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Our Sacred Honor

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We are weeks from one of the most consequential elections of our lifetime.

It has been a campaign that has brought out – and reflected - the worst of us. I worry about the state of our country. Embedded in the sordid and X-rated facade is a deepening crisis and an intensifying polarization within the American body politic.

Our politics have coarsened, our aspirations corroded and our values corrupted. We are an embarrassment to ourselves and the world. It is almost surreal to consider where we are and how we got here.

Beyond all of the critical issues – the economy, race relations, climate change, security in an age of terrorism, widespread inhumanity causing millions of desperate refugees to wander the world, the reemergence of international tension not seen since the end of the Cold War – beyond even these issues – we should consider the core principles at stake in these elections.

I would like to make five points:

1. Political Involvement

Our synagogue does not endorse political candidates. We do, however, endorse policies. Policies determine national character. Jews are duty-bound to repair society.

“Whoever can prevent his household from doing wrong but does not, is punished for the wrongs of his household,” say the rabbis. “Whoever can prevent his neighbors from doing wrong and does not, is punished for the wrongs of his neighbors. Whoever can prevent the world from doing wrong and does not, is punished for the wrongs of the world.” (Shabbat 54b)

All who call for Church and Synagogue to “stay out of politics,” – by which they mean never speak about the social challenges of our times, never speak about the pain of this world, only about the bliss of the next world - condemn themselves to irrelevancy, and even worse, they render religion, itself, impotent:

Judaism is a religion of potency and protest, demanding of us: What have you done today to promote human dignity; to alleviate humiliation; to ensure fairness; to diminish, if only a little, the human tendency towards arrogance?

We speculate about the hereafter, but the here and now is our primary concern. We do not seek escape from the secular world. We *en-sacred* the secular; we sanctify daily life. We are

obligated - we do not have a choice – to speak about, and act upon, the moral challenges of our times.

We are summoned to fairness and human dignity. This is our calling. It is what we mean by the prophetic voice. Prophets spoke truth to power. Their truth was that collective morality was the linchpin of national security; that all the weapons in the world would not protect the nation if social immoralities were rampant. Prophets did not predict the future. They were not soothsayers. They cautioned that without changing our ways, this is how the future may unfold.

“In forty days, Nineveh will be destroyed,” Jonah proclaims. Nineveh was not destroyed. It saddened Jonah that the prophecy did not materialize. He considered himself a failure. But he misunderstood the prophetic role. It was not to predict the destruction of Nineveh. It was to warn that the survival of Nineveh depended on its moral character. The salvation of Nineveh was Jonah’s highest achievement, not his lowest failure. It teaches that our efforts make a difference. We can challenge amoral authority with the authority of a moral challenge.

2. America is a Moral Statement

Our founders knew this.

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

Fundamentally, America is a moral claim. We are endowed by our Creator with the right to be free.

U'kraatem dror ba'aretz le'chol yoshveihah

“Sound the horn loud...on the Day of Atonement...sound the horn throughout the land...you shall proclaim liberty for all its inhabitants.”

Freedom is the will of God, a principle articulated in the Hebrew Bible and carved into the bell of American liberty. This is the genius of the American experiment. America is not only a place, or a political and economic arrangement. America is an idea: an idea rooted in moral claims.

Personal liberty and individual rights are sacred. *Betzelem Elohim bara oto zachar u'nekevah bara otam;*

And God created man and woman in God’s image. Each of us is equally endowed with God’s essence, and thus, equally entitled to human rights and dignity.

For the first time in recorded history, the birth of our nation set the individual free. It would take decades longer to free all Americans, and we are still far from our full potential. But from the

beginning America insisted that governments are instituted to secure individual rights. Government serves the individual not the individual the government.

3. America is about more than personal rights

The image of our times is the “selfie.” Tourists are annoying to New Yorkers anyway, but there is something unnerving about these visitors filling the crowded streets, their selfie sticks seizing every available inch of pedestrian space. Oblivious to every moving thing, the camera pole competes with us in parks, restaurants, shops, theatres and museums. Every experience can be improved by inserting ourselves into the picture. We need to be in Van Gough’s wheat field. Its haunting emptiness is enhanced by our smiling image. The worship of the self never ends.

