Erev Rosh Hashanah Sermon – Why is Reform Judaism So Political?

As we enter the New Year, I felt it important to acknowledge the anxiety and stress many of us are feeling because of the state of politics in the Union today; so much so, that it is becoming increasingly difficult, untenable, if you will, to engage in dialogue with someone with whom you disagree. Given this, the question comes up again and again, is it even appropriate or helpful to talk politics in a congregational setting? Rest assured, I will not be speaking about parties or politicians, about impeachment or upcoming elections, or even about issues or platforms. Instead we'll be asking a larger and broader question: does Judaism and our understanding of Judaism have something to say about politics at all? Or to put it another way, is Judaism only supposed to be confined to the life of the spirit and stay out of the political arena entirely? This question, in many ways, gets at the heart of what it means to be Jewish.

In order to answer it we need to start with a little historical context. As a student was recently recalling a story to me. They were in history class at their high school, where they were asked to make a presentation on Judaism. The student, one of ours who is well-versed in our tradition, put together a power-point presentation. By all accounts, the presentation went well, except they had points taken off for one particular statement. The student said the foundational text for Judaism is the *Tanaach*. The teacher, not-Jewish said, no the foundational text is the Torah. Which is it? Is our most important work text the Torah or the *Tanaach*, or is it something else?

Before we answer this question, we'll start by defining our terms of what is Torah and what is *Tanaach*. Torah in its most specific understanding is the five books of Moses. It is also the sacred object that we have in the *Aron HaKodesh*, the holy ark behind me. It begins with *Beresheet* and concludes with the death of Moses. *Tanaach* on the other hand is the Torah plus the collection known as the *Neviim* or prophets. These include not just Isaiah, Jeremiah and

Ezekiel, but also the 12 minor prophets as well as some theological-historical writings like Joshua, Judges, and first and second kings, to name a few. Then there is the collection known as the *Ketuvim*, the writings, which contains the Psalms, Proverbs, the five *Megillot* (yes there are five) and some works we almost never study or read like Daniel and First and Second Chronicles. Torah plus Neviim plus Ketuvim forms an acronym: Tanaach, also referred to as the Hebrew Bible.

However, to further confuse the issue, the term Torah comes from the root *ya'rah*, meaning teaching or to teach. This is why a teacher in Hebrew is called a *morah* or a *moreh*. Therefore, Torah can also be a larger term referring both to the Torah *sheh b'yichtav*, the written Torah, referring to the entire *Tanaach* and the Torah *sheh b'al'peh*, the oral tradition.

The oral tradition is the rabbinic interpretive tradition. See everything we do today as Jews is based on the rabbis interpreting the Torah in order to make it doable and livable in a time after the destruction of the sacrificial cult. The Torah may tell us to build a sukkah, it's the rabbis who tell us what a sukkah is. The Torah may tell us to honor our parents, it's the rabbis who define this with practical ways to demonstrate and understand a nebulous term like honor. The Torah may tell us to observe Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, it was the rabbis who created the worship service out of the Levitical rites.

Thus, everything we do as Jews comes from this interpretative tradition. An example, occasionally a minister or priest will reach out to me because they want guidance in conducting a Passover seder. Why? Because they believe the Last Supper was a Seder and they want to connect it to the life and time of Jesus. There are many problems with this request, including cultural and religious appropriation. But ignoring that argument, there is also a historical problem. The seder as we know it, was modeled after the Roman festive meal. The four

questions and the four cups of wine was a rabbinic creation. In the year 33 in the common era, the seder did not exist yet. Back then, if you wished to observe Passover, you went to the Temple to make your Passover offering. What Jesus would have done would have looked nothing like what we started doing approximately 100 years after his death.

So, one point about Judaism is that it is an inherited interpretive tradition through the lens of rabbinic argumentation. In a way, our foundational text is more than Torah or *Tanaach*, it is this history of rabbinic interpretation.

