

I want to issue a warning. I am about to use a word that I was told never to utter from the bima. Are you ready? Are sitting down? Okay, here goes: *politics*. There, I said it! *Politics*.

On Politics and Being Political:  
Jewish values and 'the real world'

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I want to clear up a misconception. The word "politics" is not derived from the ancient Greek word "poly," meaning 'many' and 'tics' of Western Germanic derivation meaning, 'little blood sucking insects.' Rather, politics comes from the ancient Greek *polis* regarding 'interaction of citizens of the city/state' with a concern for the common welfare. And using that definition, there is nothing we do here that is *not* political. When, on Yom Kippur afternoon our Torah teaches us that holiness is defined as ethical business practices and in judging all regardless of political, economic or social status as equals in the eyes of the law. When Isaiah calls out to us on Yom Kippur morning, in what is, to me, the most powerful statement of this day: that the true observance of Yom Kippur is in feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and uplifting those who have fallen. We are all being asked to engage in politics. What we read today is essentially the political platform of *our Jewish* party. And so it is that we come together at this time each year in order to be reminded of our party platform, to reestablish who we are, to reinforce what we stand for and to recommit ourselves to the guiding principles of the movement from which we may have strayed. So, as the designated leader of this neighborhood rally, I want to take a few moments to restate what I view as the three primary planks of our party platform. These are: to *see*, to *hear* and to *lift up*.

First, we must see each one of us: *b'tzelem Elohim*, each one of us, created in God's image. We began this convention a week ago Friday on a day that is designated as the birthday of Adam and Eve. Note that we begin *not* with a particularistic agenda, not by focusing on who *we* Jews are and our unique relationship with God, but rather with the universalistic idea that it is *everyone's* birthday. The implications are quite profound: We are not more Godly simply by being us than *they* are. Our ability to see the Divine in each other is an insistence upon common respect, care and tolerance, something that is sadly and dangerously disappearing from the public square. At moments when we find ourselves confronting those we are tempted to see as 'other,' we must pull out our party platform (Torah) and read the first principle: each one of us: *b'tzelem Elohim*.

Second, listen: *Sh'ma Yisrael, Adonai Eloheynu, Adonai Ehad!* Listen and hear the multi-linguaged, multi-cultured, multi-religious voice of God's unity. How can we expect to discern the Godliness in others if we are unwilling to *hear* their voice? Rabbi Maurice Eisendrath once described the *Shema* as the worlds' first civil rights program. In order to advance our party's ultimate, dare I say, 'messianic' goals, we must be willing to *hear* with open ears, open hearts and open minds.

Third, lifting up: "*B'chol dor v'dor chayav adam lirot et atzmo k'eelo hu yatza mi mitzrayim*" At all times, not just at Passover, we are obligated to see ourselves as the enslaved who were *lifted up* from Egypt. In our prayers, our celebrations, our rituals – we're practically enslaved by the reminder of our slavery! Why? To remind us, first and foremost, that our duty is to *this party* and its Leader who is responsible for our freedom. And that we who were *lifted up* from Egypt have a responsibility to pay it forward, as God's partners, *lifting up* all those still politically, economically or socially; physically, spiritually or emotionally enslaved. Slavery of any form is slavery and our *particular* responsibility, born out of our *particular* experience is to stand up to all Pharaohs, wherever we find them, and declare, "Listen, King Pharaoh. Let my people go!"

No political rally would be complete without a story that helps us to personalize these broad principles. So allow me to share with you a story told by the sages of the Talmud that exemplifies these three principles: seeing, hearing and lifting up. It is a story about a very pious and righteous blacksmith that I'll call Joseph. So righteous and devout a man was Joe the blacksmith that he had a personal relationship with Elijah the prophet. Yes, Elijah of Passover Seder and Brit Milah fame. Elijah, who is the symbol of the messianic age that might be achieved if we were all a bit more like our righteous friend Joseph. Elijah, who, in the Talmud, patrols the very highest limits of ethical behavior. Whenever Joseph had an issue or problem that he could not solve, the prophet would appear to him to offer his advice and counsel.

Joseph lived surrounded by neighbors who decided that they wanted to build a guardhouse across the entrance to their courtyard. Before proceeding, they consulted the rabbis and the codes of Jewish law to make sure that the building of such a gate was, indeed, appropriate and allowed. Indeed, it was. And so, it was somewhat surprising that, after the construction of the gatehouse, Elijah never again appeared to Joe. Why he never came again was as unclear to generations of scholars as it assuredly was to Joseph himself. Finally, one of the all time great rabbinic scholars; an original member the Rabbinic Hall of Fame, Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhak – better known simply by the nickname Rashi, cryptically suggested that "Elijah never again appeared to Joseph because *he could no longer hear the cry of the needy.*" It seems, Joe the blacksmith had violated some basic party principles. But, which ones?

The first violation is clear: he could no longer *hear the cries of the needy*. Strike one.

Secondly, if he could no longer hear, how could he see God's Divine image? Strike two.