We have fought hard for this right to ignore everyone. But our founders knew that we cannot win or keep the right to be left alone while remaining poles apart. Others must be in the picture as well. It is why Thomas Jefferson ended his master work with less-remembered but equally important words: “We mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.”

Honor is the last word of the Declaration of Independence; the last word of what it means to be an American. Honor is a moral, not a legal term.

Rights are about constitutional law. Honor is about our moral constitution. Rights are naturally endowed. Honor is willed. Rights inhere automatically. Honor is bred. Rights are an entitlement irrespective of character. Honor is a choice that reflects character. Rights are about the self. Honor is about others. Rights are protected from without. Honor is produced from within.

Honor cannot be legislated. Not everything can be constitutionally protected. We can be dishonorable without breaking the law. We can take improper advantage of people without breaking the law. We can mislead people without breaking the law. We can be cold and arrogant, cruel and selfish without breaking the law. The commentator Nachmanides – Ramban – pointed out that someone who observes only the letter of the law can easily become a scoundrel with the permission of the law. It is possible to stiff your employees legally.

A nation of dishonorable men and women will never be free. “Only a virtuous people are capable of freedom,” wrote Benjamin Franklin. “As nations become more corrupt and vicious, they have more need of masters.” There may be nothing unconstitutional in ridiculing others’ disabilities, humiliating minorities in public, bald-face lying and dissembling, corrupting and corroding public discourse, but it is dishonorable, and we cannot long sustain the American dream this way. We have pledged to each other our sacred honor.

Dishonorable politics that disses, dismisses and disdains decency is un-American. It is why those words: “Have you no sense of decency sir,” uttered by Joseph Welch to Senator McCarthy, were a turning point in American history. Smears, false accusations, guilt by association, rhetorical bullying, physical intimidation and other forms of dishonorable behavior played out on the national stage are un-American.

This campaign proves that we cannot only be selfies - islands entirely unto ourselves. We may be comfortable, but tens of millions of Americans are not. They are economically insecure. They have not had a raise in a generation. They fear that they will not be as well off as their parents, and their children will be worse off than they. They are angry. They want solutions. Their justified disgust of political paralysis has led to the eruption of angry populism and angry populist politicians. Do the affluent think that they can live behind economic moats, protected from the despair of the struggling classes? Even from the perspective of simple self-interest, let alone moral urgency, America doesn't work that way. Either we are all secure or none are secure. The Hebrew prophets warned of this millennia ago.

The same is true of physical security. Americans are preoccupied by immigration in this age of terrorism. It is a thoroughly legitimate concern. The first duty of government is to protect the people. But we do not live in splendid isolation. We cannot close the window to the rest of the world and live secure behind walls and fences. If there is savagery abroad; if there are millions of refugees on the move, sooner or later they will wash upon free shores. Problems may start in the Middle East but they do not remain in the Middle East. Sooner or later they arrive in the Midwest.

Of course, every nation must control its borders. But to stand at the sea-washed gate and to disparage the homeless, deriding the tempest-tossed wretched refuse on the teeming shore, is not who we are. "You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the Land of Egypt." "You know the soul of a foreigner because you were foreigners in the Land of Egypt." The world shut its doors to you too. We Jews were on those boats once, the wretched refuse that no one wanted.

The hated cannot cure the hater. The other cannot purge fear of the other. The weak cannot confront the strong alone. We must take up their cause. "The prisoner cannot free himself from prison," say the Rabbis. As the struggle against anti-Semitism is not for Jews alone, and the fight against Islamophobia is not for Muslims alone, and the fight against racism is not for minorities alone, and the fight against economic inequality is not for the dispossessed alone, and the fight against misogyny is not for women alone – so the struggle to open the golden door is not for the tempest-tossed alone. We must take up their cause. We must do it for the sake of decency and honor. We must do it because Judaism demands it, and America means it.

