

“Moral Might and Moral Height”

Baruch she amar v'hayah haolam. “Blessed is the One who spoke and the world came to be,” Jewish liturgy proclaim. Words create worlds. So it is no surprise that so much of the contention surrounding the words “moral values” is about the worlds these words reflect. Can moral values be secular? Aren't moral values the social justice commitments that motivate Jews and Christians to be involved in the civil rights and peace movements? Aren't moral values the biblical concerns for the poor, the hungry and the stranger? Or is the world created by our words, one in which moral values drives us not for, but against? Is that world the one in which “moral values” encodes opposition to abortion and same sex marriage?

The world created by the words of much of this election was one carefully framed by the right, and in the case of values, particularly by the religious right. Does the religious right have a monopoly on moral values? Those who have spoken insistently about moral values have shaped the lexicon. They have framed the discourse so thoroughly that words like “family values,” “morality,” “compassion,” “faith,” “patriotism” and even “freedom” have become verbal banners waved by the right. Simultaneously, words such as “liberal” and “activist” are now pejorative.

What can be done? Just as free speech advocates understand that the best response to hateful speech is more speech, so as Jim Wallis puts it, the answer “is not less religion but *better* religion.” Religious commitments cannot be reduced to sound bites. Like many of you, my deeply held values as a proud religious liberal emerge from an ancient and contemporary commitment to justice. Mine is a religious voice, schooled by the prophets, taught by generations calling out of the wilderness as they journeyed toward the Promised Land. The world I want my words to create is the vision of the prophet Amos (5:24), the dream of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., the prayer of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, --a passionate and enlightened world in which justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.

C.S. Lewis begins his book, A Grief Observed by confessing, “No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear.”ⁱ Our country has been gripped by grief and fear, by test and terror, by alarm and apprehension. In this, the red states and the blue states are united. Neither left nor right has a monopoly on fear. The rhetoric may be of hope and power—of freedom on the march—but the reaction is one of circling the wagons and contraction.

In this election, the religious right was ascendant. A steady, careful, decades long, grassroots activism has taken root. The religious right is now emboldened, convinced that their virulent passions are shared by “values voters”.

Fifteen years ago, a rabbinic colleague in Shreveport, Louisiana, fighting against creationism and a religiously based sexual abstinence curriculum in public school, warned, “They're in my town; they're coming to your town.” His town has become our

country. As an Anti-Defamation League director in Georgia recently commented, “There has been an increase in stealth evangelism. We’re seeing it everywhere.”ⁱⁱ

Before the election, liberals were riven over how to respond to the religious right. Many liberal religious leaders, strong advocates for the separation of church and state, followed their mother’s adage that “Two wrongs don’t make a right”, or, in this case, “Two sermons on the right don’t make one on the left”. Even though churches were handing over their rosters to the Republican Party and distributing flyers proclaiming that liberals would ban the Bible, religious leaders on the left felt constrained and censored themselves on the pulpit.

Our Northern California Jewish newspaper, the “j. weekly” had a pre-Rosh Hashanah cover story asking, “Should rabbis speak politically from the pulpit?” A similar story appeared in the Los Angeles Times in October. The lead described the travails of a rabbi who last year, preached prophetically about the state of the country. As a result, congregants were shouting in the sanctuary, furious members demanded that he be fired, the congregation battled over freedom of the pulpit all year long, with the detractors resigning in anger. This year, chastened, he intended to steer clear of politics. He wasn’t alone. Other rabbis admitted that they were sticking with safer themes. Since they felt powerless to influence politics on a grand scale, they would encourage people to make their lives more livable.

This Rosh Hashanah I preached a strong prophetic sermon. While my job was not threatened, even here, at Stanford, on this liberal campus, in the vast blueness of the Bay Area, I faced considerable pressure for having done so. The Jewish community is more frightened today than I have ever experienced it in my 22 years of my rabbinate.

I don’t know about freedom, but I do know that fear is on the march. For the religious right, fear has engendered what I call “Fortress Christianity”. I read that Christians feel persecuted. As a Jew, I find this difficult to understand. The United States is 83% Christian; churches dominate the landscape here at Stanford and in every American village and town. But, conservative evangelicals believe that the country is on the verge of self-destruction and when they proclaim this, they feel despised, misunderstood and discriminated against. In the film, “George W. Bush: Faith in the White House,” clips of Bush are interspersed with photos of school kids who had been punished for praying in the cafeteria. The symbolism suggests that for Bush to assert his Christianity in the face of the persecution and ridicule of this culture is to become Christ-like.ⁱⁱⁱ

Fortress Christianity is apparent in a warning that James Dobson of “Focus on the Family” issued to the White House: “...through prayer and the involvement of millions of evangelicals and mainline Protestants and Catholics, God has given us a reprieve. But I believe it is a short reprieve...conservatives [have] four years to pass an amendment banning same-sex marriage, to stop abortion and embryonic stem-cell research, and most of all to remake the Supreme Court.”^{iv}

In the face of this fear driven agenda, there is precious little sign of Christian love. Rather, we hear a great deal about evil, about violence, about war. Steven Waldman of beliefnet.com writes that “When President Bush says Al Qaeda is evil, he is, indirectly, talking to evangelicals about abortion, gay marriage, divorce, birth control, loud music, thongs and anything else they might think resulted from moral relativism. Moral clarity is essential for fighting not only terror but American cultural rot.”

