



Yom Kippur 2008

“POLITICS, POLITICIANS, YOM KIPPUR, AND OURSELVES”
by **Rabbi Peter Schweitzer**

For several years now I've been providing the Humanistic Jewish response to a column in Moment Magazine called “Ask the Rabbi.” I've been asked about Judaism's view on life after death, on organ transplants, and, apropos my opening remarks, whether Jewish children should trick or treat – yes -- or be allowed to take part in Christmas caroling – also yes.

Earlier this summer, I was given a new assignment targeted for the current September/October issue. Some of you may have already seen it. The question was: Do political campaigns belong in the synagogue? Should synagogues host politicians as speakers? Should synagogues address issues rather than politicians? Should rabbis share their political beliefs with congregants? Do rabbis need to separate political issues from the politicians?

I was then reminded as usual that my response to these “probing and complex questions” had to be kept to under 200 words. That's barely enough space to say hello and goodbye.

But, undaunted, I forged ahead. Rabbis, I wrote, 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. Some communities welcome these pronouncements and are glad to hear, for example, that their rabbi has signed on to a group called Rabbis for Obama or Rabbis for McCain, if there were such a group. Needless to say, other congregations discourage a public endorsement not to mention a particular choice. 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. Unfortunately, this sentiment is actually quite real in some places.

These days, I went on to observe, we all have access to the same news, Op Ed writers, and favorite bloggers. Rabbis cannot claim some special insight into the affairs of the world. If anything, our specialty is less about understanding the working of society, not to mention the intricacies of the economy, than it is 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 fears – as well as our visions and ideals.

Even before I got the assignment from the magazine I had been anticipating sharing some thoughts about the upcoming election and the endless campaign leading up to it and how I might tie it into the purpose for our gathering today.

A few quick lessons came to mind:

First, an obvious cliché: tomorrow is another day. Sometimes it is hard to get back up again, but there are a lot of chances for new beginnings. Today's underdog often gets a new opportunity to come back. One ought to be realistic, of course, but just because you're down isn't a reason to give up. One can re-group, re-assess, improve the message. However, it doesn't give you an excuse to go all negative. Some voters may enjoy a mudfest, but most seem to prefer taking the high road.

Second, pandering doesn't work. We are not so dumb to only vote on one issue. Jews, to be more precise, don't just have the safety of Israel on our minds. In fact, many of us don't have Israel on our minds that much at all. We are preoccupied with many other matters and are constantly having to evaluate our priorities and juggle an array of competing obligations, needs and desires. If only it could be reduced to just one issue. In fact, picking a candidate to support is often a matter of compromise because rarely do we see eye-to-eye on all positions and policies, which gets even more complicated when we're not entirely sure what some of the positions are.

Third, listen well to the candidates. They actually will tell you the truth some of the time. Or give it off loud-and-clear in their body language, their squirming, their disdainful looks, their phumping around. In fact, it is as important to listen to what they don't say as to what they do say. Or to listen to what they said yesterday and consistently for years, and what they're suddenly saying differently today and claiming has been their view all along.

Fourth, we must have the confidence and tenacity to see when they are stretching the truth not to mention delivering up outright lies and deliberate distortions. They seem to think that they can wear us down with their assertions, if they just repeat them over and over again. The attacks and distractions are the worst. We need to keep our focus on what really matters and, I might add, show our support financially to the candidates and causes we believe in, which is what I have done personally and repeatedly. Of course, I know the board would probably prefer that I encourage you to make equally generous donations to the congregation, and that's a good thing too.

And fifth, it's impossible to get through a campaign without a verbal screw up unless, of course, you never give interviews or are allowed to go unscripted. What occurred to me is that politicians often get in serious trouble with the hasty remark, gaffe, slip of the tongue or off-hand comment, that would have been better left unsaid. Perhaps they may be exhausted and not thinking clearly, but that doesn't satisfy as an excuse. If anything, that's when they should be more vigilant about what they say. In the end, everything they say or do is carefully monitored and captured for instant replay on the news or Youtube.

By the way, a rabbi or minister feels equally watched by her or his members. Would that you only remembered our gems of wisdom, but more often it is the misspoken words that are recalled. Still, my toughest scrutinizer is my seven-year son who monitors me very closely and holds me totally accountable for my every utterance, often quoting me back chapter and verse exactly what I said.

But it isn't just that we hold our politicians to the highest standards of inhuman perfection, we also are critically aware of who they keep company with. Politicians are held responsible not only for their own utterances but also, as if they were ventriloquists, for those of their surrogates, spouses, and supporters. They are constantly expected to disavow all despicable remarks and disassociate themselves from anything that smacks of racism, prejudice, fanaticism or terrorism – though certain ministers who invite Jews for Jesus representatives into their church or perform exorcisms on witches are mostly given a pass.

Rather than a campaign of goals and intentions, it too often becomes a campaign of apologies and retractions. As Gail Collins put it earlier this year, given the number of these incidents, candidates ought to just offer a blanket rejection in advance for anything stupid said on their behalf.

That, in fact, is one of the messages connected to Yom Kippur and perhaps the politicians would do well to spend some time with us here today. Yom Kippur is, at its core, a day for admitting our mistakes: our false steps, our misdeeds, our hurtful utterances, our hasty remarks. One interpretation has it that we atone for the errors committed during the year just past. Another has it that we pre-emptively ask for forgiveness for the errors we are bound to commit in the year ahead.

Unfortunately, this kind of virtual sleight-of-hand doesn't really make our actual transgressions vanish. In fact, we're sure to accumulate them anew each year. What matters is whether we're working at doing better, at catching our errors and rectifying them quicker. The biggest hope is that the list can get smaller. Perfection is a faulty goal. Improved imperfection is worth striving for.

On the one hand, we want to hold our politicians extra-accountable for their words and their deeds, their promises and their actions, but we are cynical enough or realistic enough to know that they will likely disappoint us time and time again.

And so will we, the ones we love, and also potentially anybody with whom we interact. Realizing that we will fall short, perhaps the most important vow to adopt is to lighten up. On ourselves, on our partners, on our parents, on our children, and even on our politicians.

May the year to come be a year of forgiveness and acceptance – of others and ourselves.

May it be a year of personal improvement and growth – of self-regulation and personal oversight.

And, finally, may this year's returns yield a good harvest, both in the election booth and in our own lives.