

## Certitude is No Virtue

– Louis E. Newman

You won this election because many voters believed you represented a commitment to “moral values.” Those voters were mistaken on several counts.

Your appeal to morality rests on the mistaken (if still popular) view that upholding moral values means primarily preserving some principle or institution from the past, like two-parent families or sexual abstinence before marriage. Morality, in this view, is all about our adherence to time-honored “truths” that have been the foundation of our civilization and are now purportedly being eroded by those who have no moral compass themselves and no respect for those who do. But, as appealing as this view may be to many conservatives, true moral values are frequently rooted in a vision of the future — an ideal world we hope to create, rather than a past that we wish to perpetuate. This, of course, is the power of the biblical prophets, who could imagine a world of social justice that had never existed and then take Israel to task for its failure to live up to that standard. Our religious tradition (and yours, too, I believe) teaches that our ultimate moral task is to repair and transform the world, not cling desperately to the moral views that guided our grandparents.

This mistaken view of moral values correlates closely to your view that single-minded, unwavering devotion to a cause is the highest moral virtue. If values are static, it follows that moral character is measured in terms of constancy, as if moral courage were synonymous with taking a stand and refusing to waver. This posture enabled you so successfully to portray John Kerry’s “flip-flopping” as an indicator of moral weakness. But virtue is not the same as consistent loyalty to a cause, however noble. Moral discernment and wisdom require attentiveness to the complexities and ambiguities of life, which can never be fully engaged through simple, unchanging moral positions. In the face of life’s uncertainties, certitude is no virtue. This is why the rabbis in our tradition counsel us repeatedly to engage in daily repentance, *teshuvah*, for they knew that self-scrutiny, *heshbon ha-nefesh*, and a willingness to face our mistakes are the true signs of moral strength.

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## A True Democracy

–Carol Shalita Smokler

During the final days of the 2004 election, I worked full time as a volunteer in the Kerry-Edwards campaign. My job, along with several other volunteers, was to get absentee ballots to the housebound elderly who had not received their ballots in the mail. Through an arduous process of getting affidavits signed and waiting in line for six to eight hours in order to obtain two absentee ballots (the limit per request), we were able to hand carry ballots to over 60 elderly residents in the South Palm Beach County area. I went to the home of a woman who had cut short a platelet transfusion so she would be home in time to receive her ballot. Her hand shook so badly that she could barely sign her name and fill out the ballot, but she smiled with pride throughout. I carried a ballot to the hospital for a man who only agreed to check himself into the hospital on the condition that he could still vote. The value these seniors placed on their franchise, on their exercise in democracy, awed me. Many of them had not missed a vote since turning 21 years old. Voting in this election, win or lose, was an opportunity to feel an efficacy largely missing from their lives. I hope they are not the last generation to feel such privilege and responsibility about this cornerstone of our free and democratic society.

Your administration hopes to bring democracy and the electoral process to the Middle East, create greater stability in the region and in the world, and reduce the incidence of terrorism. But we can’t export democracy when we fail to hold fully democratic, transparent, voter-friendly elections at home. In a country as technologically advanced as ours, there is no excuse for voters not receiving absentee ballots expediently, for having machines that fail to work or that tally votes incorrectly. It is unconscionable that people must wait for over six hours to cast their ballots — and this poses questions about fairness when some people, such as the elderly and the poor, cannot wait. The logistical and technical problems are easy to fix. But, more menacing problems exist: the provisional ballot system needs uniform national standards, local election officials need to be neutral, and the chief election official in each state should be nonpartisan. We should

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Finally, your re-election appears to have been based in no small part on your success in packaging moral values in a few catchy phrases: “the right to life,” “the preserva-

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tion of marriage,” and “no child left behind,” among others. These slogans effectively galvanized the passions of your conservative base and convinced them that this election was ultimately about a cultural war at home, rather than the real war overseas. More to the point, you gave voice to certain deeply-felt moral sentiments and gave people the sense that they were on the “right” side of a great moral divide in our society. But genuine morality cannot be reduced to sound bites. Real moral reflection is subtle and sophisticated because it reflects the fact that in the real world moral principles and values frequently must be balanced against one another. In our tradition, the endless dialectic of talmudic argument testifies powerfully to the fact that we deepen our moral sensitivity and refine our moral knowledge only through the careful and relentless exploration of multiple perspectives. The moral quandaries we face as a society cannot adequately be addressed with simplistic phrases that fit neatly on campaign buttons.

The distinction of genuine moral leadership is reserved for those whose moral stature is not built on the foundation of political expediency. It is one of the great ironies of your campaign that you presumed to seize the high ground of moral correctness precisely by playing to the pervasive fears of the electorate in a time of social crisis. In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Americans have felt insecure, weak, and confused. In response, they have instinctively looked for reassurance, strength, and clarity, precisely the balm that your appeal to moral values has provided. The key to your political success in this climate has been to wrap yourself in the cloak of moral values while sidestepping your responsibility to help us face the radically new historical circumstances in which we now live.

But while you may be able to fool voters, you cannot cheat history. In time, as the full complexity of the problems we face becomes apparent, the shallowness of your appeal to values will become equally apparent. Reality will once again assert itself and, when it does, the very success of your moral values campaign may prove to be your undoing. Ultimately, a people hungry for true moral guidance will not be nourished by a diet of moral fluff and empty calories. Then, having put yourself forward as a moral leader, you will inevitably be judged lacking by the very standards that you have championed. Real moral values cannot be manipulated for political ends; instead, they hold us and all our political agendas accountable before a standard that permits no simplification and tolerates no pretentiousness.

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### **Democracy, from page 7**

be considering a national ballot that provides a section for local candidates and initiatives; we need a uniform voting system (optical scanner, touch screen).

When partisan politics tinkers with the electoral process, our democracy looks shabby. Attempts to hold down the vote or falsely enhance the turnout undermine the spirit of democracy. We want the world to look at our elections and see a successful process. While you have a full agenda for your second term, a genuinely non-partisan assessment and reform of the electoral process will improve our democracy and inspire more people to vote in the future. Let's hope that our children will make it a priority to vote in every election, just like the housebound seniors.

*Carol Shalita Smokler  
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