

Kol Nidre
“In my humble opinion....”
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Should a rabbi talk about politics? (How many of you say yes? How many say no?)

I think it is one of the dumber things a rabbi can do. When it comes to trustworthiness and honor, politicians score lower than any other profession in survey after survey. Considering that clergy score considerably higher on all these same surveys – why on earth would I want to mess that up by getting into politics?

I attended an AIPAC conference for Rabbis, down in Washington DC over a year ago. Every year, they bring together a wide range of thinkers and experts on issues related to Israel and invite rabbis to come and be briefed just before the High Holidays – so we can be up to the minute in our understanding of the issues of the day as concerns Israel. The speaker at this particular session was Leon Wieseltier the author and critic and contributing editor at the Atlantic Magazine and one of my personal favorite contemporary thinkers. He was being interviewed by my colleague Rabbi David Wolpe, who asked, “Mr. Wieseltier – here you are at a conference sponsored by AIPAC, speaking before 250 rabbis – here is your chance to influence them and advise them – what do you think they should say regarding Israel from the pulpit on the High Holy Days?” And I remember vividly Wieseltier’s response: he immediately shouted, “Oh, good God DON’T SPEAK ABOUT ISRAEL, the last thing I want to hear when I come to shul on the High Holy Days is my rabbi talking about politics! I want to hear about God and the needs of my soul, how to find meaning in my life and how to be a better person – but please, please, no politics!”

I am not so sure his hosts from AIPAC were thrilled with his message, but it was one that I took to heart.

I try and never speak about politics. First I don’t want to aggravate you and I know that no matter what I say on whatever issue, if it is political – I will aggravate at least half of you and probably most of you. Even if I dumped on Trump I would probably aggravate some of you.

“But wait a minute,” some of you are thinking, “The rabbi is always talking about Israel; the rabbi has been critical of some of our president’s Foreign Policy positions – why just last week Rabbi, you gave a sermon on immigration and the refugee problem. You insisted that a Jew is prohibited from saying, ‘not my problem!’ You argued that as Jews we are obligated to help, we are commanded to care. If you are speaking about immigration and refugees, Iran and Israel – aren’t you talking about political issues?”

This question hinges on a larger question, what is political. The fact that refugees and immigration has entered into our political conversations does not mean that these issues are in and of themselves political. Guns, Foreign Policy, Food Stamps, Race relations, abortion, issues of inclusion and even the definition of marriage are not in and of themselves political issues. Just because politicians on the right and on the left have chosen to politicize some of these issues does not mean that for me, as a rabbi, they are now verboten. At its core these

and so many other issues are not, or at least should not be political issues. They are fundamentally religious issues, social issues and many of them deeply spiritual issues.

When I spoke about immigration and refugees I did so in the context of the mandate of our torah – Exodus 22:21 – “Do not mistreat the stranger and the foreigner – remember you were once strangers and foreigners in Egypt... or Leviticus 19:34 “You must care for the foreigner and the stranger in your midst and not mistreat them – remember you were once strangers in the land of Egypt...” We are a people whose ancient history is rooted in the immigrant experience – we are a people whose modern history is also rooted in the immigrant experience – I cannot avoid talking about this issue – even if politicians have appropriated it for their own purposes – because the way I see it – it is not political, it is deeply and fundamentally religious. And even though these particular immigrants are from Syria and may one day become my enemies – today they are in need of my help and as a caring person and as a Jew I must help.

When I speak out on issues like women’s right to choose, inclusion for gay and lesbian families – when I cry in outrage over our country’s refusal to deal with gun control, when I challenge our President’s Foreign Policy – I am not entering the world of politics – I remain deeply and firmly rooted in the soil of my sacred Jewish tradition. I hear the words of our Bible, the cries of our Prophets ringing in my ear – it is precisely because I believe these are religious issues that I, as your rabbi, feel the need to speak on them and explore them with you. And I will continue to do so in the weeks and months to come.

I do not believe that God is a Republican, or a Democrat – but as a student of the Bible and a student of our sacred Jewish tradition I am convinced God demands we care and care deeply about these and so many issues of our day.

