

As the Jewish year winds to a close, we find ourselves on Shabbat mornings reading from the book of Deuteronomy, the last of the Torah's five books, containing the farewell addresses of Moses to the people of Israel and a legal code spanning some fifteen chapters that served as the foundation for much of later rabbinic law. At the end of this legal code, there is a section laying out the blessings and rewards for faithfulness to God and God's commandments and the punishments for disobedience and faithlessness – a detailed and grim catalogue of personal and national catastrophe. It has been noted that the threatened disasters run to four times the length of the promised rewards – 54 verses devoted to drought, famine, physical and mental affliction, military defeat and exile. Those commenting on this passage have remarked that in human psychology, averting the threat of negative consequences often functions as a more effective incentive than the promise of attaining positive reinforcement. Jewish tradition speaks of *ahavah*, the love of God, and *yirah*, the fear of God; while the former may be regarded as a higher level of spirituality, the latter might well be a more potent motive for many religionists.

This observation seems to me to offer a parallel to what often occurs in the political process. News media and opinion pollsters measure a candidate's ratings of approval and disapproval, and it is frequently the latter – the percentage of people who are dissatisfied with an incumbent's performance in office or who find a challenger's (or incumbent's) character, qualifications or policy positions lacking – that drives the choices that are made in the voting booth. Candidates are well aware of this and devote much of their oratory and their advertising budgets to highlighting their opponent's negatives. The message is not so much *ahavah* – love me and what I stand for as it is *yirah* – be afraid of my opponent.

Allow me to digress for a moment to note that attacks on each other by the candidates are not the only negatives in play during the current election cycle. A phenomenon that is troubling and disconcerting to many in the electorate is the emergence from the shadows of what is called the alt-right and its giving voice to nativist, anti-Semitic, and racist sentiments. In fairness, it should be noted that there is also what a columnist in the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* calls an alt-left, whose hatred of and hostility to Israel exceeds the bounds of legitimate criticism and crosses the line into anti-Semitism. Bigotry, stereotyping and scapegoating should have no place in our politics and are contrary to everything that our country stands for. Judaism teaches us respect for the *tzelem Elohim*, the image of God in which all of us, whatever our faith, our nationality or our

color, are created. We Jews know instinctively that, when someone expresses hatred or disdain for another based on their religious, racial or ethnic identity, we too are vulnerable. Beware of generalizations and of blanket statements that characterize all members of faith tradition *x* or ethnic group *y* in a negative light. We are all individuals and (expanding on Dr. King's famous words) deserve to be judged on the content of our character, not the color of our skin, the country of origin of our parents or grandparents, or the place we choose to worship.

Yes, it is legitimate to question someone's record in office or the soundness of the policies they advocate or to cast doubt on their character, their truthfulness, their experience or their qualifications. And it is not only proper but indeed mandatory that we be repelled by bigotry. A candidate's negatives should come under consideration, but drawing attention to these should not be the sole focus of our politics. Aspirants to office should also address the positive, should inform us of what the country they seek to serve and to lead means to them, and communicate to us their vision of America.

Like you, I have read a great deal over the past weeks and months about politics and elections; one article I came across recently spoke to me in a way that much of the analysis and partisan advocacy I've read did not. The writer touched on what is called civil religion and bemoaned what he felt was the disappearance of one particular aspect of it from our public life.

Civil religion is an idea popularized by sociologists in the 1960's. It refers to a secularized faith that serves to bind together a community despite differences among its members regarding religious belief or practice. Civil religion, like the various faith denominations that we conventionally designate as religions, has its symbols, images, and rituals and a shared narrative. American Jews have a civil religion that focuses on the remembrance of the Holocaust, support for Israel, assistance to endangered and threatened Jewish communities around the world, and maintenance of Jewish communal institutions, educational, cultural, and philanthropic. This civil religion is a binding force uniting almost all who identify as part of American Jewry, regardless of their degree of ritual observance or the nature of their religious beliefs. America has a civil religion with its symbols such as the flag, its shrines such as the White House, the national Capitol and the monuments to Washington and Lincoln, its rituals such as a Presidential inauguration, and its narratives such as the Revolution that won our independence from the British monarchy and the waves of immigration that created a nation *e*

*pluribus unum*, one out of many. Civil religion may on occasion invoke the Deity and beseech God's favor, but it generally avoids overtly sectarian references to the dogmas of any particular faith, which is why it is able to unite people of many different religious backgrounds. I think of the American Thanksgiving as the outstanding example of American civil religion (although we are losing some of its meaning to televised football and early-bird holiday shopping); when we participate in interfaith worship services to give thanks for our blessings, extend financial support to our local social service agencies, and donate to the Thanksgiving basket program (of which Temple Israel is now a co-sponsor) to assist the needy among us.

