, “Go and ask him yourself.” Joshua asked, “Well, where is he? And how will I recognize him?” Elijah said, “He is sitting among the poor lepers at the gate to the city, tending to their bandages, one by one.”<sup>3</sup>

Our savior is found not in grand pronouncements or promises. Rather the messiah is found among the lepers – the lowest of the low, the untouchables of their day – healing their wounds, face to face. The messianic era begins not in sweeping initiatives of leadership, but in anonymous deeds of mercy and compassion.

We know that the choice we make on November 8 will define who and what we are. More than the various policies our nation will pursue, it will define the tenor of our public discourse and the role model we provide for our children.

At the same time, we know that the choice we make on November 8 is far less important than the choices we make every day. Our new President will not solve all the challenges we observe in our nation. Only we can do that – person to person, day by day.

*Ken yehi ratzon.* With God’s help, may it be so.

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<sup>3</sup> BT Sanhedrin 98a.