
pulled Jewish ethics, peoplehood and faith apart from each other are all still very much with us. The dream of synthesis lies in ruins; and this *hurban* has come from within. As Yohanan ben Zakkai understood, only a return to the sources, to Torah in its richest sense, will return us to ourselves.

Political moderation, and the spiritual interaction it represents, is not a wishy-washy proposition; it is a principled stand to be affirmatively taken, defended and held against the extremes of both right and left, with no less fervor than the others, and with its own special courage, the courage to listen and to doubt. Lucidity is a moral value, dialogue is its own reward and the sanctity of religion demands that we desacralize politics.

We who are committed to halakhah should be brave enough to call the chauvinistic and violent elements of our tradition by their proper names, and brave enough to admit the legitimate claims of peoplehood, land and language—our own and others’—and brave enough to admit at times that we—and I mean all of us—understand nothing at all. □

Jewish political conscience

Harold M. Schulweis

A few months ago, two prominent advertisements appeared in *The New York Times*. The first, under the banner “*Mazel Tov Newt*” was signed by rabbis and Jewish lay leaders convinced that the Gingrich “contract” reflected the “eternal values of Judaism.” The other advertisement, in refutation, maintained that the “core political commitment of Judaism” is the covenant to liberalism. Each claimed its own synonymy with authentic Judaism.

To validate the equation of neo-conservatism or liberalism with Judaism, each side exercised its own “gerrymandering” skills, carving out of the Bible strings of citations that make its jurisdiction safe from contradiction. The devil and his consultants can quote scriptures, and with a bit more erudition, cite passages from the Talmud as well.

God Is Preeminently Political

The result of such column left, column right split thinking

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distorts the complexity and integrity of the biblical tradition that is as concerned with not favoring the poor as it is with not pleasing the rich (Leviticus 19:15).

Theological political gerrymandering fosters a partisan trivialization of important issues of social policy while caricaturing the adversary as either sclerotic Republicans or bleeding heart Democrats. For many, this “Crossfire” polarization engenders to a cynical dismissal of politics itself. “A plague on both your houses.” It encourages a spiritual isolationism that would separate the liturgical from political life and raises a *mechitzah* between the sanctuary and society.

Such a proposed apartheid of the sacred and the profane runs counter to the spirit of Judaism. God cannot be segregated. The God of the Bible, the prophets and the rabbis is not a Republican, Democrat or Libertarian. God is preeminently political. The God of history is deeply concerned with the way His children wield their power. The prophets are obsessed with the exploitation of the stranger, the fatherless, the poor, the afflicted.

A Jewish Third Ear

But if we are not to exclude the moral, political concerns from our Jewish religious agenda, how can we avoid turning the synagogue into a hiding place for left or right parochialism? What resources do I, as a religious Jew, draw upon to take my stand on issues such as immigration, health care, affirmative action, minority rights?

I confess that I hear all partisan rhetoric with a pre-political Jewish third ear. There are Jewish theological and moral convictions that have cultivated my political sensibilities, and Jewish historic memories that inform my political judgment.

When, for example, I hear today from all quarters a new “realism,” derogating racial talents and competencies, the strident sounds of xenophobia directed against both legal and illegal immigrants, the resentment against governmental intervention to alleviate the anguish of the submerged communities, I hear echoes of earlier theologies.

One hundred years ago, a powerful political philosophy emerged in this country and abroad headed by such celebrated philosophers as Herbert Spencer and William Graham Sumner. They justified their insistence that the government not interfere in matters of social policy but should follow the wisdom of nature. They found in Darwin’s notion of “natural selection” and “the survival of the fittest” scientific validation of their political libertarianism.

Parade of Social Darwinism

Learn from nature. “What happens when a sow has a recent runt in the litter?—She eats it. What happens to a mutant

baby chick?—the mother hen pecks it to death. But what do we do? We build asylums for imbeciles, hospitals for the maimed, institutionalize poor laws, offer medical attention. The result is a society drained of its wealth, a civilization grown effete left with the decadent, the weak, the poor.” The advice of the Social Darwinists is to live according to nature so that the effete will be naturally eliminated, the healthy survive and civilization prosper.

The issue is not science or social polity. In the contemporary forms of Social Darwinism I find pantheistic paganism redivivus. That pagan pantheism, clothed in scientific garb, worships the power of nature. Here I recognize the ancient struggle of Judaism against the deification of nature, power and instincts. In Judaism the imitation of God contravenes the imitation of nature. Surely the tradition respects our animal biological ancestry, our instincts and impulses but it admonishes us not to adore them. It is the God of compassion, not nature “red in tooth and claw” that is to be emulated. That compassion demands transformation, not adulation.

More than abstract theology is involved. My *zayde* and *bubbe* are involved.

In the late 19th century, the voices of the social Darwinists like William Graham Sumner proclaimed that the new immigrants from Italy, Hungary and Russia were polluting our society, and especially the Jews, who came “as beaten men from beaten breeds...moral cripples their souls warped and dwarfed by iron circumstances...too cowardly to engage in violent crimes they concentrate on shrewdness.”

Today's Refugees

When I read today's allegations that the new waves of immigrants bring to these shores crime and violence, I hear the echo of the 1908 report of the New York Police Commissioner, Theodore Bingham, announcing that half the crimes in New York were committed by Russian Jewish immigrants. “Jews are fire bugs, burglars, pick pockets and robbers when they have the courage.” He is speaking of the generation of my grandfather and grandmother and of my uncles and aunts. I am not deaf to the parallels and analogies to my own life.

When refugee boats are turned back to Haiti or Cuba, I cannot get out of my head the 930 Jewish passengers on the boat from the hellish harbor of Hamburg, Germany to the haven of Havana that was turned back by the United States. I cannot forget that the passenger aboard the *St. Louis* formed a committee to prevent suicide.

The Jewish spiritual background is broader and deeper than liberal or democrat politics. Judaism will not determine how I will pull the lever. Of course, I know the arguments against food stamps and breakfast for school

children. “Where is the responsibility of the parents? Or the children? Should we feed them and create a culture of dependents?” But even after I vote, there remains the haunting matter of conscience; what is to become of the children who, as one of them explained, didn't eat breakfast this morning because it wasn't his turn?

Sacred Ends

I may vote to build more prisons and have more policemen and vote against the quota politics that discriminate against the whites. But there remains with me a matter of Jewish conscience: how to respond to the infant deaths among blacks that are twice as high and to the maternal deaths among blacks that are three times as high as with whites. “Compassion,” Camus wrote, “does not exclude punishment but it suspends the final condemnation.” It takes into mindful consideration the wretchedness of the common condition.

Beyond the liberal or conservative libelous labelling, Judaism and the synagogue have a duty to remind us that there is more than economic partisan political strategy to be considered before and after the vote. Torah is not a book with a political platform. The text cannot be opened up to find means, instruments and strategies. But Torah is a book of sacred ends. Whatever our partisan politics, the underlying spiritual question remains, whether we succumb to the wisdom of the Social Darwinists and turn our children back to the dark laws of the jungle or retain our hard-earned fidelity to the Jewish covenant of conscience.

The spiritual politics the synagogue should place on its agenda is not meant to win a vote or elect a candidate, but to prepare the Jewish heart and mind to raise those who are bowed down. □

When conscience is not enough

Michael Gottsegen

Harold Schulweis espouses the cause of a “Jewish political conscience” that could help us to discern what stand we are to take on issues of the day. Such a conscience would be a solid keel to keep us from being

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