

Rabbi Andrea London  
Beth Emet The Free Synagogue  
Yom Kippur morning 2017/5778  
Politics in the Pulpit

Over the summer, Rabbi David Wolpe, a Conservative rabbi in Los Angeles, and Rabbi Rick Jacobs, the president of the Union for Reform Judaism, debated the merits of politics on the pulpit.

Growing up as a Reform Jew, I took it for granted that political activity and Judaism go hand in hand. The Reform Movement has a political advocacy group in Washington D.C., the Religious Action Center, that educates Reform Jews on political issues and pending legislation, and mobilizes members of our movement to contact our legislators and make our opinions known.

And my childhood rabbis—Rabbis Robert Marx and Arnold Jacob Wolf—embodied this social justice ethic.

Robert Marx was one of the founders and visionaries of the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs. For over 50 years, JCUA has been building coalitions with groups throughout the city of Chicago to fight injustice in many areas, including the workplace, housing, education, and policing.

And Arnold Jacob Wolf was a well-known critic of the Vietnam war among many issues he championed.

Rabbi Jacobs argues in his column: “Sermons that “speak up” on the great moral issues of our world and our lives may address politics and policy as a means of addressing such moral issues but they are not about politics. On the contrary, they are about our Jewish values; the values we teach and the values we pass on to our children; the values that have kept us together as a people for centuries.” (“Why my friend David Wolpe is wrong: A ‘politics free’ pulpit is an empty pulpit,” June 13, 2017, *Jewish Journal*)

But Rabbi Wolpe challenged this Reform Movement dogma in his column when he asks: “What policies do you support on major questions that differ with what you would believe if you were not a religious Jew?” (“A response to my critics,” June 13, 2017, *Jewish Journal*)

He challenges us to think how we might be using Torah to support political positions we already hold instead of allowing Torah to influence our views.

There’s no doubt that this is a contentious time politically. And rhetoric that’s divisive, vulgar, and disparaging of so many groups in our society is rampant

In this climate, clergy have a responsibility to bring people together and provide them with comfort and solace.

But this is not enough. I believe we need to change the systems of oppression that exist so that comfort and solace will be the warp and woof of our society, not just an expression of thoughtful and caring people.

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Religious organizations are good at direct service – feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and the like.

But to create a just and compassionate society we must do more than plug holes in the dike of a system that is leaving too many people suffering and impoverished. The holes just seem to be getting larger and more numerous. The fissures in our society are so deep the dike may not hold for long. No, the dike needs to be rebuilt or better, yet, we need to create a better system to stem the rising tide of bigotry, injustice, and suffering of all kinds.

On the second day of Rosh Hashanah, I spoke about, or tried to before the fire alarm went off, what it means to affirm God as our ruler—a theme that is central to Rosh Hashanah when we crown God as king and accept God’s sovereignty over us. In the Aleinu prayer, which was originally written for the Rosh Hashanah liturgy, we bend our knees—a particularly apt metaphor this week—and exalt our Creator who spread out the heavens and established the earth and gave us the gift of Torah. We pray to behold the splendor of God’s power which will be revealed when the world is free of idolatry and false gods, when the world grows more perfect through divine governance. And when that happens, the prayer concludes, on that day, God will be sovereign over all the earth and God’s name will be one.

Wholeness and harmony on earth will exist only when we live by God’s Divine values. Electoral politics is not the only vehicle through which we can do this, but it is a powerful way to make systemic change. We also, however, need to be humble enough to admit that we can never know for sure exactly what God wants from us. Claiming one is acting in God’s name has brought so much death and destruction to our world. The religious impulse must be that we are dogged about pursuing justice and peace while simultaneously pushing ourselves to grow in empathy for those who don’t share our views. We need to continuously question ourselves and our motives so that we don’t fall prey to our own hubris.

I take to heart Rabbi Wolpe’s challenge that God needs us to listen deeply and carefully to our tradition which often has competing and paradoxical teachings, but this doesn’t preclude us from taking a stand and engaging in our messy and imperfect political system when need be, even when it’s difficult or unpopular.

Isaiah 58, our Haftarah portion for this morning, rings in our ears today:

“Is this the fast I desire? Bowing your head like a reed, covering yourself with sackcloth and ashes? Do you call this a fast—a day worthy of the favor of Adonai? Is this not the fast I desire—to break the bonds of injustice and remove the heavy yoke; to let the oppressed go free and release all those enslaved? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and to take the homeless poor into your home... Then, when you call, Adonai will answer, and, when you cry, will respond “I am here.” If you remove the chains of oppression, the menacing hand, the malicious word; if you offer your compassion to the hungry and satisfy the suffering—then shall your light shine through the darkness, and your light become bright as noon.”

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Last month, Pastors Michael Nabors from Second Baptist Church and Daniel Ruen of Grace Lutheran Church, and I traveled to Washington D.C to participate in the 1000 minister march which drew closer to 4000 religious leaders of all stripes from around the country. We marched for criminal justice reform, laws that would give a fair shake to our nation's struggling poor and underpaid, equity in the provision of healthcare, and access to the voting booth for the vast ranks of Americans who have been disenfranchised by dint of their race, economic status or criminal record. We marched together because we believe that God's voice, as heard through our diverse faith traditions, implores us to pursue a just and equitable society; we are our brothers' and sisters' keepers. We marched together because we believe that our message is stronger and our actions more effective when we work across lines of faith, ethnicity, and race.

In the evening after the march, we were walking along the Potomac River in deep discussion about the issues facing our nation and what we can do about them. I said to them, I want you to come to Beth Emet on the holiest day of the year, Yom Kippur. As we spend the day in deep prayer and introspection, it would be powerful for my community to engage in conversation with you about your understanding of the place of politics in the pulpit and what we should be doing as a religious community to build a better society together.

Pastors Nabors and Ruen are gifted leaders of their churches and our community. They're involved in all the major issues facing our community, and are often the voices speaking up for truth and justice. They are people of great intellect, tremendous compassion, and deep faith. Some of you have had the privilege of meeting them at Beth Emet or at community events. They have been my community event organizing partners, my traveling companions, and my regular breakfast buddies at Le Peep. They inspire me with their wisdom and buoy me with their tireless commitment to the pursuit of justice. Most importantly, they're a joy to be with, and I'm delighted they are with us today. My friends, my colleagues, Daniel Ruen and Michael Nabors.

Each of them will speak. After the service concludes the conversation will continue with them at our study session downstairs.

Conclude the service with the song, Rav Shalom. Music by Larry Karol. Words from Isaiah 54:13-14

“All your children shall be taught about God; and great shall be the peace of your children.

You shall be established in righteousness, safe from oppression, and unafraid; safe from terror—it shall not come near you.”

Opening question for the study session after services:

At the march in Washington in 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history, there "is" such a thing as being too late. This is no time for apathy or complacency. This is a time for vigorous and positive action.”

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What do you think is the urgency of now?