

## LIVING IN AN AGE OF RELIGION

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We are living in an age of religion. We are living at a time when religious beliefs permeate the political arena and religious passions influence presidential elections and world politics. It's non-stop on television and radio, and in popular culture. Recently, there has even been a town in Florida that was built as a religious community.

And it pains me that as a rabbi, and as a religious person, I have to say, that I am scared to death by what I see.

Because what I see is not the celebration of humanity that came from the founders of our country, who saw God as an inspiration to improve the nature of society, and who understood that religious values could be a powerful motivator for those engaged in public life. And who also understood that it was imperative that religion be kept separate from the government itself, or both government and religion could become corrupt.

When I turn on the evening news, I do not see images reminiscent of the abolitionist movement, where the churches spoke out about the immorality of slavery.

I do not see images from the Civil Rights Movement where people of different faiths and different colors came together using peaceful methods to demand justice and accountability from our leaders.

And while I do see people out on the streets demanding our government to stop the genocide in Darfur, or to work for peace in the Middle East, or to pay attention to our natural resources, I never hear the media describing these activities as coming out of the faith communities.

Yet I know that many of those who are out there fighting for these things are doing so because their faith compels them to do so.

I know that Judaism is not alone in believing in *Tikkun Olam*, or loving ones neighbors, or caring for the environment. Nor are we alone in believing in the importance of taking personal responsibility for our actions, caring for the poor, and speaking up for the disenfranchised. I am friends with enough members of the Christian clergy and adherents of other faiths to know that religion can be a powerful motivator in bringing people together to work for the common good.

So it makes me wonder, when did pursuing peace, creating just societies, and loving our fellow human beings cease being seen by politicians and the media as religious values?

When did those values become secondary to holy wars, the apocalypse and the fervent desire for the *moshiach* to come and save us?

I am weary of hearing what is described as religious values on television. Because in truth, most of it is little more than ideological fundamentalism, parochialism, and old fashioned bigotry and hatred masquerading as religion. And it is on the rise both here and abroad.

We are living in a time when values that have long been held dear by our country and OUR faith are under attack ó religious pluralism, peaceful co-existence, healthy debate and dissent, and of course respect for one another, and their right to have beliefs that are different than our own.

It is at times like this that we must ask ourselves ó what do we believe? What are our core values? What do we stand for?

In ancient days, on Rosh Hashanah the High Priests would pray not only on behalf of Israel, but on behalf of all the nations, and all the people of the world. They held the belief that during the High Holidays the entire world, and all of its inhabitants were being judged - together.

We believed that all of our fates hung in the balance, and that our destinies were intertwined. So it would make sense that when we were praying for God to show mercy, we would pray that God would be merciful not only to us, but to all people, not just the ones we like, or agree with.

The Cohanim did not pray that these other nations would become Jewish, or follow our faith and believe as we did. Judaism has always recognized that there are different paths to God and that ours is but one of many.

And even within Judaism, there has never been just one way to practice our faith. It has always been understood that practices vary from country to country, community to community, even synagogue to synagogue.

The Talmud was careful in recording dissenting opinions along side the majority opinions because the rabbis taught that perhaps in the future, the halacha, the Jewish law, might change with the evolving needs of the community. And in fact we have not one, but two Talmuds ó the Babylonian and the Jerusalem. And the two are often in disagreement with each other.

Debate, disagreement, even challenging authority are not just Jewish cultural traits, these are central religious values! We believe that it is through healthy debate and disagreement that we can come to higher truths than we can achieve through promoting a strict dogma and unquestioning minds.

Rabbinic Judaism is based on a premise of rejecting extremism, rejecting fundamentalism, rejecting hateful action and hateful speech towards others, as well as not being afraid to speak truth to power.

That does not mean that fundamentalism does not exist in Judaism, of course it does, as it does in every religion and ideology. However throughout most of our history, the majority of the Jewish world has tended to marginalize or fear extremism and fundamentalism, believing that path to be unhealthy and dangerous.

