

At the Crossroads

By Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch

America is at the crossroads.

Two roads now diverge. We cannot travel both. Knowing how way leads on to way, we shall never return to this place. Somewhere ages and ages hence, they shall be telling that two roads diverged in America.

For the sake of our country, for the sake of the world entire, may they say that we chose the right path — and that made all the difference.

“Imdu al drachim,” said Jeremiah — “stand at the crossroads... ask where is the good way... and choose that way... and you shall find rest for your souls.”

This Shabbat and next — I will devote my sermons to the elections. I do not speak as a partisan, although, like you, I have political views. In all my decades as a rabbi, I have never endorsed a political candidate or a specific party, nor has our congregation under my leadership. I have never lent my name to any public document that was partisan. Despite being bombarded with requests - I do not join groups such as “Rabbis for Biden,” or “Jews for Trump.” I have supported decisions of both Republican and Democratic administrations, and I have criticized both.

My role is to highlight the morality of policies within the context of Jewish values and teachings. There are real and substantial policy disagreements in our country — that have real and substantial impact on people’s lives. Every policy has moral ramifications, and morality is the business of religion. We are moral agents, seeking the welfare of the community. Our tradition insists that we speak truth to power, that we call out leaders who stray from the right path.

“Ata ha’ish” — “you are the guilty one” — Nathan, the prophet, indicted King David.

“You who detest justice and make crooked all that is straight...your fields and cities shall become heaps of ruin,” Micah warned.

What I am about to say might strike some of you as partisan. I do not intend it that way. Unlike many in our severely polarized country — I respect and honor differences. We should not be afraid of disagreement. To the contrary – debate strengthens democracy. We depend on it. I reject cancel culture. I force myself to ask: “Where is the person coming from? What is bothering her? Why does he believe what he believes?”

The Jewish community is diverse politically and our synagogue is no different. We have Republicans here. We have Democrats here. We have Independents here. It makes us stronger and better. I grant to each of you — and to every person joining online — the right to disagree with and criticize me. I am sure you will.

On the issues that confront us in the elections — most of us, by now, are locked into our positions. There is little that anyone can say that will change minds. So why speak at all? As people always say to rabbis — “just stick to religion, rabbi” - as if Judaism looks kindly on a communal leader who speaks only of God in heaven, and never about bringing heaven to earth.

I never hear from people who agree with me that I should just stick to religion. Only those who disagree resent what they contend is political. If they agree — it is not political — it is standing up for principle. Benjamin Disraeli's observation comes to mind: "I find that an agreeable person is a person who agrees with me."

So why speak at all?

Three reasons:

First: whoever has a platform must use it, especially in moments of peril for the community.

Second: public speaking is not only an exercise in persuasion. It is also about giving strength to those who already agree with you. It is to remind them that they are not alone. It is to fortify them, to give them courage — not only to nod in agreement, but to march — to take action, to inspire them to believe that they personally can make a difference.

Third: somewhere ages and ages hence, when our descendants will look back upon these days, I do not want it said about me — or about this illustrious Stephen Wise Free Synagogue that I am privileged to lead for a brief moment in time — that we were silent in our country's hour of need. Silence is the refuge of cowards. And to stay silent while others speak is to cede the ground to them — to those who represent different values.

I do not want you or the Jewish community or American society to think that because other Jews are so vocal — that they speak for the rest of us — whether in their approach to the coronavirus or any other issue on the communal agenda.

I am deeply worried about our country. President Trump has sledgehammered democratic norms — the protecting walls of American democracy. It turns out that these barriers were not as strong as we presumed.

It turns out that these barriers were not as strong as we presumed. It turns out that all the lying, the insults, the race-baiting, the cheating, the attacks on the media — and on the independence of the justice and law enforcement establishments — the ridiculing of expertise, evidence, science and reason, the promotion of conspiracy theories, the subtle dog whistles to extremists and supremacists, the overall meanness, crudeness and rudeness have impacted on this country in a devastating way.

"Don't pay attention to President Trump's words," say his defenders, "just look at his actions." A leader's words are his actions. Words are what fortify values, mores and norms. They influence behavior — inspiring people to great acts of self-sacrifice for the common good — or to xenophobia and hatred. Actions follow words as thunder follows lightning.

"There is life and death in the power of the tongue," the Bible warns. "The tongue is like a sharpened arrow," said Jeremiah. Jewish sages expanded on this thought. Words kill like an arrow because they can kill from a distance. It is as if the Rabbis could foresee the 21st century. Tweets can kill from a distance. Often, we are not even aware that an arrow was fired.

“Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from deceitful speech,” wrote King David, one of our greatest leaders.

Our Sages were so concerned about lies — about vengeful and hateful words - that they cautioned: “Malicious speech kills three. It kills the one who speaks it — the one who hears it — and the one spoken about.” (Arakhin 15b)

We expect truth, even from politicians. Truth creates responsibility. You would not tolerate a rabbi, attorney, teacher, investment advisor — or even a life partner — who lied to you multiple times a day. Relationships depend on truth. Freedom depends on truth. Jews, of all people, know how public lies by public officials can destroy public trust.

The assumption that there are facts that exist outside of you — that you cannot simply make up an alternative reality — “we are rounding the corner on Covid-19,” — objective reality - undergirds all progress in every field of human endeavor — including science, technology, medicine, philosophy, law, politics and even religion.

