

D'var Torah

SINAI TEMPLE, SPRINGFIELD

SHABBAT EVENING, 29 JULY 2016

Thoughts on the Election Process

As I was sitting in front of the TV this week and last watching the conventions, I kept hearing the words of Shemaya and Avtalyon, our early sages, “Don’t get yourself too fully involved in the process of government.”¹ Huh? Was this what I was doing? Was this what the thousands of people who were at the conventions doing? Was this what the millions of the people who were watching the conventions on TV doing?

So what about getting us a leader, Shemaya and Avtalyon? Is this what you’re warning us against?

Don’t be alarmed, folks. I’m not going to endorse a political candidate from the *bimah*. The Republican call for its repeal notwithstanding (and only once in the last 60 years has the IRS tried for enforcement), I am fully aware of the official position of the IRS, that is, this, the so-called Johnson amendment that was passed without debate: “All Section 501(c)(3) organizations are absolutely prohibited from directly or indirectly participating in, or intervening in, any political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for elective office. Violating this prohibition may result in denial or revocation of tax-exempt status and the imposition of certain excise taxes.”

On the other hand, what I have in mind – and I am going to speak about getting involved in the process of electing the next president -- isn’t about endorsing. So why then do I talk from the *bimah* about what I am going to talk about? Because choosing our next leader is very much, just as it has always been, a serious Jewish concern.

We see that even in this week’s parashah, Pinchas. There, after being told that his leadership of Israel is soon going to end, Moses says to God, “[Okay, then] let the Eternal One, the God of spirits of all flesh, appoint a person over the congregation who will go forth before them and come before them, who will lead them out and bring them in, so that the congregation of the Eternal One will not be like sheep without a shepherd.”²

Joshua, the text tells us, is named as that chosen leader, and while he was marked for and trained for the position from early on – or at least that’s how the Torah portrays it – and while the people had no say in who their leader was going to be, the fact is that an “election” didn’t just happen. In Biblical times there was a process, just as today, here, there is, albeit quite a different one, a process.

¹ Avot 1:10.

² Numbers 27:16f.

Process. I want to share something from my childhood. I grew up in a three-generational home. In our six-room apartment were my sister and I, and our parents and our maternal grandparents, *alei hem hashalom*. Though both grandparents were European-born, English was the lingua franca of our home (though the language was switched to "Jewish" - which was what the language, Yiddish, was called by us - when my parents and grandparents didn't want my sister and me to know what they were saying; probably some of you had the same experience).

Now I spent a lot of time with my grandmother, often sitting by her for hours on end as she, though almost blind from diabetic retinopathy, would sit sewing, or sit crocheting strips made from old rags and discarded clothing.

"Grandma," I asked her so many times, "Tell me about the Old Country."

"You shouldn't know from such things," she would answer.

"So how come the family came over here?"

"To get away from the 'knock at the door in the middle of the night,'" she'd always tell me.

It wasn't until years later, after Grandma died, that I figured out what the "knock at the door in the middle of the night" was. It wasn't just a child being afraid of the dark. It was fear of what "they" might come and do to "us." At any time. Without warning.

Well, what Grandma perceived as the safety of this country was something that made her a super flag-waver. No, we didn't have a picture of FDR hanging in our house. And I heard from my Mom that, during the whole time of the War, since my Uncle Danny and my Cousin Max had been drafted, Grandma was petrified that an olive-drab military sedan would pull up to the apartment and bring with it "the bad news." But that notwithstanding, for my grandmother this still was the greatest country on earth.

And the part that she took most seriously of all was being able to vote.

Now as I said, Grandma was very visually challenged. So on voting day, my Mom accompanied her to the dark basement polling place a block away from where we lived and, because Grandma was legally though not totally blind, got to enter the voting booth with her.

Now the voting booth was candle-lit (I, a very young kid at the time, got to go in too, which is how I can relate this). And there were no voting machines back then. So Grandma, as everyone else then, voted on a paper ballot, and the "X" that would mark her choices had to be made in such a way that the cross of the "X" ended up inside the

box or the circle. Otherwise the vote wouldn't count. So, after Mom told her which box represented Grandma's choices, my Mom, gently resting her hand on Grandma's hand which was holding the pen, would guide it to the proper place so she could vote.

Though it would have been much easier, Grandma's not voting was unthinkable. Being able to vote, as she said many times, was *also* why they came here to this country.

That hasn't changed. And that's why we vote in secret. And that's how we can fully get involved in the government process and still follow the dictate of Shemaya and Avtalyon.

Should we be involved? Ted Cruz, a couple of weeks ago, took some pretty heavy, hefty (and gutsy) swipes at Donald Trump as he spoke at the Republican convention. My feelings about Ted Cruz aside, there was one particularly Jewish thing in what he said. It was in his three-word caveat, "Vote your conscience." The "your conscience" part is obvious. There's nothing particularly Jewish in that. The Jewish part was the first word, "Vote."

In the next months, we are, I'm sure, likely going to be bombarded with some very ugly rhetoric. I'm guessing it might be worse than anything we've ever heard before in a presidential election. And that might tempt us to walk away from it all and say, simply, "A pox on both of their houses. That, I suggest is something we dare not do. And to do it, meaning to leave the choosing process to others who will remain in it, is not what we Jews have ever done.

Yes, we've had our court Jews in the past who have, most of the time, represented our needs to the "authorities." But now *we* are the court Jews. All of us are. And walking away and leaving it all to the "others" is to guarantee that whoever we *don't* want to get elected likely will.

I didn't get to vote in a presidential election until I was 31 years old. The problem was that when I moved from Illinois to go to HUC in Cincinnati, the Illinois voting commission wouldn't let me vote now because, they said, I was no longer an Illinois resident. Ohio, on the other hand, said, "You might be living here, but you aren't an Ohio resident. Go vote in Illinois." Then I was ordained and immediately entered the army. While the army recognized my "home of record" as Ohio, Ohio had other ideas. So, the whole time, I was unenfranchised and couldn't vote. Finally, as a rabbi at my first post-army pulpit in Sharon, Pennsylvania, I was able to register. And you know what? The idea of my years-long trek to the polling place was such a curiosity, that when I came out of the polling place in Sharon in the presidential election of 1972, a

Sharon Herald reporter cum photographer was there waiting to be able to write up a big story on me that appeared in the paper next day.

I haven't missed voting at a presidential election since. And I've even already made arrangements to be able to vote absentee back in Salem. Because that's what my Grandma taught me to do. And that's what's Jewish.

May we all, difficult as it might get sometimes, remain part of the election process that, to paraphrase Torah, we might, after it's all over, continue to be able to live safely on the good land that indeed has been bequeathed unto us.

-- *Howard A. Kosovske*