Related to this, if you read through the literature, there is a great deal of disagreement amongst the rabbis as to how to go about doing Judaism. There are majority opinions. There are minority opinions, and there are even a few off-the-wall opinions. Thankfully all of these are recorded in collections like the Mishneh, the Babylonian Talmud and Palestinian Talmud, and many subsequent writings. This by the way, is a big reason why it takes us rabbis and cantors so long in seminary. We have to study two-thousand years of inherited interpretative tradition.

These rabbis were concerned with all aspects of life, not just religious observance. There are tractates devoted to how to conduct business, medical ethics, building codes, family life, intimacy, and so many more. This means our tradition was never simply focused on the life of the spirit alone. It was never just about worship and holiday observance. But is it also political? To answer this, we have to acknowledge that there is also a strong practice of, what we would refer to today as social justice or social activism in our tradition as well. We find it in Prophetic Judaism found in the teachings of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Amos and others. However, it is even older than that. In the Torah we find Abraham arguing with God over the fate of Sodom and Gemorrah. Moses teaches us "*tzedek, tzedek, tirdof*,[1] justice, justice, you shall

[1] Deuteronomy 16:18

pursue." Moses further reminds the Israelites not to subvert the rights of the poor, the widow, the stranger and the orphan in our midst.[2] Moses, in Deuteronomy, points this last one out over and over again to the Israelites as they are about to enter into the land of Canaan without him. The Israelites have a religious and moral obligation to do their very best to set up a just and righteous society, for that is what it means to be in a covenantal relationship with God. We are the chosen people, not chosen for suffering and persecution, though others have placed that mantle on us, lucky us. We are the chosen people to be a light unto the nations by how we are supposed to live and conduct ourselves.

This means we are a people based on an inherited tradition of establishing principles of justice and righteousness wherever we reside in all communities and at all times. This is perhaps part of the reason why we have been so despised throughout history. People don't like to be reminded of what they are doing wrong. It tends to build up resentment. Including in ourselves.

On Wednesday, many in the traditional world will be observing *Tzom Gedaliah*, the fast of Gedaliah. Don't worry if you haven't heard of it, again, I was not aware of it until rabbinic school. *Tzom Gedaliah* is one of six Jewish fast days spread out throughout the year. Four of them are day long fasts, while the other two, Tisha B'Av and Yom Kippur are twenty-five hour fasts. Five of the six are tied to historical events, while only Yom Kippur is connected purely to ritual and spiritual observance.

As the story goes according to Stephen Gabriel Rosenberg writing for JPost, "The Babylonians conquered Jerusalem in 597 BCE … (eventually) they ignored the royal family and appointed a civil servant, a functionary, to govern the ruined province.

His name was Gedaliah ben Ahikam ben Shaphan, ... Gedaliah worked hard to put life back into

[2] Deuteronomy 26:12 for example

some sort of order and it seems the people came out of hiding to join his court. They respected him – but not so the royal family. Their members, those who had not been deported, had fled to Transjordan. They had abandoned the people of Jerusalem to their plight, but now they came back to denounce Gedaliah. They could not tolerate a non-royal ruler and in their envy and jealousy they went so far as to murder him.

GEDALIAH HAD been warned but was too trusting to take precautions. The royal party, led by one Ishmael ben Netaniah, came with seven other officers and a bodyguard to Mizpah, where Gedaliah invited them to a banquet and assured them of his good intentions and the future benign policy of the Babylonians, whom he, Gedaliah, would confront in any necessary negotiations, so that the country could proceed in peace and quiet.

It happened on the first of Tishrei (Jeremiah 41:1), the day of the New Year, and the royal party came willingly from across the Jordan. They enjoyed Gedaliah's hospitality and then closed ranks and murdered him and his Babylonian guards, as well as massacring the civilian Judeans that had assembled at his court.

Not that the royalists had any chance of supplanting his rule, for there was no chance of the Babylonians appointing another king. It was on their part pure jealousy, spite and enmity, pride and punishment, that a commoner should have been appointed to govern Judea."[3]

According to subsequent interpretive traditions, this is why the Jews were forced into exile, because they had turned on each other. Sadly, it would not be the last time that a Jewish official was assassinated by a fellow Jew, and this is why I observed *Tzom Gedaliah* when I was living in Israel only a few years after the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin[4]. *Tzom Gedaliah* is not merely a religious fast, it is also a historical and political one as well.

