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Does Politics Belong on the Bima?

Response by Rabbi Peter Schweitzer

Rabbis have long championed the idea of “freedom of the pulpit” that entitles them to speak out on issues and to voice opinions that may not necessarily be popular among their members. However, while some communities welcome these pronouncements, others discourage them.

As an old joke goes, a rabbi was once hired for a new position and advised that he could talk about any subject he wanted as long as it wasn’t about politics or religion.

It’s also been said that to be a good rabbi one needs imagination. That is, one needs to imagine that somebody is paying attention to what you have to say. Naturally I’m glad when members listen to my ideas. I am equally gratified when I can learn from them and be guided by them.

These days, in fact, we all have access to the same news and op-ed writers. Rabbis cannot claim some special insight into the affairs of the world. If anything, our specialty is less about understanding the working of society than it is about understanding the working of individuals. Of course, we may make pronouncements on politics if we care to, and our synagogues can host public discussions on the issues, but we serve our members best when we address their concerns—their hopes and fear—as well as our visions and ideals.