4. Our Freedom is Always at Risk

We have been so successful; freedom comes to us so easily nowadays that we assume it to be the natural condition of society. We rarely think about the frailty of freedom: How hard it is to achieve and how quickly it can dissolve. We forget that most human beings who ever walked the face of the earth were not free. Most people today are not free.

We assume that we live at the end of history, when all the great ideological battles have been won. It is not so. We must be vigilant. Every generation must struggle anew. This is the lesson of the exodus, the reason we retell and reenact the story year in and year out. Liberty is always fragile. It is always at risk.

“What constitutes the bulwark of our liberty,” asked Abraham Lincoln. “It is not our frowning battlements, our bristling sea coasts, our army and our navy...All of these may be turned against us. Our reliance is in the love of liberty which God has planted in us. Our defense is in the spirit which prized liberty as the heritage of all.”

This spirit has weakened in us.

We have become soulless: mechanized, mechanical and mercenary. We are tweeted into moral atrophy, lulled into a false sense that the solution to any problem can be expressed in 140 characters. Stay tuned and I will tell you how ISIS can be defeated in my next tweet. We have been seduced into thinking that the first words are the best words. Few have time for thoughtful thoughts. The thinker has no time to think, and the reader has no time to read.

The more we advance technologically, the harder it is to remember our purpose. I love what technology provides: I am not a crusty geezer who laments how everything used to be better. Although I am not a geek I hire geeks who teach me, or at least try to teach me, how to get the most out of a screen – and what I can’t do, they do for me. I am not against technology. I am not coy about it. It has – and will continue – to make our lives immeasurably better. Just to contemplate what science, technology and medicine will gift to the human race by the end of the 21st century is to cause the heart to skip and to lament that we will not be around to see it.

But with every technological advance we lose something. I used to be an expert in navigation. In the military, I could find a sand dune in the middle of the desert in the dark of night, by reading the stars. There was something almost mystical about that. Today we plug in the coordinates and GPS takes us there. Navigation is a lost art. Who even takes maps nowadays on a road trip?

I am not complaining; I don’t take maps either. It is so much easier today. We drive straight to our hotel, rather than the old days when we had to circle the unknown streets of a foreign city for hours, testing the patience and drawing the ire of local drivers.

But we now conflate the speed of arrival with the purpose of the journey. What is our quest? This is the human question. No technology can answer this. We choose the destination. GPS only takes us to the place that we selected. It does not tell us why this destination and not another. The only navigation software that works to address human purpose is our moral positioning system that, by its nature, is soulful; un-mechanized, un-mechanical and un-mercenary.

Kindness cannot be measured by click-throughs. Google has not made us grateful. Facebook has not made us forgiving. Reddit has not made us righteous. Social media has not made us committed to social justice.

Science is morally neutral. We are no more honest than when Moses brought down the tablets millennia ago. In fact, I suspect that we are less honest, because the temptations are greater: technology has made it so much easier to cheat. A hacker can break into our bank account

without leaving home. If he has not been taught that theft is wrong, the damage inflicted from such a corrupted soul could be many times worse than in the pre-technological age. What is the use of Kindle access to all the philosophies ever written if it does not kindle in us moral awareness?

Here is the irony: what was intended to advance human freedom often has the opposite result. We can read today practically every word ever written: the entire library of humanity in our pocket. It was supposed to make us smart.

So why are so many so dumb? With all of the scientific data at our disposal how do we explain such widespread science denial? We are still prone to magical thinking even if we now express it technologically to the thousands we euphemistically and a bit sadly call “friends.”

A blizzard of lies blinds us to the truth, making truth harder, not easier, to discern. While we always assumed that the solution to untruth is truth; that the solution to ignorance is enlightenment; that the solution to bad speech is good speech - what we have discovered is that technology has provided comfort, support and immense power to ignorance, immorality and lies.