While the religious right may believe that this is the moment and the momentum to launch a crusade, Michael Feingold of “The Village Voice” contends that they achieved their might at the expense of their soul. “...Make no mistake, this is the election in which American Christianity destroyed itself. Today the church is no longer a religion but a tacky political lobby, with an obsessive concentration on a minuscule number of social topics so irrelevant to questions of governance that they barely constitute political issues at all. [These]”moral values,” ... have almost nothing to do with the larger moral question of how one lives one's life, and everything to do with the fundamentally un-Christian and un-American idea of forcing others to live the way you believe they should...The whole meaning of America was predicated ... on the right of citizens to practice their own faith and conduct their lives as they saw fit; to interfere actively in others' lives, on the basis of "moral values" about which there is no agreement, is the most radical repudiation of constitutional values in our electoral history, reducing the word *conservative* to absurdity.”^v

That Christianity has been reduced to a political lobby was unwittingly in evidence on Election Day. At the Florida polls, busloads of children wore T-shirts that read--“I go to church to learn how to vote right.”

If Feinberg is correct, that the religious right's interpretation of “moral values” is fundamentally un-Christian and undemocratic, then why were so many--who were not themselves committed to this agenda-- persuaded? Again, I would argue, fear. Fear squared in that it conflates fear from within and fear from without. In his column, “Moral values vote is far from simple,” Tim Townsend elaborates, “There's a deep sense of anxiety for many Americans ... [that] we are losing our moral compass, losing our liberties, which are derived from God. When we fail to acknowledge God—removing ‘under God’ from the Pledge, banning the Ten Commandments from public buildings—we fall away from God's grace and protection... [After] Sept. 11...a residue of quiet fear lingers for most Americans, not just Christian conservatives. A constant feeling of near apocalyptic terror gives many voters a bigger—picture way of looking at the country—a way in which the worry of saving Social Security pales in comparison to the immediate and frightening drama of good vs. evil. This is what Bush was able to tap in to.... And it is at the heart of the moral values question in a much more significant way than any question about same-sex marriage or embryonic stem-cell research...the twin specters of domestic moral collapse and terrorism came together to haunt the Christian psyche.”^{vi}

It has been noticed that the targets of Sept. 11—New York, Washington and Pennsylvania--were not persuaded by this permuted fear. I would argue that this is because domestic moral collapse does not weigh as heavily on the psyches of those voters. Their moral values have accommodated the challenge of modernity without the need to build a fortress; they evidence a greater willingness to live with windows open wide toward the future.

We who are not afraid that the basic fabric of our lives is being torn asunder have a new religious task. We who are not afraid that the basic fabric of our lives is being torn asunder must provide hope for those in the fortress. We need to evangelize too—not against, but for—for the streams of our religious traditions that give birth to pluralism, to understanding, to tolerance, to bridge building, to justice, to peace. By our teaching, by our example, moral might can yield to moral height.

This week we celebrated Thanksgiving, a time of appreciation, blessing, and hope. Today begins Advent, a time of Christian anticipation of the birth of a redeemer, a time of light and two hope. In two weeks, Jews around the world will begin celebrating Chanukah. On the first night, one candle will be lit, just as our Advent candle is lit today, and another candle added each night until the entire chanukiah is full of light. The Talmudic rationale for starting with one light and adding another each night is “maalin bakodesh, ve’ain moridim.”—We increase in holiness, we do not decrease.” I believe that the moral values, which will endure, are those that increase light, those that increase love, those that increase justice and those that increase unity. Just as Advent and Chanukah come at the darkest time of the year, and one brave candle begins to shed light against a background of darkness, so at this dark time of fear, we must all light candles of hope, of reassurance, of challenge. The prophet Zachariah teaches of such moments, “lo bachayil, vlo bakoach, ci im ruchi” (Zachariah 4:6), “Not by might, not by power, but by spirit alone, shall we all live in peace.” May we who are thirsty for peace, thirsty for openness, thirsty for appreciation of difference, drink deeply of the spirit and bring light to those still in darkness. May you have an Advent season filled with light, with hope and with peace. Thank you.

ⁱ C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, p. 1.

ⁱⁱ Deborah Lauter, Regional Director, ADL in Georgia, “JTA November 9, 2004

ⁱⁱⁱ Steven Waldman, “On Belief”, http://www.beliefnet.com/story/152/story_15216.html

^{iv} David Kirkpatrick, “Some Bush Supporters Say They Anticipate a ‘Revolution’”, *New York Times*, Nov. 4, 2004

^v Michael Feingold, “Cast Away: Our Vanished Values”, *The Village Voice*, November 9, 2004

^{vi} Tim Townsend, “Moral Values Vote is Far From Simple,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, November 7, 2004