But there is more. Close attention to Rashi's answer reveals that he also violated the third plank: to reach out a liberating hand to *lift up* the enslaved. With sensitive ears we can hear in Rashi's answer the story of our own liberation from Egypt. At the beginning of the story of the Exodus we are told that the Israelites *cried* to God and that God *heard* their cry. Just a few chapters later we find the Hebrew slaves, their supply of straw reduced but not the quota of bricks they must produce, *crying* out once again, this time in vain to an *unhearing* Pharaoh. Rashi's judgment of Joe uses the same words about *hearing cries*. Rashi suggests that our very pious and righteous blacksmith had made himself just a bit too Pharaoh like in limiting, even so slightly, his ability to *see*, to *hear*, and to *lift up* those crying out thereby lowering himself from the very highest regions of ethical behavior where Elijah hangs out. Strike three.

Now clearly, most of us don't live at that high level of righteousness, as evidenced by the fact that none of us has an ongoing personal relationship with Elijah. Joseph's story is a lesson in just how very hard it is to live that kind of highly principled life day to day. If it was hard for Joe, how much the more so for us? Even so, the story encourages us to be more conscious of the barriers that *may* keep us from seeing, hearing and lifting up those in need. In this sense, the physical barriers of the story are, of course, metaphoric. We know this, because it is made so clear that the building of a gatehouse is an accepted practice in Jewish law. Whatever walls we *do* build must not become barriers to living up to the essential principles of our Jewish party platform, principles meant ultimately to bring Elijah into our presence and along with him the messianic age.

Now party principles and paradigmatic stories are only important if they influence the conduct of our lives once outside these walls. And so, our social action committee, under the dedicated and inspiring leadership of our co-chairs Sarah Londer and Ken Bernstein has been working hard to implement a program in which these principles, "blue zone" principles to be sure, will be put into action. Our Yom Kippur afternoon study sessions will include a presentation by Sarah and Ken of this year's social action agenda. There you can learn more about our goals, how you might become involved, and how you might add your resources to our efforts.

Their presentation will be followed by TAS member Jeff Klein and Richard Weinroth, of M.E.N.D., introducing attendees to an organization dedicated to seeing, hearing and lifting up the needy in a way that Meets Each of their Needs with Dignity. Next Saturday morning, as part of our Social Action Synaplex, we will have the opportunity to tour M.E.N.D.s facility. All of this part of our

commitment to support the important work of M.E.N.D. in bringing healing to our community.

This is but one component of our Social Action agenda which will focus, in particular, on hunger and homelessness in our community. Following this Friday's Social Action Synaplex erev Shabbat & Sukkot service we will hear from representatives of L.A. Family Housing. As we celebrate the abundance of our blessings, we will hear from them about the stark realities of hunger and homelessness. Additionally, we will continue supporting the amazing work of SOVA, and learn of ways we can do even more to support their very sacred task.

Have you signed up to "Feed the Hungry?" On October 18, due to the determination of our own Stephanie Howard, TAS will lead a five valley effort to package 40,000 meals, to be distributed through SOVA to the needy in our community.

In the Los Angeles area there are approximately 8000 homeless families as well as approximately 8000 faith based organizations. Imagine L.A.'s mission is to connect one homeless family with one faith based organization in a unique attempt to eliminate homelessness in our city. Our social action committee is eager to participate in this program. All we require are a few individuals interested in guiding our adoption process. If that person is you please contact me.

It is so important to look out beyond our gates, but it is just as important to look hear the cry from within, offering a hand of support to those in our own family. Heeding the party platform our Mitzvah committee has added to their sacred task of supporting those in mourning, the mitzvah of *bikkur holim*, bringing words of healing and support to members of our TAS family in times of illness. In another effort to share blessings we have added to our website a "need a job / have a job" page where members of the community can find and share resources. Finally, with a focus on the resilience of the soul our re-envisioned TAS High Program is providing the tools necessary for our teens navigate the difficult and challenging times that are part of each of our journeys through life. Watch for further resilience programming coming your way soon.

All of this is in addition to our ongoing efforts, our frequent blood drives, our ongoing SOVA collections, Fran Rosenfield's Gifts from the Heart reaching out at holiday time to needy children, and Jewish World Watch and the KNOCK foundation both seeking to extend the reach of justice and the loving arms of this community the oppressed in Africa.

This is an impressive and wide ranging social justice agenda through which we enact the principles of recognizing Divine image in all, *listening* to hear God's unity in all voices and *lifting up* all who are enslaved. I know that both the social action and mitzvah committees would welcome your participation and

involvement in their sacred service. Contact information is located on the Social Action handout you received upon entering the sanctuary.

You see, *politics* is not such a dirty word after all. Indeed, if we are going to live in community we have no choice but to be political. In a televised interview just this morning President Clinton remarked, “Even if you’re never in political office – you have political responsibilities. You can make your [community] better and stronger.” So, it is all a matter of how we choose to make use of the political tools we have been handed: as we are reminded on this day, we can choose curse and death by building up walls that block our vision, muffle the cries and obstruct our ability to reach out, or, we can choose blessing and life, expanding the boundaries of our ‘blue zone’ tearing down the barriers that separate us that we might see God’s image in each other eyes, *hear* God’s unity in each others voice, and together *lift up* and liberate all that enslaves humanity.

Speaking for myself, I choose life.