Look – when it comes to the current issue of the Nuclear Agreement with Iran – I have an opinion. But, I don’t think my opinion is all that relevant. Is this a good deal or a bad deal? What do I know? I am just a rabbi. I care about Israel – deeply but as to which course is the best one – what do I know? “900 rabbis sign one letter and 400 rabbis sign another- they use terms like “centrifuges,” “Uranium enrichment” and other terminology for which my rabbinical training provides no competency, never mind authority. (Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove)

Some argue that the nuclear deal signed recently with Iran will spell catastrophe for Israel. Others argue that it’s the best of a range of bad options for dealing with Iran’s pursuit of a nuclear weapon. Both sides seek the same thing – to protect Israel and the world – but they disagree on which path will better achieve that goal!

No matter how much I search the Bible or the Talmud – I have not been able to find any inkling as to which is right. As I said – I have an opinion. And if you insist, I will be glad to share it with you - -I think our president is wrong on this one. I think this is a bad deal and will not achieve what its proponents think it will.

Some of you may remember that I spoke out on this last Pesach. I said at that time that it seemed to me that our president – who by the way, I voted for twice – that our president seems to believe that we have been too quick in the past to resort to force in places like Afghanistan and Iraq and even in Yemen and Somalia and that belief seems to be informing his approach to Iran. His foreign policy seems to be based on a fervent belief that diplomacy and talk is better than fighting or force – or in the immortal words of Winston Churchill, “jaw-jaw

is better than war-war!" But I argued then and I believe now that even Churchill would be the first to acknowledge that there is a time for talk and a time for war. But I acknowledge that these are complicated and subtle issues and I confess I do not have simple answers for them – I am a rabbi, what do I know.

So why am I so suspicious of the Iranian leadership? Why do I think it is a mistake to enter into this agreement with them? Well – you may remember the midrash I taught:

The *Midrash* tells us that when the Israelites came to the Sea of Reeds with the Egyptian army in hot pursuit after them, God had to decide what to do – how to save His people – should He drown the Egyptians in the sea? After all the Egyptians are God's creatures as well. This was indeed a dilemma for God – to save one it seemed he had to destroy the other. Thereupon the guardian angel of Egypt, whose name is Uza came before the Holy One to plead for mercy on behalf the Egyptians. So did the angels of the other nations of the world. At that point Michael, the guardian angel of Israel came before God and added his voice, but urged God to drown the Egyptians. God asked Michael, "Why do you want Me to act so harshly. Why are all the other angels seeking My mercy and you – you demand such strict and harsh justice? At that moment, Michael sent the angel Gabriel before the Holy One and Gabriel held in his hand an Egyptian brick with the corpse of a Hebrew infant entombed inside. Seeing that awful gruesome sight, the Holy One immediately decided that the pursuing Egyptian troops *deserved* to be drowned, *had* to be drowned, and so they were.

This is a fascinating *midrash* and it deserves much more attention and study than I can afford it from the bema this evening. But if I understand it correctly, God at first does not understand Michael – why is he so vengeful? Why not let God delay the Egyptians or somehow protect the Israelites. Why does he demand the punishment and the death of the Egyptians? God and all the other angels start with the assumption – and I would argue it is the base assumption upon which all of Judaism is based – that people, all people are deserving of compassion. God's assumption is that the Egyptians, like all people are reasonable, and though they may have sinned – they have the capacity to repent and change. So what changes God's mind? The angel Michael brings evidence that the Egyptians are *not* like all other people – the angel brings evidence that even God cannot ignore, to challenge His fundamental assumption – the sight of the brick with a corpse of a Jewish infant entombed inside of it, lays bare the reality of an evil that is not deserving of compassion.

And this really brings us to the core of this debate.

Is there such a thing as an evil that is not deserving of compassion? Are there some people who are *not* like us – who do not play by the same rules that we play by and are not moved by the same values that we are moved by?

One generation removed from the Holocaust – I don't know how a Jew can answer any way other than: yes. Yes, there is such a thing as evil – unredeemable, unrepentant evil.