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[3] https://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Op-Ed-Contributors/The-murder-of-Gedaliah-governor-of-Judea-325479

[4] November 4, 1995

In this way and in others, the prophets and later the rabbis tied our exile and the Diaspora directly to the failure of not only to uphold the spiritual life, but also the ethical life. Therefore, Judaism is not just a tradition of religious and spiritual observance, it is also a tradition of social justice. One cannot separate observance and the pursuit of justice from each other. To be a Jew means to do both. Failure to do one or the other leads to the diminishment of not only the individual but also the community.

Now we are going to skip ahead to the Haskalah, the Enlightenment period of the 18th century. I won't bore you with all of the historical details except simply to say that following the French Revolution of 1789, which itself was inspired by the American Revolution of 1776, that due to the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, wherever the French went, the tore down the walls of the ghettos. For the first time in a thousand plus years, Jews began to be able to live freely and openly as Jews.

Up until this point, all Jews were Orthodox. But they weren't called that because there was no such term. It was this first group of newly freed Jews who began to wrestle with what it meant to live as a Jew in the modern world. Thought leaders like Leopold Zunz and Rabbi Abraham Geiger began to establish in Germany "an attempt to reconcile Judaism with contemporary life and harmonize it with emerging currents in Western thought."[5]

They did not seek to create a movement, they sought to modernize a tradition that was not allowed to grow and flourish because of both internal and external pressures often related to shtetl and ghetto life.

Needless to say, these reformers and their myriad of changes like the return of instrumental music, the sermon in the vernacular, mixed seating, and diminished emphasis on halachic

[5] https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/reform-judaism/

observance really caught on in North America where the ideas and ideals of individual liberty were already quite prominent.

Or as My Jewish learning puts it, "…the vast body of ritual practice that had served to set Jews apart from the wider culture was de-emphasized in favor of universal ethics and the prophetic vision of justice and peace."[6]

This teaches us that Reform Judaism is not simply a break-away from traditional Judaism, it is an experimental attempt to create a Judaism fully in concert with modern life, where one can live, breathe and act as a Jews in the home and in the greater world. It is not an abandonment of ritual life, but a constant attempt to make ritual and spiritual life more meaningful and doable according to one's own personal practices and choices but with a particular emphasis not just on observance but also on justice.

It is this commitment to *tzedek*, the pursuit of justice, which is why Jews were involved in the fight for many issues of social justice especially in the 20th century. For example, they fought for worker's rights and worker safety in the 1910s. A major moment was the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire in Greenwich Village on March 25, 1911. 146 people died in the fire, the majority women and girls, many of whom were Jewish immigrants. Have you heard of Maud Nathan? Maud Nathan, who was the daughter of a prominent NY Sephardic family became a leader in Progressive Era reforms. As president of the NY Consumer League, she led efforts to improve working conditions for workingwomen in stores and factories.[7]

Jews were involved in the Women's Suffrage movement. "Rabbi Steven S. Wise, of the Free Synagogue in New York, brought his pro-suffrage convictions with him when he moved from Oregon in 1907, where suffrage had already been on the ballot in state referenda. A respected

[6] https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/reform-judaism/
[7] https://washingtonjewishweek.com/24490/when-jews-fought-for-suffrage/editorial-opinion/forum/

religious voice was particular important to suffragists, who were regularly denounced for undermining traditional values (which might sound familiar.) Steven Wise was not the only Reform Rabbi to speak up for suffrage – the Central Conference of American Rabbis voted for it in 1917 – but he was among the most active, and the best known."[8]

Jews were involved in the Civil Rights Movement. Many of you are familiar of the picture of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel marching with Martin Luther King Jr. What you may not know is that "The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were drafted in the conference room of Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism."[9]