The early rabbis refused to canonize the Book of Maccabees, because they glorified a violent strain of fundamentalism that sanctioned civil war and killing based on religious zealotry.

The rabbis of the Mishna and the Talmud elevated the pursuit of peace as one of our highest values. And the rabbi who did more than any other to shape the way we understand Judaism was Hillel. And from Hillel we learn that the entire teachings of the Torah can be summed up in one sentence: "What is hateful to you, do not do to any other."

In this age of religion and of ideological fundamentalism, we are called upon to affirm and act upon our beliefs, and our core values.

The idea of "what is hateful to you, do not do to any other," pursuing peace, respectful disagreement and a pluralistic society - These are the types of values that are the foundation of modern Judaism. And these are the values that drew our families to this country and have enabled us to live without fears of legalized anti-Semitism and oppression. It is what inspired our community to be involved in helping create a more just society here in America, and abroad. And it is what has led Jews into public service, community service and founding interfaith organizations and civil rights advocacy groups.

So what do we believe today? What does American Judaism stand for? At a time when religious values are a major focus of public discourse, we cannot afford to be silent about what we believe. Because if we do not speak out on our own behalf, we can be assured, that there will be no one who will do so for us.

Since the 1970s there has been a steady rise in fundamentalism at home and abroad. Fundamentalists who believe that there is no room for people who believe differently than they do, people who believe there is only one true religion, only one true path to righteousness and salvation, they are a threat to all people who are in disagreement with them. Radical fundamentalists who are not afraid to resort to violent speech and violent action to enforce their beliefs are becoming all too common.

This type of fundamentalism has been on the rise in the three Abrahamic faiths. It was radical fundamentalism that led to the bombing of the World Trade Center and the constant suicide bombings throughout the Middle East, it was radical fundamentalism that led to the bombings of abortion clinics and the more recent murder of Satendar Singh here in Sacramento over the summer, and it was radical fundamentalism that led to the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin.

It has pained me deeply to see that in the Jewish world there has been an ongoing and steady increase in incivility, intolerance, and at times, even displays of violence from the ultra-Orthodox community towards the rest of the Jewish community in the streets of Israel. While this strain of fundamentalism is seen most sharply in Israel, it exists in lesser degrees in the Diaspora as well.

Living in America it is easy to forget that outside of our borders, Reform and Conservative Judaism is in the minority, and non-Orthodox Jews are often marginalized or inhibited from participating in the larger Jewish community. This has been particularly true in Israel as well as in Central and Eastern Europe where the Jewish communities are beginning to experience a renaissance of Jewish life.

And because the Reform movement was for the most part absent in Israel's early years, it is really only in the last 15 years or so that liberal Judaism has been able to begin to take hold in Israel; by building more synagogues and schools and being seen as an option for mainstream Israelis. However, even with the progress that has been made, Reform and Conservative Judaism is still seen as being on the fringe in Israel.

Approximately 1/3 of world Jewry live in North America, 1/3 in Israel, and 1/3 throughout the rest of the world. And the nature of all three of these communities is rapidly changing.

It is imperative for the Reform movement to be involved in what is happening both here and abroad. Through the URJ ó the Union of Reform Judaism, ARZA ó the American Reform Zionist Association, the World Union of Progressive Judaism, the Women of Reform Judaism and National Brotherhood, working together, we have the ability to have an impact well beyond our own congregation's walls.

While it might be easy to be a Reform Jew here, we cannot forget those who are fighting for basic recognition elsewhere. The future of Judaism depends on a vibrant, respectful and open dialogue within the Jewish community.

And in *American* society it is all too evident to see how effective the radical right has been in pushing a *particular* religious agenda in our courts, in our schools and throughout the political arena.

When some citizens have sought religious equality in the Public Square, or recognition of the diversity of faiths in America, we see talking heads on television screaming that there is a war on Christmas and that there are those in society who do not recognize that this is a Christian nation.

