

## Politics and Religion 2

Delivered October 27, 2012 by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick

This morning I would like to continue our sermon series on Politics and Religion. First, a word about separation of Church and State. Last week Rabbi Arnow quoted Heschel who said, "We affirm separation of Church and State. We reject the separation of religion and the human condition." In other words, we don't want government, our elected officials, forcing religion on us. But, on the other hand, we know that religion and politics cannot and should not be totally divorced one from the other. Some of the most important reforms in government - most famously perhaps, the cause of civil rights, came from a religious tradition. It was a strong sense of religious conviction that brought about serious change. And what was true on a grand, national scale is true for us as individuals. The religious traditions that have shaped our conscience and helped make you into the person you are today should also shape our vote. So today I want to take one particular political issue and show how your Jewish conscience should inform your vote.

I want to take a topic that has been widely overlooked in the recent debates but is nonetheless important - and that is poverty. Most Americans define themselves as "middle class", and the poor don't tend to vote in large numbers, and so we have heard the phrase "middle class" a lot and "the poor" very little.

And I want to get into the specifics here, so let me say at the outset that we will assume that both Republicans and Democrats believe that poverty is indeed a problem; that members of both parties are sensitive to the needs of the poor. I don't want to argue that one party is more sensitive to the poor than the other in spite of stereotypes that exist. Instead I want to share some Jewish sources about poverty and the manner in which each party might address the issue and the implications for you if you affiliate with that political party.

One of the most important Jewish values that informs our approach to the poor is "B Tezelem Elohim" - the unique value of every individual, regardless of what they look like or how much money they have. And while this seems so obvious, it is in fact a very real problem today. From

the 1980's on, the discourse on welfare reform centered on urban, not rural poverty. Even though the majority of welfare recipients and the poor are white, media portrayals perpetuated a belief that poverty is a "black problem" brought on by an inferior work ethic and moral failings. Poverty was, and to a certain extent still is, seen as a self-inflicted wound. (Fact: The fact is that 1 in 7 Jewish households in Philadelphia is living below the poverty level!) Our Judaism should move us to push aside prejudice so that our Jewish values negate our all-too-human need to make value-judgments. Today we recognize the "working poor"; people who have a hard time making a living wage in the service industries even when they have a full time job. It is not so much a function of poor work ethic as it is a societal issue centered on what constitutes a living wage. Jewish values push us past prejudice. We should be looking for leaders who embody these values as well.

It is so easy, too easy, to be judgmental of the poor. Consider this text from the Talmudic period: "If a rich man says to a poor man, "Why don't you work and get food? Look at those hips, look at those legs! Look at that fat! Look at those lumps of flesh! (Come on, who hasn't thought just once that an overweight beggar should go on a diet and start looking for a job?!) The text continues... "Of one who speaks like that the Holy One says, "It is not enough that you have not given him anything of yours, but you must set the evil eye upon what I have given him?"

The text here has Gd rebuking the wealthy for judging the poor. By drawing attention to the poor person's weight (and of course the poor have a proclivity to weight problems because the cheapest foods are often the most caloric. Fresher, healthier foods are harder to come by since markets stay away from poorer neighborhoods)... by pointing out the excessive weight the rich man tempts the evil eye to attack the rich man's health. Still, it is not uncommon to assume that a person's physical appearance offers an accurate assessment of his financial needs. Judaism demands not simply that we give, but that we have empathy as well. So, if these traditions inform your Jewish world view then they should also influence your vote. It is wise to ask which candidate and which party more closely mirrors your Jewish values on this issue.

Finally, let us turn to the issue of tending to the needs of the poor. What is the better mechanism for addressing the needs of the poor, a strong central agency that addresses the issues systemically, or individuals who take the responsibility of caring for the poor upon themselves? Should we all contribute to one centralized program through taxes, or should that same money be retained by the citizenry who then take it upon themselves to provide for those in need?

There are Jewish sources to support both opinions. On one hand Jewish law demands a central authority, often called a "kuppah" that provides for those in need. Money was regularly collected for the "kuppah" and distributed systematically. On the other hand, the requirement for individuals to give tzedakah extends to giving on a one to one basis. Both paradigms exist side by side. However, if one favors the centralized form of giving, which seems to align more with the Democratic Party, then taxes must be paid willingly even though Jewish law still demands that we give as individuals. The challenge here is that you could/should end up giving more to the poor - your tax money plus what you give directly through charitable contributions. For those who favor what could be called the Republican approach, the onus is on the individual and so a more nuanced and hands-on approach to tzedakah would be required. In other words, the challenge for Republicans Jews is that they need to give away more of their income directly to those in need. The challenge for Democrats will be giving the required 10% of ones own income in addition to that which is funded centrally through taxes.

This challenge is a very real one and its implications need to be addressed thoughtfully. Indeed convincing studies that I have read very carefully do show that Republicans, as a whole, tend to give away a higher percentage of their earned income to charity than Democrats do. The reasoning is fairly straightforward: Democrats believe more of that responsibility rests on the shoulders of the government, while Republicans, knowing that they keep more of their earned income will then give more of it away.

As we draw closer to the presidential election we have to listen carefully to what is being said, as well as what is not being said. Our Jewish values and particularly our responsibility to help those who cannot help themselves must remain an important priority for all of us as Jews. Who

can better bring help and hope to those in need is your decision to make; but as Jews, compassion and caring for those in need should always be an important political priority.