

## Inside the Inauguration

*Alan Mittleman*  
America: A Religious Country . . . 1

*Mik Moore*  
Communion or Confrontation? . . . . . 2

*Donald W. Shriver*  
Justice and Imperialism . . . . . 4

*Shmuel Jablon*  
Why I Voted for Bush . . . . . 5

Discussion Guide . . . 5

*Daniel Ain*  
The Virtue of Humility . . . . . 6

*Louis E. Newman*  
Certitude is No Virtue . . . . . 7

*Carol Smokler*  
A True Democracy . . 7

*Martha Ackelsberg*  
Responsible For All . 8

*Jay Michaelson*  
Wrestling with God . 8

*Hadar Harris*  
Canvassing in Fear, Voting with Faith . . 11

*Ruth Calderon*  
The Balcony . . . . . 12

*Neil Gillman*  
Book Review . . . . . 13

*Daniel Terris*  
New Visions . . . . . 14

*Marla J. Feldman*  
NiSh'ma . . . . . 15

*Adena K. Berkowitz*  
Sh'ma Ethics . . . . . 16

WITH THE PRESIDENTIAL INAUGURATION APPROACHING, *Sh'ma* invited a few discerning voices to write letters to President Bush (see page 7) — suggesting what the administration might address in the next four years. Also included in this issue are probing reflections on the divisiveness of the election, the role fear played in the campaign, questions about whether Jews should align themselves politically with the evangelical Christian Right, how Jewish values influenced political decisions, and how we might approach politics in 2008.

## America: A Religious Country

*Alan Mittleman*

THE 2004 ELECTION will be remembered for its emphasis on values. The Democratic strategy to stay focused on the economy was unsuccessful. And while the Republicans emphasized the war on terrorism and steadiness in Iraq, they presented themselves as the party of values. This meant mounting a forthright defense of traditional institutions such as marriage and, suppressing dissent within their ranks, presenting a coherent opposition to abortion. Republicans painted the Democrats as unprincipled secular elitists, out of touch with the conservative social values of the American people. Although this charge was exaggerated, the Democrats were an easy target because of their ambivalence in speaking about faith, their nuanced or, less charitably, contradictory approach to gay marriage, and their solid support for abortion rights.

The Republicans took a risk in emphasizing traditional values to such a great extent. Stem cell research, for which the President restricted federal funding early in his term, is relatively popular outside the Republican base of conservative Evangelicals and traditional Catholics. California's passing of a \$3 billion funding initiative for stem cell research shows that it plays rather well in the general electorate. President Bush's support for a constitutional amendment defining marriage in traditional terms, although it went nowhere in Congress, proved a rallying cry. Eleven states passed referenda amending their constitutions to protect the traditional definition of marriage. Democrats could not take a clear progressive line on gay marriage without offending elements of their base. Although Jews, for the most part, are supportive of gay marriage (52%), blacks are not. Nor are Hispanics. Forty-four percent of Hispanics voted for the President. They can no longer reliably be counted on as a Democratic constituency. Milton Himmelfarb's classic *bon mot* — the Jews earn like Episcopalians and vote like Puerto Ricans — needs to be amended. Jews continue to earn like Episcopalians but Puerto Ricans no longer vote like Puerto Ricans.

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In the two decades since the Reagan revolution, the Republican Party has become the majority party. The Democrats are dispirited, casting about for a, *mirabile dictu*, progressive yet traditional vision that will enable them to reconnect with the religiosity and values that a majority of voters apparently hold dear. For Jews, this is especially galling. It represents the end of a long period where an essentially secular discourse about public affairs marginalized religious voices. All public issues were technical problems; liberalism provided a progressive, civic faith. Religion was expected to play by a set of rules put in place by




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secular elites. This epoch is over. Sociological predictions of the triumphant march of secularity were misguided. America remains an intransigently religious country with a religiosity that insists on expressing itself in the public, political realm. Then, as now, public religion has both given a moral tone to our politics (abolition, the civil rights struggle) as well as set America on divisive cultural crusades (prohibition) that complicate the settlement of our social problems.

In a Pew Research Center poll before the election, almost 30 percent of Evangelicals said that values questions would be decisive for them in this election. Although other Christian groups did not rate values as highly, their importance, on average, was about 20 percent. In the small Jewish sample, however, only four percent thought values important. The vast majority of Jews seemed satisfied with the state of the culture (but dissatisfied with the economy, foreign policy, etc.). After the election a full 78 percent of Bush voters, according to *Newsweek*, said that moral values were a top concern. Although we don't have figures on Jewish voters, we can imagine that, as a majority liberal community, the traditional orientations conveyed by the politically charged term "values" would be unwelcome to Jews. Like

the Democrats, American Jews will have to figure out how they should relate to a changed political-cultural landscape where traditional religious faith and traditional religious values have become politically salient, indeed, politically correct.

Some years ago, Elliot Abrams, now an official on the National Security Council, wrote *Faith or Fear*, a book urging the Jewish community to be less fretful about traditional values groups such as Evangelicals — to have faith in their moral decency rather than suspect them as potential (or actual) antisemites. Abrams' challenge is even more pressing today. Jews, like Democrats, can either define themselves as a permanent opposition, consolidating on the left and delivering righteous jeremiads to the culture, or they can come to terms with America's durable and politically expressive traditional religiosity. The Talmud tells us that a sage is preferable to a prophet. Political wisdom, the prudent assessment of what is best for the community under the current circumstances, should trump indignant moralism. The faith of other Americans need not be a source of fear for Jews. Jews, among others, should find their way back to the center, lest they be left out in the cold of a very long political winter. 

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## Communion or Confrontation? Jewish leaders at a Crossroads with the Christian Right

Mik Moore

How can we expect evangelical Christians to support our concerns if we support none of theirs?  
— David Harris, Executive Director,  
American Jewish Committee  
(Christianity Today, October 2003)

*Mik Moore is a political consultant in New York City. He recently organized Operation Bubbe, an election-week effort to bring Jewish volunteers to help get out the vote in Palm Beach County. Mik currently serves as board president of the Jewish Student Press Service.*

DESPITE TALK OF a political realignment, on November 2, 2004, American Jews overwhelmingly rejected George W. Bush and his commitment to the concerns of the Christian Right. Today Harris' remark should be an anachronism. Unfortunately, it could prove to be prophetic. American Jewish leaders are divided between those willing to trade domestic communal interests for an alliance with Christian fundamentalists and those who stand with the majority of Jews. Defeat of that majority would smooth the way for a broader conservative Jewish communal agenda and justify the most significant communal

backlash in over 30 years.

One week before the election, I led a group of 120 volunteers to Palm Beach County to help get out the Jewish vote. Our experience when meeting Jewish retirees was reflected at the polls: 80 percent of Florida's Jewish voters cast a ballot for John Kerry. Across the country thousands of Jews put hundreds of thousands of hours into defeating the Bush agenda. My own encounters and the stories of others made it clear that the rising power of the Christian Right, with its dangerous domestic agenda, was a top concern to many American Jews.

Yet throughout the presidential campaign, Jewish leaders repeated that the president had been a great friend to Israel, while Bush partisans proclaimed, "Israel (and the 'War on Terror') first!" Ed Koch often campaigned for President Bush, telling Jewish audiences that he supported the president even though