We have been liberated to express ourselves with almost no limitation. But so have they. And they have not been freed of superstition or hate. Technology empowers intolerance. Terrorists use Twitter. The very science that propels us to gleaming new ages has also returned us to dark middle ages. Anti-Semites and haters of every kind use social media. How ridiculous it now seems to have hoped that the Holocaust would once and for all purge the human heart of hatred of Jews. The human creature does not change so quickly.

We are what we always were: admirable, good, kind, noble in reason, the beauty of the world, the pinnacle of all creation. And at the same time we are “most ignorant of what we are most assured,” our “glassy essence like an angry ape plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven as makes the angels weep.”

Liberty - the value that underpins advanced civilizations and facilitates scientific breakthrough; liberty that allows for art, music, culture, medicine, society – also empowers those who undermine liberty, who seek a Hobbsian world where there are “no arts, no letters, no society; and worst of all, continual fear of violent death; and the life of Man solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.”

The very technology that was intended to bring us closer, to unite us in common purpose, to create global virtual communities, also polarizes us. The explosion of websites offering every view under the sun has allowed us to pick and choose who we want to hear and we tune out everyone else. Often, it is not truth we pursue, but comfort, the false comfort of the echo chamber.

Even universities seem less dedicated to free expression and investigation. Increasingly, we view campuses as emotional safety zones. We seem to have forgotten that all breakthroughs in human thought begin as unpopular opinions that challenge the complacency of the prevailing orthodoxy.

The sad truth of the human condition is that while we have advanced spectacularly in the realm of science, we have advanced slowly in the realm of morals. The very failings that drove the Hebrew prophets to moral fulminations plague us today as well.

Our lack of moral progress means that we are constantly at risk of destruction. The very technology that liberated could destroy. We are the first human beings capable of self-imposed annihilation through scientifically engineered weapons of mass destruction or ecological catastrophe. Science gives with one hand and takes with the other. Our increasing reliance on technology has made us increasingly vulnerable to technology. Morality, not technology, is still the key to a peaceful world. It is still the bulwark of our liberty.

As President Roosevelt famously said a month after Pearl Harbor:

“Today we are faced with the pre-eminent fact that, if civilization is to survive, we must cultivate the science of human relationships – the ability of all peoples, of all kinds, to live together and work together in the same world, at peace.”

5. So: Who Should You Vote For?

There is a fascinating debate in the Talmud on the nature of leadership. According to one view, as the leader, so the generation. According to the other view, as the generation, so the leader. (Arakhin 17a)

In other words, one opinion proposes that the character of a generation is determined by its leadership – from the top down. This view asserts that leaders have a critical impact on the character of a society. Our civilization will be good or bad, moral or immoral; our policies will be decent or indecent - as a result of the character of those who lead us.

The other opinion proposes the opposite: it is the character of a generation that produces its leadership – from the bottom up. In other words, you get what you deserve. Good leaders are reflections of a good society, and bad leaders are the products of a society gone wrong.

Who are we? What is the evidence of our generation?

The Talmud, characteristically, never resolved the issue. It merely stated the two conflicting opinions. As the leader so the generation; as the generation so the leader – we have no resolution. Perhaps this is the wisest course of all. Maybe both statements are true; they are not contradictory at all, but complementary – two sides of the same coin. Or perhaps the debate is unresolved because there is no definitive answer. It all depends on the character of the leader and the character of the generation. Or maybe the real message of the Talmud is that it is in our power to determine the outcome. We all share in the responsibility. We all share the burdens of the solutions.

Every political choice we make is fundamentally a moral choice. Every election is a contest for the soul of the nation. Ultimately, politics is about conscience and character.

Vote for those who can inspire us to reach our highest potential. Vote for those who remind us to consider the good of others. Vote for those who seek justice, love, and mercy and who walk humbly; who encourage us to deal loyally and compassionately with each other. Vote for those who remind us of the stranger, the widow, the orphan, the suffering and those left behind. Vote for those who seek to soften our hard hearts. Vote for those who lift us up, rather than tear us down.

Vote for honor.

Let honor be your last word.