At one of the Republican presidential debates, 3 candidates proudly raised their hands to the question "who does not believe in evolution." This should make us sit up and take notice. This is about more than just someone's personal philosophy. The person who sits in the White House will determine policy issues at the National Institute of Health, be involved in appointing judges who will rule on abortion rights, prayer in school and whether or not it's ok to teach "intelligent design" as science. These are not only civil issues, they are also religious issues.

This past year, when a Muslim congressman sought to bring in his own Koran to swear his oath of office upon, both Jewish and Christian bigots screamed that it was un-American, and outside the Judeo-Christian values of the United States.

Judeo-Christian values ó whatever happened to love thy neighbor as thyself as a Judeo-Christian value?

When the rights of one religious group are jeopardized, the rights of all religious groups become jeopardized.

This coming year is an election year. I am sure that there will be endless discussion about family values and religious values in the debates and on cable news.

It is imperative that we speak up, and let it be known what *our* family values and what *our* religious beliefs are, because if we don't, we may ultimately jeopardize our legal rights to practice those values.

Since 9-11 we have been aware of the increasing dangers of radical Islam throughout the Western World as well as the Middle East. In Europe there has been everything from terrorist attacks on public transportation, to riots in reaction to the Danish cartoon that depicted Muhammad, and attacks on the Jewish community.

Israel is also seeing a dangerous threat arise out of the Hamas controlled Gaza Strip who has directed their violence not only towards Israel but towards moderate Muslim and Christian Palestinians as well.

This is not what religion is about, and this need not be what the age of religion be remembered for.

We must not let people who espouse hatred and seek to destroy others claim that they are the true voice of religion, or that they speak for all religious people.

We who are sitting in this room are also religious people. The values we study and embrace are religious values. When we engage in *Tikkun Olam*, *tzedakah*, *g'millut chasadim*, acts of loving kindness, we are engaged in religious acts.

There are times when we know that we are standing at a crossroad in history, when critical decisions need to be made about what direction our community, our nation, and our world are going in. Now is one of those times.

Now is the time for the voice of moderation, dialogue and reason to speak up and speak loudly. Now is the time for us to be advocates of co-existence and to work diligently with other faith groups who hold similar values and to build bridges to facilitate greater understanding with those groups who are very different than our own.

Last year our congregation affiliated with ACT ó Area Congregations Together, an organization dedicated to uniting the Sacramento faith community to help underprivileged youth, and give them opportunities in education and in the work place.

We have also continued our commitment to the Interfaith Service Bureau and working to cultivate understanding and dialogue amongst the faith groups in the greater Sacramento area.

The Sacramento JCRC ó the Jewish Community Relations Council, is being revitalized and needs our help and support in creating coalitions between religious and ethnic groups, as well as lobbying our public officials on matters of concern to the Jewish community.

In this coming year we hope to cultivate and build relationships with other churches and synagogues through our gay rights and our sustainable living committees.

And the Women of Bønai Israel will be inviting Muslim women to join us for an evening of dialogue during a Rosh Chodesh in January.

And throughout this year you will see our congregation offer programs and classes on Israel so that we can learn how we can become more involved in helping ensure a strong and safe Israel that is also committed to its highest Jewish values.

As Hillel taught:

*If I am not for myself who will be for me?* ó We have an obligation to be our own advocates in the public square.

*If I am only for myself, what am I?* We cannot only be concerned with the rights and needs of the Jewish community in America. We must speak out when we see any group being discriminated against ó it is what our religion demands of us.

*And if not now, when?* - Now is the time to speak out against extremism here and abroad. Now is the time to redefine what it means to live in an age of religion.

We must act with integrity, we must speak out about what we believe in, we must stand up for our values, and we must do so now.

*Shana tova* ó may this year bring our people and our world a renewed commitment to peace and understanding amongst all people.

*Ken yehi ratzon* ó may this be God's will.