

POLITICS AND THE PULPIT  
A Pre-Election Sermon

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1. Politics is in the air this week. It is in the annual American Show of the Year. It has its sordid aspects - the half-truths and innuendo which seem inevitable. ~~The~~ It has its genuinely humorous aspects - the display of righteous indignation, the brickbats, the half-serious assertions by every candidate that the Republic stands or falls on his election. And above all, it has its glorious aspects - the fact that it is a game open to all, the fact that ultimately it is the people in the whom power resides and that it is democracy which is our form of self-government.
2. However, it is not politics that we wish to speak about tonight, nor is it that which you came to hear in this synagogue. I want, rather, to define the attitude of this pulpit to a problem shared by religious leaders and those interested in government, by the clergy and the practitioners of politics in its nobler sense. And that is: to what extent, if any, is it permissible or advisable for the clergy to "mix" in politics. For that is what does occur - in any larger city than this you will find, every year at this time, that some clergyman of some faith has made some kind of statement about some political issue or personality. For a good number of years, in Zionist circles, it was common knowledge that Rabbi A, a renowned Zionist personality, was a strongly pro-Roosevelt backer and Rabbi B was - and today still is - an equally staunch Republican. This was assuredly not a clever way of assuring success either way by showing support for both parties. It was clearly a deeply ingrained political view by each of these two well-known public figures who happened to be Rabbis. In Springfield this year there has been some matter of Catholic criticism of the composition of an educational committee. Such examples can be multiplied many times. Well, what view should we take - as both religious Jews and loyal Americans?
3. First let me state unequivocally that a Rabbi's task is not to be a political commentator. If he is, he prostitutes his mission and converts his pulpit into a platform. It means that he neglects his sacred duties of being a teacher of Torah, and he leaves his position open to partisan political attack - which can sometimes be tragic. In addition, he is the spiritual guide of people who have many and diverse political opinions, and he therefore may not - IN HIS OFFICIAL POSITION - favor the one against the other. He has as much right to offer political opinions as religious dogma as the politician has to comment authoritatively on the religious problems of the day.
4. Yet, while this attitude is, I believe, incontrovertible and a wholesome one both as Jewish and as American practice, it seems that the so-called wall erected between "Church" and "State" has become overly high. The teachings of religion cover not only the relationships of Man and God, but also between Man and Man. And politics is part of that field. Furthermore, to deny the clergyman, at all times, the privilege of expressing critical opinion about a problem solely because the professional politicians reached it first, is to disenfranchise, strip the liberties, of a whole class of Americans. When you insist that a clergyman must become politically prophylactic, you do two things: you take away his rights as an individual American, and you tell him that his mission as a religious teacher is to be restricted to everything but practical life.
5. Well, then, how does one steer clear from both extremes - to keep within both frames - that of loyalty to the American form of democracy, and that of Judaism? We can do that, I believe, by limiting the clergy to three conditions in its intrusion upon the political scene.

6. First of these, is to limit the criticism of the pulpit to one avenue - and that is, that the intrusion should not be partisan, not diplomatic, not financial, but only one thing: moral. There and only there is a clergyman within his province. If he keeps within that framework, even if it be the highest levels of government, he is acting ~~with~~ in the best tradition of the Prophets of old.

I say the Prophets of old advisedly. The Hebrew Prophets were relentless in their criticism, and they spared no one from the lowliest water-carrier to the mightiest of tyrants. They sped their shafts to society, to the Temple, to government, wherever it was most deserved. But one thing guided them: the criticism was always moral. They spoke not in their own name, for they were not vain, and not in the name of a party or prince or official, for they were not Politicians. They spoke only in the name of ~~the~~ G-d and they demanded only morality, justice, mercy - for they were Prophets, NEVIIM.

\* When Isaiah ripped into the ruling classes of Ephraim, as the Northern Kingdom of Israel was known, he did not do it for the sake of any party. He was personally unaffiliated with any of the many factions that began to tear the Kingdom apart and ultimately destroy it. But neither did he ever hesitate to decry injustice in government just because government has some kind of exclusive immunity from moral reproach.

\* When Jeremiah blasted the Jewish Kingdom of his day for signing a treaty with Egypt, it was not out of ~~love~~ for Egypt or because of partisan necessities within the state. It was because Israel already had a treaty with Babylon, the enemy of Egypt, and he marshalled his energies against any kind of immorality and treachery whether it was personal or political.

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Listen to the mighty verses of an Isaiah as he intervenes in "politics" as he takes the princes of a nation to task - and then tell me if ~~this~~ kind of intervening in politics is right or wrong: (Chap. 3, 13-15): (quote).

\* And if you want the archetypic, the perfect example of a Rabbi's permissible and correct interference in ~~the~~ government, take the attempt by the world's first Prophet to find fault with the world's greatest governor. It is tomorrow's portion that we read of Abraham's approach to G-d in his attempt to save Sodom from the punishment G-d had warned was coming to it. I can think of many reasons Abraham might have had to influence G-d to save Sodom. Its ruination would adversely affect the entire economic life of the Near East. It would have a bad psychological effect on neighboring countries and cause violent inner struggles and upheavals in the attempt by neighbors to grab what was left of Sodom. His cousin Lot would lose his influence with neighboring potentates. But Abraham never spoke anything like that. He was not a politician and had no pretenses to being economist or psychologist. Instead he said CHALILAH LECHA .....LO YAASEH MISHPAT? THE MORALITY OF JUSTICE - that and that alone was his argument. And that kind of argument it is proper to direct even at the most Absolute Ruler of the Universe.

\* Told of Lubliner Rav, R. Meir Shapiro... Polish parliament... leftists... because Jews don't have rights... i.e. a Rabbi becomes a member of parliament, a Gaon intervenes - when it is a matter of preventing persecution, of securing the rights of minorities etc.

7. In conclusion, then, it is not in the province of the Rabbi to mingle in politics, but it is his sacred duty to teach the word of G-d even, as is so often the case, it is the prince, the leader and the administrator who need that teaching. And perhaps the greatest of all such teachings is the ringing declaration of faith by the Psalmist: TOV LACHASSOS.... It is better to seek refuge in the Lord than to trust in man; it is.... in princes.

