

“Singing in the Way-Back: How I Became a Jewish Faith-Based Voter”
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Does anyone remember the old station wagons of the 1970’s and 80’s...back in the day when people didn’t think so much about gas mileage, and before anyone had even heard the phrase “dependence on foreign oil”? In those days station wagons were enormous, hulking vehicles with simulated wood paneling. Maybe they got 10 miles to the gallon. The “way-back” was the huge payload section in the rear of the car—you could practically live back there—with backward facing seats, and if you had a really nice one, like a Caprice Classic—that was the first car I ever owned, an ‘84 Caprice Classic station wagon—I got a lot of dates in that car, let me tell ya’...But if you had a wagon like that, the back window would even roll down! As a kid, I used to sit in the way-back of my grandparents’ station wagon, with the window down, and I remember sticking an American flag out the window and as it fluttered in the wind, my grandparents and I would sing that Tin Pan Alley song by George Cohan: *You’re a grand old flag, you’re a high-flying flag and forever in peace may you wave. You’re the emblem of the land I love, the home of the free and the brave...* Now the same grandparents who taught me that song, and taught me to be a proud American—they took me on my first trip to Washington DC— also exposed me to the richness of my Jewish heritage. Being an American and being a Jew were two sides of the same identity; and they taught me to love and cherish them both.

It’s funny to me that the conventional wisdom dictates that is impolite, improper to speak about religion or politics in polite company. Religion and politics, goes the thinking, are two lightning rods that can turn a lovely cocktail party into an all-out brawl; pleasant dinner conversation into a raging debate; friends into foes. Not only that, but we have been told that a strict wall of separation should be built between the realm of religion and that of political discourse. That religion is essentially a private matter, while politics is for the public square. Consider the story of when George Bush the elder was running for president in 1988. The elder Bush was a Navy fighter pilot who flew 58

combat missions in WWII. On one mission the torpedo bomber he was flying was shot down by the Japanese over the Pacific—for that he got the Distinguished Flying Cross. As a candidate for President, Bush senior was asked what he was thinking about, floating there in the water...hoping to be rescued. And he said, "Well, I was thinking about my family and God." And then the little politician thing clicked in his head and he realized he'd mentioned God, which was dangerous, so he added, "*And the separation of church and state!*" But at the risk of being impolite, I want to suggest to you on this holy day, even though you are all very polite company, that I do not agree with the conventional wisdom. I do not believe that faith should be sequestered within the walls of the synagogue; that religion has nothing to say, nothing to teach, nothing to impart to our culture or the most significant decisions that affect all of our lives. I refuse to believe that religion is only a matter of the heart...to grant that, is to grant that religion is essentially irrelevant to the world, and I refuse to grant that...and do you know why? First of all I would be unemployed. But it's really because I am a descendant of Moses. Moses is my spiritual teacher, and my political role model. Moses burst into the royal court of the most powerful political leader in the world, the Pharaoh of Egypt, and demanded justice and freedom for his people. That is the greatest example in human history of the religious impulse to change the world. And make no mistake about it, Moses put himself in that position, risked his life in that uninvited personal audience with the ruler of Egypt because he was religious. Moses wasn't a secular Jew. He wasn't acting on some generic ethical impulse—there was no Ancient Egyptian chapter of the ACLU at the time. He was there in that palace making those demands because he was *frum yid!* He was there demanding the freedom of his enslaved and brutalized people because of his overwhelming sense that God did not intend for human beings to treat each other in such dehumanizing ways. He came to that palace because of his relationship to God and what that relationship meant to him and what that relationship *demand*ed of him. And I've got news for you...the Torah depicts a God who is intimately involved in politics; a God who cares deeply about how we live in this world, how we construct our societies, and how we care for those who inhabit them. That's why Israelite kings were commanded to keep a *sefer Torah* nearby at all times—God's will was always to inform how they ruled! God in the Torah is concerned not only with our private spirituality but what being a believer

in Him requires of us. A reading of any of the books of the prophets—you pick, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Amos, Habbakuk (when was the last time you read Habbakuk?!?) demonstrates that these deeply religious people were constantly agitating those in power to be more compassionate, more just, and more genuine in their stewardship of society.

Perhaps the reason that it is impolite to talk about religion in mixed company is that religion shines a light on the dark places in our society. Like Moses exposing Pharaoh in front of his courtiers and advisors as the ruthless keeper of slaves and abusive taskmaster that he was. The voice of the prophets might make us uncomfortable, it might indeed make us question our priorities and decisions as a society and a nation...perhaps that's why comfortable people at comfortable cocktail parties prefer to avoid the subject altogether.

