

A Tale of Two Elections

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By Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch

I have been reflecting about the American and Israeli elections of the past two weeks.

Whenever I speak about political developments, it is important for me to emphasize that while, like you, I have partisan opinions, I do not share them publicly because that is not my role. I am not a politician, and this pulpit is not a platform for partisan political pursuits. Such pursuits are appropriate — you should do them, but not me and not here. I am a religious leader, seeking to make sense — and to share with you my understanding — my understanding — of what God demands of us. What are our moral obligations to each other and to society?

That said, I have never shied away from engaging the political process because politics is how we determine policies — and policies reflect collective moral values. And collective morality is absolutely the business of religion. What kind of religion could maintain credibility lamenting the sufferings of the persecuted, but not caring about the policies that lead to suffering or the measures that can alleviate suffering? What kind of religion offers beds to the homeless, but is unconcerned about the policies that cause or exacerbate homelessness?

When it comes to politics, I view my role as holding politicians morally accountable for the support and promotion of rhetoric and policies that impact upon millions of people. And I am an equal opportunity critic. I have decried Trumpism — not because it's associated with part of the Republican party, but because I view the nastiness, the lies, the arrogance, the indecency, the culture of perpetual grievance, the cruelty, the insults, the hints and winks encouraging violence and conspiracy — I view these things to be contrary to Jewish values and to the best interests of American society and the Jewish community.

I have decried the anti-Zionism, the whitewashing of terrorism, the animosity towards Israel that is increasingly popular in the Progressive wing of the Democratic party — not because progressives are Democrats, but because I believe such views are contrary to Jewish values and to the best interests of American society and the Jewish community.

And I have repeatedly spoken of and warned about the intensifying Jew-hatred spreading across the country from both the right and the left — in the most conservative environments and the most progressive establishments.

If I look back at the last decade, my two central concerns about politics have been the integrity of the political system itself and the slouching towards extremism that has intensified both here and throughout the Western world, spanning all parts of the political spectrum.

Let me address these two points:

First, the Integrity of the Democratic System:

The most humbling thing about democracy is losing.

If we take politics seriously, if we view public policy and public service as important — even noble — endeavors, when we lose, it is not akin to losing a tennis match or a chess tournament. Often, we feel as if our future, our very way of life, is at risk. Our predominant feelings are disappointment, disillusionment, despair and even dread.

But losing is inherent in and necessary to democracy.

Ten weeks after VE Day — Victory in Europe Day — Winston Churchill interrupted his participation in the Potsdam Conference to return to London for the announcement of the election results. Most people assumed that Churchill would prevail. He had stood practically alone against Hitler. He won the War — the Lion of Britain.

Churchill wrote: “Just before dawn I woke suddenly with a sharp stab of almost physical pain... by noon it was clear [we had lost the elections].” Churchill’s wife Clementine said to him: “It may well be a blessing in disguise.” Winston replied: “At this moment it seems quite effectively disguised.”

One of the disguised blessings of losing a fair and free election is that it forces us to reassess, reevaluate, recommit and recharge. Why did the people favor my opponent? Why did they reject my character and worldview? And one presumes that this searing internal reassessment and reevaluation might have contributed to Churchill’s reelection six years after defeat.

Losing is also part of democracy. Knowing how to lose — recognizing that a healthy system will also result in my defeat — is at the heart of a free society. If we do not lose, we get one-party rule, which breeds an insufferable arrogance of power that will eventually corrode democratic institutions. Healthy institutions and healthy societies need intellectual and political pluralism. We need to open the window on our own convictions and let in the refreshing breezes of challenge and debate. It is one of the great urgencies of our times. We have become tribalized and silo-ized — interested in and exposed to only our own kind.

And since the peaceful transfer of power — the very lifeblood of democracy — depends upon acknowledging and accepting defeat, those who refuse to lose — who accept the results only if they win and if they lose it is ipso facto evidence of fraud and rigged elections — such people are exceedingly dangerous to our way of life.

And from that perspective, I breathed a small sigh of relief at the verdict of the American people. All too many election deniers were elected and reelected, but it was reassuring to me that in the key battleground states, no candidate who supported the Big Lie won. And claims of election fraud from those who lost races were blessedly minimum — which tells you something about how much they believed in the Big Lie in the first place. I say this not as a political partisan. In fact, I hope that one day, when the history of our times is written, the likes of Liz Cheney, Adam Kinzinger and a relative handful of their Republican colleagues will be hailed as American heroes — prophets of rebuke and messengers of redemption, who, like the prophets of old, were prepared to pay the heavy price of rejection and scorn for speaking truth.

Two, slouching towards extremism:

Israel did not have a problem of election denial.

The elections were conducted in accordance with the highest democratic standards. Over 70% of eligible Israelis voted — for the fifth time in three years. No one challenged the results. The losers readily conceded once the votes were in. There were no charges of cheating or fraud. There is no doubt that

there will be a peaceful transfer of power. In many ways, the Israeli elections reflected the strength and vibrancy of Israeli democracy.

And yet, democracy is not only the free and fair empowerment of the majority. It is also the protection of the minorities and the preservation of the rule of law. History is replete with democratically-elected governments that turned from democracy.

And while it is true that the popular vote was split fifty-fifty — almost to the last voter — between the parties of the outgoing government and what looks like the parties in the incoming government, nonetheless, due to some complicated features of Israel's parliamentary system — in Israeli terms, the incoming coalition scored a decisive victory.

And the results should be deeply concerning to all of us who love Israel and care about the well-being of the Jewish people.