Yes, ours is a religion of compassion and a God of compassion. The rabbis argue that God is 500 times more likely to express mercy over justice – by the way a principle *we* depend on as we seek God's forgiveness for *our* sins on these holy days – we hope and we pray that God will judge *us* with mercy – that *we* won't necessarily get, "what *we* deserve" but that we will get a large dose of compassion and forgiveness, however undeserved it may be. But – even though the rabbis insist that God's mercy outweighs his desire for justice by 500-1 they also insist that: "One who is merciful to the cruel will wind up being cruel to the merciful."

I think that is a very important statement. Mercy is a beautiful and admirable trait – in God and man. But there are times when mercy is cruel and justice is the kindest thing we can do. Remember as kids when our parents said, “this hurts me more than it hurts you,” as they were about to administer a stern dose of justice? They understood. Compassion should be our bias. But, when the angel brought evidence of the depravity of the Egyptians – God, our compassionate God whose name is *Rachmana*, the Compassionate One – even God could not avert his eyes from such evil and I imagine that He probably muttered, “this hurts me more than it hurts you...” as He drowned the Egyptians in the sea.

I support diplomacy as a first response to any and every disagreement. I do believe that “jaw-jaw is better than war-war!” But when the angel brings evidence before me that I cannot ignore, well, that is why I think our president is making a mistake. I think there is evil in the world. I think Syria and ISIS and Hamas and Hisbollah, North Korea and yes Iran – are evil. And evil cannot be reasoned with, it must be destroyed. There are times when mercy is cruel.

That is my opinion, some of my friends say that if Iran violates this deal – *then* they will experience the strong arm of American and world justice. I worry that the leaders of the world will only find more reasons to equivocate. But, now and I want you to listen very carefully to the next words I am about to say to you: “That is my opinion, that is what I believe – but, I might be wrong!”

I might be wrong! That is what separates me from most of the politicians and all of the religious fanatics – on the left and on the right - my willingness to admit, that I might be wrong.

There is an attitude of certainty that dominates too much of the political discourse today. In politics and in religion too many of our “leaders” claim a hold on the truth for their particular position or ideology. Too much of what passes for religious preaching these days is similarly grounded in a deep and abiding belief that *they* are right – that God is on *their* side and anyone who disagrees is wrong, a traitor to the cause, – or worse an enemy of God, truth and justice.

That is not my religion, that is not my torah and that is not my God. And I hope and I pray you will come to know God as I do. I want you to have strong opinions on the Nuclear Deal with Iran. I want you to have strong opinions on gun control and abortion and gay marriage and a whole host of issues – *and* I want *this* House to be a House of Prayer for ALL People. I hope and I pray that left or right, up or down whatever opinion you may hold that you will find comfort and welcome and peace in this place.

There are shuls where the subtle and not so subtle message is that if you are not right wing in your politics – well, you are not welcome there. There are shuls where if you are not liberal – you are not made to feel welcome. *Ki beyti beit tefila l'chol haamim* - This shul is based on the biblical vision of a house of worship for all people.

No one comes to shul to be aggravated – but I hope you come to be challenged. We come to shul in search of fellowship and encouragement and deep spiritual advancement. The torah is our source of knowledge and its lessons are the foundations of our practices. A synagogue functions at its best when it encourages Torah study, spiritual growth, religious responsibility and when it teaches us how to find and respect the Divine spark that warms every human soul.

You have strong opinions about the Iran deal – God bless you – all I ask is that after you express them passionately and forcefully – that you take a deep breath, smile and say – “but I might be wrong.”

I really do think that this is the difference between a religious person and a religious fanatic – between a political person and a political fanatic – the ability to say this simple phrase: but I might be wrong.

And that is my question to you tonight. Has it occurred to you that you might be wrong?

Congressman Jerry Nadler who represents the Upper West Side of Manhattan announced his support for the negotiated Iran nuclear deal. He wrote a cogent essay detailing how he arrived at the decision. I read his decision and I disagree. But – after he made his decision public he received death threats. He was accused of turning his back on the Jewish people. One rabbi compared him to President Roosevelt when he betrayed the Jews of the Holocaust.

Is this what we have come to? Either you agree with me or you are a traitor? Either you agree with me or you are the enemy?

In some ways I am even more worried by the poisonous atmosphere that has choked off all possibility of debate and discussion than any particular position on this matter. The polarization in politics and the fanaticization (I don't think there is such a word) of religion – these are the threats that *really* frighten me. No one side has a monopoly on acting in the best interest of Israel, the Jewish people and world peace. We only have our beliefs and our hopes and our fears.