When the prophet Nathan, in 2 Samuel 12, presented himself before the great King David—you know the one about whom we sing *David Melech Yisrael Chai, Chai ve'kayam...That King David...* rather than condemning King David outright for his adulterous affair with Bathsheva and then arranging for her husband to be killed so that he could have her for himself, Nathan told the great king a parable about a rich man who had many flocks and a poor man who only had one lamb that he lovingly tended and cared for. When a traveler came to stay with the rich man, rather than take one of his many lambs to feed the traveler, he stole the one lamb of the poor man instead. When David responded in rage that the rich man deserved death Nathan responded *ATAH HA'ISH, you* are that man! *You* committed this very crime! It takes *chutzpah* to speak out and to push the powers that be to be better. But that is our job as religious people. That is our job as people who will say in these services 22 times the words *Avinu Malkeinu*. Twenty two times, we say that today! But what does it mean to say our Father our King? What does it mean to say that God has dominion over this world? Can it be that the Lord is King when in the richest country in the world, one in every six children lives below the poverty line? Can we genuinely sing *Adon Olam*, proclaiming God as Master of the Universe, when 1 billion people on this globe are forced to live on \$1 a day? What does it mean for us to say on page 170 that God is *El Orech Din*, the God of justice, when 4 million American families are hungry to the point where people in the

household are skipping meals? How dare we say *Adonai Malach Adonai Melech Adonai Yimloch*, God has, does, and will always reign supreme when 45 million Americans have no health insurance—including 8.4 million children, and 14 million have critical housing needs as housing prices soar, mortgages explode, banks collapse, and foreclosures decimate whole neighborhoods? These are not issues of political parties, they are human issues, and they are statistics that should be appalling no matter where you sit on the political spectrum. If we truly believe what we will say 22 times today, that God is King, and that we are not only here to pay lip service to those words in our *machzorim*, then we better believe that religion has something to say to the larger world.

Rabbi Marshall T. Meyer, an American Conservative rabbi who spent the 1960's in Argentina during that country's frightening military occupation, helping and hiding both Jews and non-Jews, searching for those who had disappeared, running underground railroads to help people escape the country, Rabbi Meyer wrote¹ that the most subversive book, the most feared book by the Argentine authorities was the Bible. As he went to visit terrified prisoners in Argentine jails, he could never get a Bible through the gates because it was deemed subversive literature by the military. Why is the Bible so subversive? Because it speaks in no uncertain terms about freeing the captive, caring for the widow and the orphan, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and proclaiming liberty throughout the land. Because of that, I, my friends, am a faith-based voter. Yes in this election and in every election, I enter the voting booth not only as a proud and patriotic American, but as a proud and patriotic American Jew! You don't have to be an evangelical Christian or a member of the Moral Majority to call yourself a "faith based voter." I think it's high time for all Jews to declare that we are Americans whose ideology and values and moral compass are informed by our Torah and our Prophets...by that subversive text that dictators and military juntas are deathly afraid of.

Religion does not belong to the right or to the left. Religious values are not the specific domain of Republicans or Democrats. For all of you who are inclined to read

¹ Isay, Jane, ed. You Are My Witness, *The Living Words of Rabbi Marshall T. Meyer*. St. Martin's Press, New York. 2004. Page 141.

some kind of endorsement in my message today and then gossip about it at your Rosh Hashanah lunches—forget about it. I am reminded of the counsel of Rabban Gamliel, the first Century Jewish leader, in Pirkei Avot who says, *Heivu zehirin be'reshut*, Be wary of the authorities!² Don't get too close to either side, to any political camp Rabban Gamliel taught. That same Mishnah one chapter later in the name of Rabbi Chanina taught: *Hevei mitpaleil b'shlomah shel malchut...pray for the welfare of the government.*³ And I assert that these texts are not in conflict...If you are too close to power you can't have the best interests of that power in mind...Just ask Jack Abramoff! Jim Wallis wrote a best selling book called God's Politics,⁴ which he defined in this way: "God's politics is...never partisan or ideological. But it challenges everything about our politics. God's politics reminds us of the people our politics always neglects—the poor, the vulnerable, the left behind. God's politics challenges narrow national, ethnic, economic, or cultural self-interest, reminding us of a much wider world and the creative human diversity of all those made in the image of the creator. God's politics reminds us of the creation itself, a rich environment in which we are to be good stewards, not mere users, consumers, and exploiters. And God's politics pleads with us to resolve the inevitable conflicts among us, as much as is possible, without the terrible cost and consequences of war. God's politics always reminds us of the ancient prophetic prescription to 'choose life,' so that you and your children may live, and challenges all the selective moralities that would choose one set of lives and issues over another."