The next government will likely include ultra-nationalists, ultra-Orthodox, and ultra-opponents of Reform and Conservative Jews, the LGBT community, and Israeli Arabs and Palestinians. These members of Knesset have an extreme — and even messianic — view of Judaism. One party's faction includes admirers and disciples of Meir Kahane, whose extremism led Israeli courts to ban him from sitting in the Knesset, and the United States listed Kahane's party as a terrorist group.

I understand why these forces gained strength in the elections. Like in America, some grievances are real. As crime is a real and legitimate concern in American politics — if people do not feel safe this sense of insecurity will show up in election results — so in Israel: security is always a central concern — and in the weeks leading up to the elections, there were many savage terrorist attacks on Israeli civilians — Jews, Christians and Muslims. Since the beginning of 2022, there have been over 2,200 terrorist-related incidents, claiming the lives of 26 Israelis. And Israelis are still traumatized by the eruption of violence between Jewish and Muslim citizens in towns and neighborhoods during the 2021 war with Hamas. That, more than any other factor, explains the rise of the ultra-nationalist parties. Just this week, there was a horrific and gruesome murder spree that killed three fathers of 11 children and wounded three others.

But while I understand why these unsavory actors were strengthened, it is not good news for Israel or for world Jewry. They seek to change the very character of the country. They want a state governed by Jewish law — as interpreted exclusively by them. They promise legislation to weaken Israel's highly regarded and internationally recognized judicial system — democracy's central check on parliamentary power. Many of these members of Knesset are arrogant, uncivil, and use the most pernicious, ugly language to describe those with whom they disagree, both Jewish and non-Jewish.

They represent a kind of Judaism that is out of the mainstream. The Sages believed in moderation. They knew all about our propensity towards extremism and warned against it. Talmudic rabbis blamed the destruction of the kingdom and the exile of the Jews that didn't end until the last century — they blamed the destruction of the kingdom not on the Romans who destroyed the kingdom, but on what they called "*sinat chinam*," baseless hatred among Jews,, extreme polarization and internal enmity. Maimonides taught "pursue the middle path" — *shvil ha-zahav* — the golden mean, the way of moderation. "We are commanded to walk in the middle ways," Maimonides wrote, "which are the good and right ways... This is called the way of God."

I want to be on the record, and to convey in the strongest possible way I know how, that the empowerment in key positions of these radical forces in the Israeli government has the potential not only to rip Israeli society apart — which is a matter for Israelis first and foremost — but will also cause

untold harm to Israel's reputation, interests and standing abroad. It will further corrode the relationship between Israel and world Jewry. What we are contending with now in terms of young American Jews turning away from Israel will be nothing in comparison to what we will see in the years ahead if they're not restrained.

Because here's the thing about extremism: it ultimately destroys that which it seeks to uphold. Victor Hugo wrote, "To be ultra is to go beyond. It is to attack the scepter in the name of the throne. It is to maltreat the thing you support. It is to be dissatisfied with snow, with the swan and with the lily in the name of whiteness. It is to be the partisan of things to the point of becoming their enemy. It is to be so very pro that you are con."

Let no one be confused or sanguine. In the end, the support that Israel receives in this country and throughout the West is based on shared democratic values. National interests play a role, of course. But fundamentally, it is about our common commitment to liberty, freedom, social justice, civil society, intellectual and political pluralism and tolerance of minorities that seals Israel's high standing in the West. There can be no Start-Up Nation if the nation does not stand up for toleration and moderation.

And preempting the angry letters and admonishment that I am sure to receive (and from some parts of the Jewish community that happens all the time): I want to emphasize my bona fides on Israel — they are impeccable. Unlike most ultra-Orthodox Jews, I am a Zionist — and devote my energies to the well-being of the Jewish people and its central accomplishment in our age: the state of Israel.

I have met incoming Prime Minister Netanyahu many times, usually around some crisis that ultra-Orthodox parties fomented to amend conversion laws and other laws affecting world Jewry — 90% of whom are not Orthodox. These encounters go back 25 years, when I first met Netanyahu on his first term in office in the late 90s. Looking back at these years, he has managed to hold off the most extreme forces of his coalition and minimized the damage they sought to do between Israel and world Jewry. He always took care to prevent a complete rupture with world Jewry. He was always open to meeting with delegations that I led and other leaders of the American Jewish community. At least he tried to say the right things — at least he paid lip service, saying the right things. And Netanyahu successfully prevented the most radical proposals, and our Reform movement in Israel continues to grow, and even receives some government funding now. Those of you traveling with us next month to Israel, you will see our synagogues firsthand and meet some of our rabbis and lay leaders.

For all of our sakes, I hope that Netanyahu will hold the line against the waves of troubling initiatives coming our ways in the years to come. And who knows? Perhaps he will persuade more moderate parties to enter his government now or at some point in the months to come. In any case, we — on this side of the ocean — will be watching and monitoring and doing our best to prevent the worst.

And this leads me to my final message:

In so many ways, America is a miracle. She's worth fighting for. In so many different ways, Israel is a miracle. She is worth fighting for. America is filled with good, decent people on both sides of the political spectrum. Israel is filled with good, decent people on both sides of the political spectrum. We need to make common cause with each other — we need to try. We are more united on more issues than we are led to believe.

The last decade has taught us that even the strongest and most developed countries, like America, require constant attention to their democratic fiber. Democracy is always fragile and in constant need of cultivation and strengthening — even in America. Israeli democracy is robust — a truly remarkable achievement given that most of its citizens came from non-democratic countries. But, like every other

democracy, it too is in constant need of attention and cultivation — and it is constantly potentially fragile.

We will never abandon Israel. We will continue to do our part to invest in those who reflect the best of Jewish values: the majority of Israelis who are tolerant, moderate, *rodfei shalom* (pursuers of peace), *ohavei Yisrael* (lovers of fellow Jews), and *ohavei ha-briyot* (lovers of all Mankind).