Think of Hillel and Shammai – who lived almost 2000 years ago. They were acknowledged by all to be the two greatest scholars of their day and they disagreed on practically everything. There are more than 300 Hillel vs Shammai disputes recorded in the Mishna. And both sides we were told were the words of the living God – *elu v'elu divrei elohim chayim!* However, although the tradition acknowledged that both opinions were legitimate, it also insisted that the law follow Hillel. Why? Was he smarter? No. Were his positions more reasoned? Was he right? Maybe; maybe not. So why did he merit having the law follow him? The Talmud explains because Hillel and his students were modest, they studied their own opinions and the opinions of Shammai and they always quoted Shammai's opinion before they stated their own! Because they were willing to consider the possibility that, they *might* be wrong.

Let television news be about talking heads and fashioning opinions; synagogues should be about rabbis who know how to listen as well as they preach, synagogues should be about caring hearts, open minds and honest souls. The Pope is visiting Washington DC – he will be here in New York on Thursday. This is one of the most beloved Pope's in memory. And do you know why? There are very few things I agree with this Pope about – certainly we disagree on religion, but we disagree on many other matters as well – but I like him – you know why. Because of his deep humility and his willingness to listen and his capacity to care. These, in my humble opinion, are values that are even more important than being right.

Look that is what this day is about – for 25 hours we are occupied in an intensive exercise in *teshuvah* – repentance. What is *teshuvah*, repentance – if not the simple ability to humble ourselves, to acknowledge that I, you, we might be wrong. If you believe you are right – you

have no need to seek repentance, you have nothing to apologize for. If you *know* you are right this entire book of prayers is lost on you because it is predicated on the belief that the core human characteristic is that we are flawed, we make mistakes – we sin. Yom Kippur is the process by which we confront the error of our ways and seek to mend them. Yom Kippur is the day that we acknowledge our humanness – our fallibility and embrace the possibility of growth and development. On Yom Kippur we fall *korim* - we literally drop to the ground and we prostrate ourselves before God! On Yom Kippur we beat our breast in the hope we will take this to heart! Some of you come here and are so sure you are right and that everyone else is wrong – well – I imagine you would be more comfortable beating your neighbor's breast than your own.

We may joke about two Jews, three opinions – but it goes to the very heart of what it means to be a Jew. To be a Jew means at one in the same time to be confident that there is truth while being humble enough to recognize that we may only own part of it. It means a confident belief in God and an understanding that my belief in His truth is not the same as His truth. Or as one of my favorite lines ever recited in a movie – by the priest who was counseling Rudy, in the 1993 movie by the same name, says: “Son, in 35 years of religious study, I have only come up with two incontrovertible facts: there is a God and I’m not Him.”

Let me conclude by teaching you a rabbinic expression. In many of the rabbinical commentaries on our sacred texts, there is a beautiful phrase that is often used to introduce the rabbi's conclusion. It generally comes at the end of a long, reasoned and sometimes passionate articulation of a position – and then right as he is ready to make his point, tell us what he believes, these wonderful religious models say: “*Nireh l'oniyut da'ati*” – “In my humble opinion... and then they present their conclusion. What a wonderful perspective is captured in those words: “*Nireh l'oniyut da'ati*” – “In my humble opinion.

We could use a little more humility in religious and political discussions today. We could use a little more humility in our personal interactions – as a parent I don't *always* have to be right; as a friend, as a lover. God does not share His truth directly with any one of us. The best any of us can hope for is an imperfect truth filtered through the wisdom of our tradition and our individual capacity for reason.

So they shout at us – from the left and from the right, I am right! No, I am right! What is a sane person to do? Two thousand years ago, the Talmud laid it out very succinctly. Life presents before us two paths, one of fire and one of ice. Take the one and you will die from the heat. Take the other and you will die from the cold. What should you do? Walk between them. This is the dilemma that confronts us in 2015. Wherever we turn we see fire or ice. What should we do?

“*Nireh l'oniyut da'ati*” In my humble opinion, I can offer no better advice than: Walk between them. Come let us try and find *that* path together.