I am worried about America today. I went to a movie this summer with my little brother. My brother Max just graduated from Ohio University, he's 22 years old, looking for a job and just getting his life started. There we sat together in the theater as the lights went down...nowadays when you go to a theater you can count on 20 minutes of previews. Every single preview depicted death and destruction and apocalypse. How many previews are there typically, a half a dozen or more? Every one of them that day showed cities crumbling, people running in terror, ominous music, and tremendous, gratuitous violence. I sat there wondering what is my little brother thinking about this?

² Mishnah Avot: Chapter 2, Mishnah 3

³ Mishnah Avot: Chapter 3, Mishnah 2

⁴ Wallis, Jim. God's Politics. *Why the Right Gets it Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get it*. HaperOne, San Francisco, 2005.

How degrading to the soul this is, how disconcerting and disheartening to someone who is at the brink of a career, a life, and God-willing a family? What does this mean about the soul of America? Mick LaSalle, the film critic for the San Francisco Chronicle wrote: “Today’s movies occupy a zone completely different from anything that has gone before...

Today every life-affirming story not meant for children is set in the past... No one would believe anything positive set in the present. And dramatic love stories, which have always depended on the assumption that people are intrinsically worthwhile...are virtually nonexistent, a subject for independent cinema...

I thought the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, would change things, writes LaSalle, that movies and audiences would turn serious and that people would come together in a common understanding that life is worth living and things are worth doing. But I was way off. If anything, American movies are more cynical and despairing than before. Their implicit message: People are garbage and the world is terrifying.”⁵ God help my brother Max.

By the time the movie I actually paid to see came on the screen, I was so disturbed by the previews, I could barely concentrate on the movie. I fear that the soul of our nation is suffering, and that people of faith can help heal it. I’m not talking about people who blow themselves up while proclaiming God’s name; or people who commit despicable crimes concealed under the cloak of religious institutions; or people who want to teach creationism in our schools as if it were tantamount to science; or greasy, shiny, slimy television evangelists who enrich themselves more than they enrich the world—those people are the reason that Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris are selling so many books about Atheism--they are not the people of faith I am talking about. I am talking about religious people who read their Bibles as a text of justice and loving kindness. I’m talking about religious people who believe that God demands that we create a righteous society. I’m talking about religious people of many different faiths who believe in the ultimate dignity of this precious gift called our lives, and to affirming and protecting that dignity in every other person regardless of their race, creed, checkbook balance,

⁵ LaSalle, Mick. “Movies as Mirror on Society,” San Francisco Chronicle; Sunday, May 9, 2004.

profession, or the part of town they live in. I'm talking about religious people who are going to walk into that *kodesh ha'kodashim*, that holy cubicle called a voting booth in five weeks and are going to exercise this magnificent right to determine the course of our society, and who are going to get involved in shaping it and molding it to be better than it is today. I'm talking about people who don't just breeze past that line in the *Aleinu* prayer, *letakein olam bemalchut Shaddai*, that our job is to repair this world through the sovereignty of God. Our faith tells us that the real enemy of goodness in the world is indifference...To look at the plight of others and not to feel anything. Not to feel moved to act or to speak out, or for that matter, to vote...but instead to just go about our own business. Or in the way I hear many people describe their intentions in an election season, "I'm just going to vote my pocket book," "I'm going to support *my* issues." That is fundamentally un-Jewish! *Lo tuchal le'hitaleim*, says the Torah,⁶ but you must not be indifferent...when your neighbor needs your help, when your society demands your voice. We're talking about sins on these holidays, if there was ever a sin, it's a sin in Judaism to be indifferent.

