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"Are there times when a rabbi must express his or her political opinion from the pulpit, even if it is likely to spark controversy?"

Response by Rabbi Peter Schweitzer

I have always been of the opinion that congregations ought to be open communities where a range of views can be tolerated side by side. We don't all hold the same theological beliefs and we don't all subscribe to the same political opinions. In my community, while there may be a preponderance of atheists and agnostics, there are also those with abstract god-beliefs, albeit not ones that include personal prayer. Likewise, we may be mostly center-to-left in our politics, but we have members who sit on both sides of the aisle, not to mention within their own families.

Rabbis have a special opportunity – by virtue of their unique bully pulpit – to speak out on an array of topics from the mundane to the controversial. While I believe in the idea of a “free pulpit”, I don't think a rabbi's voice has much weight or credibility unless it is already bolstered by the overwhelming support of the community that has engaged his or her services. In this sense, rabbis really are hired to preach to the choir that is already persuaded. A congregation doesn't generally hire a leader for the purpose of sparking controversy. Excitement, maybe, but turmoil, no. More active participation, certainly. Deeper and more honest self-accounting, sure. But castigation and condemnation and taking highly unpopular positions, not at all.

I know that some rabbis seek out opportunities to be provocative. This is not my style. I prefer to examine issues on a meta-level. Why, for example, is such an issue so controversial? What is at stake? What makes it so difficult for opposing sides to hear each other? How do we resolve our differences if there is such a divide? Can we find common ground? And if not, how do we manage to co-exist?

Now these, in my mind, are the real provocative questions.