

Religion and Politics 3

Delivered November 3, 2012 by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick

It is nice to have a day of celebration after a very trying week. I hope that you all weathered the storm well, and our thoughts and prayers are with those who are still dealing with the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy. We were very lucky in our house with just the power flickering on and off a bit. And so we had the TV on a lot, watching the news. On one hand, it was comforting to see good people helping one another, rescuing strangers, providing shelter for those in need. On the other hand, having our TV on was extremely frustrating and very depressing because it was raining - raining attack ads, and I for one am sick and tired of them! I have never seen so much negativity - candidates trying to pound each other into oblivion. Watching that was frustrating; it made me angry and sad and I believe that there is a heavy price to be paid for such cynicism, a toll that will be paid by our children. And I want to address this topic in the last of our three part sermon series on Religion and Politics.

Cynicism about government is what fuels all those negative attack ads. The people who fund and make those ads believe that they are giving us what we want; exposing politicians for the inept, ill informed, and insensitive people they really are. They are doing us a "favor" giving a cynical audience what they hunger for. And that stuff seeps in. So when our governor compliments the president; when the two are seen working together for the good of us all, we really know that Christie is just thinking about the next election. He wants to be president in 2016! How could it be otherwise? Who could be so naïve not to see the truth?! Well I, for one, take the man at his word - he was doing his best for the people of his State. You can agree or disagree with the man's politics, but I truly believe that our governor was doing his best for us and I thought he did a great job.

You know, it used to be that taking on the government and the political system was cool, kind of counter-culture. Being cynical about the government seemed like a bold and daring stance to take - you are, after all, taking on the powers that be. But now the opposite is true. Having faith in government and the political process is truly counter cultural today. If you try to defend government as a force for good in society, if

you respect politicians for their dedication to public service, you are seen as naïve, gullible and uninformed. It takes a certain amount of courage to say anything positive or hopeful about government and politics today because you risk seeming foolish, and no one wants to be played the fool. So being cynical is actually playing it safe. If you are totally pessimistic about the political system there is no danger of your friends making fun of you for being naïve. So, to be cynical about government is really just going along with the crowd and risking nothing. In today's world, what is daring is to not be so cynical about politics and government; to actually believe that by working through government we can make the world a better place.

The Talmud teaches us that we should pray for the government - real prayers, not like the one in Fiddler On the Roof. That's why we said one here today. We are taught that, when done right, government is a powerful source for good. It is through government that we address the most serious social, economic and environmental problems we face as a nation. We are told to pray for the government because government is one of the main ways to alleviate human suffering. It is government that allows us to right wrongs and create a more just society. We have become too cynical about government as a political enterprise and this makes us unable to see just how valuable this institution really is.

But defending the value of government is worth the risk.

The problem with being too cynical about our public institutions is that it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you insist on believing that government is irredeemably terrible - it will be. Cynicism can all too easily lead to apathy and unwillingness to participate in politics and government. Why bother to take part in a process you know is basically screwed up? Also, if you believe that all politicians are corrupt, you won't work to elect those good candidates who are truly dedicated to public service - which only makes it easier for the bad candidates to win office. And if you don't support government as a force for good in society, you actually weaken it. In fact, you inadvertently play into the hands of those who are trying to tear it down.

But the price we pay for such cynicism goes beyond bad government. It spills over into other areas of our lives as well. Cynicism eats away at our hearts and souls, and what is worse, we in turn model it for our children... It takes courage to be optimistic, to be hopeful, to know in your heart what is good and right in spite of what you are hearing all around you. Today it takes courage to not be cynical. Just like it takes courage to stand up to bullies, it takes courage to stand up to attack ads that pander to fear and selfishness and insecurity. There is no doubt in my mind that attack ads work - every political strategist will tell you - of course they do! But we Jews, above all others, should know that cynicism leads to suspicion, which leads to lies, which lead to bigotry and hatred - and we Jews have been on the receiving end of that far too often...