A Jewish faith based voter can not be indifferent about a natural environment in peril when we are commanded to be the caretakers and stewards of our world. A Jewish faith based voter cannot be indifferent to poverty and homelessness when the Torah tells us repeatedly to care for the most vulnerable in our society. The Torah is obsessed, obsessed with the prevalence of poverty, and our response to it. A faith based American Jewish voter remembers that the most often repeated mitzvah in the Torah is "do not oppress the strangers in your midst for you were strangers in the land of Egypt!"⁷ Who are the strangers today? The undocumented immigrants who cut our grass, pick our fruit, work in our meatpacking plants, clean our houses? The single mother in the inner city who is pregnant without a father in sight? The elderly person on a fixed income who can't afford prescription medication? *Lo tuchal lehit'alem*—you must not be indifferent! A faith based voter cannot be indifferent to genocide, HIV/AIDS, the terrorism wracking the world thousands of miles away or the terrorism that takes place on American streets every night in the form of violence that festers because of despair and hopelessness. Why

⁶ Deuteronomy 22:3

⁷ Exodus 23:9 as an example

can't we tolerate this, American Jews? Because our Torah's overarching motif is *uvacharta va'chayim*: CHOOSE LIFE!⁸ A Jewish faith based voter cannot look dispassionately at the plight of America's urban schools which are crumbling with decay and substandard education when our Torah says *veshinantam le'vanecha*—that educating our children is a fundamental religious obligation.⁹ And in my personal opinion, a faith based voter who cares one inkling about human rights and dignities, who thinks freedom and civil liberties, equal rights for women, freedom of religion, and the right to speak openly in society are all sacred, that person—whether Jew or non-Jew—ought to be a supporter of the State of Israel, which is one of the freest, most democratic nations in the world. This is what being a faith based voter means to me: a kid who was raised to be a proud, enthusiastic American Jew; a kid who sat in the way-back of his grandparents' station wagon with his arm sticking out the window singing *You're a Grand O'l Flag*. I want political parties and candidates to court the Jewish vote not just for our numbers, but because they know that Jews are consistently on the side of justice and goodness for all of society. Because they know that Jews care not only about their own community but for the benefit of every community in our society. That's what it means to be a light unto the nations. That would really make the Jewish vote mean something significant.

One of the most meaningful things I did this past year was attending the citizenship ceremony for our beloved family babysitter Fela who has been a part of our life since we moved to Dallas. She has known two of my kids since birth and she is a very special part of our life. Originally from Mexico, she became eligible just recently to become a US citizen. We practiced a lot together for the exam...I would quiz her: How many members of Congress? 435. How many Senators? 100. How long is their term? 6 six years. I was proud to be there when she became a citizen at the Homeland Security Office off of Stemmons Freeway. I barely recognized her that day to tell you the truth—she was dressed to the nines, and clearly this was the most important day of her life, along with her wedding and the birth of her child. Her husband had to work that day, and her daughter was in school, so I was the only one there to witness this momentous occasion with her. I stood toward the back of the gallery as she and people from

⁸ Deuteronomy 30:19

⁹ Deuteronomy 6:7

numerous different countries of origin raised their right hands and became citizens of this great country. As I scanned the faces of the people in the room, I realized how much America meant opportunity and freedom and hope for each one of them. And I thought about how much America has meant to my people, to our ancestors who immigrated to this country a century ago for many of the same reasons, who came here from places of poverty, disease, war, and genocide. People of faith have a responsibility to this country that has protected the very freedom we have to speak openly about the values of our religious tradition and how they can help guide our nation. And I remind you, my friends, that it was people of faith, religious people—many of them Jews— who spearheaded abolition in Europe and America, who promoted women’s suffrage, fair labor laws, and who were top to bottom the entirety of the civil rights movement. The religious impulse has helped bring about positive and powerful change for our nation, and we still have a responsibility to be our nation’s conscience in these troubled times.

You know the rabbis calculated that there are four times as many verses in the Torah describing the building of the tabernacle as there are describing the creation of the world. That seems backwards...surely it is harder to create the world than to create a box with two poles attached to it. But what the rabbis explain is that it is in fact much easier for God to build a world that we can live in than for us to build a world that God can live in. You remember the promise God made to the Jewish people back in *Parashat Terumah*...build me a sanctuary *veshachanti betocham* and I will dwell among you.¹⁰ But building a sanctuary or a world that God can inhabit, a world in which we can truly say *Avinu Malkeinu*, God is truly the Ruler of this Realm, is our greatest challenge as a human society. But it is a holy challenge that people of faith like you and me must work on...not just in November, not just in an election year, but every month and every year as we try to make this country and this world worthy of God’s presence. May we all be strengthened in this great task.

¹⁰ Exodus 25:8