And we fought for gay rights. One of our own, "Frank Kameny – "our Rosa Parks", according to one gay rights activist – was an early pioneer. Fired from his job with the Army Map Service in 1957 under the terms of President Eisenhower's executive order making "sexual perversion" grounds for dismissal for federal government employees, Mr Kameny refused to slip away quietly. Instead he attempted to sue the government. While the Supreme Court refused to hear his case, his appeal (which, despite his lack of legal training, he wrote himself) represented the first time a civil rights case based on sexual orientation had been pursued in the US courts. The government's discrimination against gays, he argued in his brief, represented "an anachronistic relic of the Stone Age carried over into the Space Age". The Constitution demanded equal treatment for all."[10]

These are just a few of the major social justice movements in our country's recent history that we Jews have been actively involved with. Or to put it another way, it is incumbent upon us to act,

[8] Ibid.
[9] https://rac.org/jews-and-civil-rights-movement
[10] https://www.thejc.com/lifestyle/features/rainbow-warriors-the-jews-who-fought-for-lgbt-rights-1.485871

based on our inherited religious tradition, in ways that bring greater justice to the world. Tikkun Olam, repairing the world is not just a moral imperative, it is also an act of religious observance.

To review: Judaism is an inherited interpretive tradition through the lens of rabbinic argumentation. It is not just a tradition of religious and spiritual observance; it is also a tradition of social justice. One cannot simply be separated from the other. Reform Judaism, in particular, took this and ran with it. We are not merely a cloistered community, but a people compelled to both pray and act in the world. As a result, it is incumbent upon us to act, based on our inherited religious tradition, in ways that bring greater justice to the world.

This is what it means to be Jewish and this is what it means to be a proud Reform Jew. Each of you is going to choose which elements to emphasize in your own personal observance. Each of you has your own religious, moral, ethical and political convictions and will choose how to express them. And both of those are well within the boundaries of what it means to be Jewish.

We are a tradition that is both the life of the spirit and the life of deeds. One cannot be separated from the other. This is also why we spend a lot of time wrestling with our inherited tradition, for in the end, we are all struggling to understand what it is God wants from us in order to make the world a little more sacred, a little more holy. And the only way we can do this is by being in relationship with one another, by engaging in difficult conversations with each other and by understanding that we will hear things with which we may fundamentally disagree with.

Yes, we live in challenging times, but as our tradition compels and demands of us, we need to, to borrow a phrase from one of our own, “lean in,” and become more engaged.

Judaism is about religious observance; it is also about the politics of everyday life. Judaism is about keeping the holidays, and it is about engaging in acts of social justice. Judaism is about

teaching our children, and it is about empowering our children, sometimes even to save us from ourselves.

The life of the spirit and the life of the heart are one in the same. In Judaism we cannot separate them out and compartmentalize them. We are commanded to pray and to do. We are commanded to study and to act. We are commanded to live in ways that bring greater justice to the world so that all may one day be free. And this is the beauty and legacy of our inherited tradition. Or as Hillel put it, "that which is hateful to you, do not do unto others. All the rest is commentary."[11]

We've now heard the commentary, now let's get back to work on finding ways to express our Judaism in meaningful and impactful ways in this new year, this 5780, even if it means having and holding difficult and uncomfortable conversations.

For as we learned, our tradition is both about the spirit of the heart and the politics of the mind. What it is not about is party. Instead it can serve as a guide for helping us to uncover what is just and right, sacred and holy, in order to help guide us to build for a better today and for a better tomorrow in all areas of our lives: in our spirits, our souls, our families, our homes, our communities, our congregation, our nation, and our world. Wherever we go, whatever we say, and whatever we do, Judaism can and should be part of those journeys in this year and in all years. To do any less, would mean not fully expressing our authentic Jewish selves.

I cannot promise that 5780 will be filled with any less anxiety or uncertainty, especially given the rising level of antisemitism, which we'll speaking about on Yom Kippur. But what we do know, is that no matter the circumstances, it is incumbent upon us to be more engaged, and bring the best our tradition has to offer to fruition. Or as Hillel famously asked in Pirkei Avot, "If not now, when?"[12]

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[11] Babylonian Talmud Tractate Shabbat 31a

[12] Pirkei Avot 1:14

L’shana Tova,

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