It is easy to deride civil religion. It can be shallow, lacking in the theological depth, in the spiritual discipline or the aesthetics of religions that hark back to antiquity. And it can easily veer off into idolatry, exalting the nation as an absolute above criticism rather than as a contingent good. And yet as I delved into the meaning of civil religion, I learned that it has both a priestly and a prophetic aspect, the former relating to the symbols, rituals, hymns and myths that I mentioned, the latter to a set of values that unites the people of the nation in all of their diversity. Clearly, it was the vanishing of civil religion in the prophetic sense to which the writer of the article was referring.

In the article he enumerated some of the values espoused by American civil religion – humility, a sense of community and of dedication to the common good, responsibility for oneself and to the community, obligation to a purpose in life beyond individual achievement and self-aggrandizement, accountability for one's actions either to a higher power or to one's vision of a better self, and recognition of the need to return some of the fruits of our good fortune for the benefit of others and for future generations. Through my interfaith activities I have come to know people from many different religious traditions, who live by these values and are inspired by their faith to put them into action. When I come together with them as fellow Americans, these same values are what we celebrate as part of our shared civil religion.

Humility is a fundamental religious virtue, rooted in the awareness that we humans are not God and that our knowledge, our perspective, our resources and our powers are limited. But it also is part of our civil religion, encompassing the recognition that the problems and challenges that face our society are complicated, of long-standing, and not always amenable to simple solutions. We need community to bring together people of good will and to foster cooperation in

confronting our challenges. Leadership is important, indeed crucial, but solving our problems and addressing our needs as a nation is beyond the capacity of any one individual and requires the efforts of the many working together. The American ethos has always had a sense of admiration for the self-made achiever, but deep down it recognizes that community, family, schools and mentors have had a role in the individual's success. Community provides us with amenities and services the individual would be hard-pressed to acquire on his own, but it also serves us as a source of emotional sustenance.

I don't believe that our civil religion can be characterized as either liberal or conservative. True, one position on our political spectrum stresses personal responsibility, volunteerism and private philanthropy while the other advocates a greater role for government. But valuing the importance of community and understanding empathy with others (and particularly with those who are suffering) to be the basis of an ethical life are qualities that transcend the individual's political loyalties. All of us comprehend that life is more than a competition between winners and losers, that we all share in the joys, the anxieties and vulnerabilities of the human condition and are made to depend on each other, and that demeaning a fellow person is morally offensive.

Let me return now to a specifically Jewish context and draw on the words of the High Holiday *Amidah* (actually the liturgy here is quoting from Isaiah): *vayigbah Adonai tzva 'ot bamishpat v'ha-el hakadosh nikdash bitzdakah*. "The Lord of hosts is exalted through justice and the holy God is sanctified through righteousness." *Mishpat*, justice, implies to me a dedication to fairness. *Tzedakah*, righteousness, has come to refer to charity, because generosity to those in need or distress in Judaism is simply doing what is right. Our *machzor* or holiday prayer book, incidentally, translates the term as lovingkindness. All of these concepts derived from our tradition and expressed in theological terms (God is exalted and God's holiness is made visible by our devotion to justice and lovingkindness) align with American civil religion and its values. We want people to be treated fairly, and we want to think of ourselves as a kind and generous people.

I look to those seeking office to share with us their vision of what kind of America they want us to be and their understanding of the values that are part and parcel of our civil religion. I love America for having given my grandparents opportunities they would not have had in Czarist

Russia where they were born and freedom from the discrimination and second-class status that they suffered there. I love America for its promise, its potential and its ideals, even if in our history the potential has not always been fulfilled and the ideals not always honored. And I would like to cast my vote out of *ahava*, love for the vision the candidate projects of an America embodying the noblest ideals of its civil religion.

As Jews rededicating ourselves at the commencement of a new year to the service of our Creator, may we do so not out of *yirah*, fear, but out of *ahava*, love for the One who gave us so much -life and health, sustenance both material and spiritual, knowledge and wisdom, and the blessings of love and friendship, family and community.

May you and yours be blessed with a *shannah tovah um'tukah*, a sweet and happy New Year.