Hosea, the prophet, knew this already 2,700 years ago:

“There is no honesty; false promises and dishonesty...are rife. For that, the earth is withered and everything that dwells on it languishes. Everything perishes. My people shall be destroyed.” (Chapter 4)

If there is no honesty, if lie follows lie, then - as Hosea warns — sooner or later — freedom, itself, will collapse. Wave after wave of dishonesty will crash upon the protecting walls of democracy, eventually wearing them down. In the final analysis, trust is what protects civic morals, democratic values and the rule of law. Destroy these, and you destroy democracy’s ability to protect itself from itself.

Objective truth is so fundamental to Judaism that Talmudic rabbis described truth as God’s seal. “The world stands on three pillars: On justice, on truth and on peace,” said Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel. Remove the pillar of truth, and the world cannot stand. Justice and peace depend on truth.

It mattered less to Jewish tradition whether a leader was eloquent. It was about character and values. Moses couldn’t even speak clearly. He was a stutterer. “I am not a man of words, I am slow of speech,” he protested when God ordered him back to Egypt to liberate the people. God sent him anyway, because this man who stuttered — had no choice but to learn how to listen better. His very speech impediment encouraged him to empathize with other vulnerable people.

In Jewish tradition it was about character and values. The greatest leaders were modest: “I am a child,” said Jeremiah. Don’t send me. “They will not believe me,” said Moses. The greatest leaders never said — I know everything. I know more than the doctors, more than the generals. The greatest leaders were the ones who shared responsibility — and who relied on others to do what they could not.

Character is the first and most critical ingredient of enlightened leadership. The best of us are not necessarily smarter or more talented. The best have a better character. The best are grounded in moral integrity. Their principles give them strength. Intelligence, knowledge and even experience can take you only so far.

The reason we seem never to learn from history — that we make the same mistakes over and over again — is that these are not actually the same mistakes. They are different mistakes. History never repeats itself fully. There are too many variables. Every situation is different. No one can predict the tests that await a nation or its leaders. There is no formula, no equation that can be uploaded for any and every circumstance.

And therefore, the indispensable criterion for leadership is moral awareness. Is this person grounded in good values? Does she have the moral fortitude to withstand the inevitable tests to these values?

I am uneasy, anxious and deeply worried about the coming weeks — because the American experiment rests on two central propositions that are under withering assault: The right to vote, and the peaceful transfer of power. These are the most sacred tenets — the holy of holies — of our secular form of government. Americans have fought, sacrificed and died defending these principles. Even in the darkest days of the Civil War, when the future of the Republic was weighed in the balance, the peaceful transfer of power was sacrosanct.

We never had a president, or a presidential candidate, who was unwilling to commit to election results. President Trump has made it abundantly clear: “I will have to see,” he said, when asked to commit to honoring the count. “The only way we are going to lose this election is if [it] is rigged.” His daily drumbeat warning of electoral fraud is designed to justify his after-the-fact contention of a rigged election. Vice President Pence also refused to honor the results in advance.

Elections are usually days of celebration for America. No matter who wins, the country rejoices in the miracle of the peaceful transfer of power. Americans accept the verdict of the people. But this year, there is a real threat — even an expectation in the law enforcement community — that the streets will explode in rage and violence. No matter who wins, the other side will consider the results illegitimate. This is how far our country has fallen in the past four years. This is how countries decline. Gradual hard-to-notice changes over decades hit a tipping point and then the crash.

To our fellow Jews — those who disagree with me — and I say this with respect and with love:

Do not politicize mask wearing. Wear masks and socially distance. Do not be taken in by those who tell you that masks are some kind of plot to destroy religious freedom. Judaism is not anti-science. Some of our greatest scholars were scientists and medical doctors. Furthermore — remember the central Jewish principle, *pikkuah nefesh* — the preservation of life. Masks and social distancing save lives. Saving life takes precedence over almost every other Jewish obligation. Whoever saves one life, it is as if they have saved the entire world, our sages teach.

Avoid baseless claims of prejudice. You can say many things about the mayor and the governor. Neither are anti-Jewish. To falsely accuse others of anti-Semitism sets back the fight against real anti-Semitism.

And keep your mind open about Israel. Don't assume that anyone who disagrees with you does not care about — or support — the Jewish state. I understand — and respect — your views. I receive many of your publications and read them thoroughly. I often agree with you. But it is rather bold to assume that the reason that seven out of ten American Jews do not agree with you — must be because they are not pro-Israel. There can be no other explanation.

Keep your mind open as to what is good for Israel. And give others the benefit of the doubt — as they give the benefit of the doubt to you. In a now-famous meeting between Israeli prime minister, David Ben Gurion, and President Kennedy — Kennedy asked Ben Gurion how America could help Israel. Ben Gurion responded: “By being a great president of the United States.” Ben Gurion — and all Israeli prime ministers — understood — that Israel’s greatest need is for America to stay strong, unified, respected around the world, and influential. Such a United States was the best guarantee of Israel’s survival.

A leader who can turn on a dime against his closest and most loyal advisors, supporters, partners, and friends can turn on a dime against a country as well. Leadership is about character and values.

We stand today at the crossroads of history. The choices we make now will determine our direction for years to come. Knowing how way leads on to way — we shall not return to this place. We shall have future choices — but not these.

Each must search their souls:

“Man must light for man the fires no other can,
And find in his own eye where the strange crossroads lie.”
(David McCord)

May we be guided by wisdom and understanding.

The Bible teaches: (Proverbs 8)

It is Wisdom calling,
Understanding raising her voice.
She takes her stand at the topmost heights,
By the wayside — at the crossroads.

On this last Shabbat before our fateful choice — we pray for the peace of our nation. Since the days of the Babylonian exile, when Jeremiah urged the Jewish refugees to pray for the welfare of their new country — Jews have recited a variation of this ancient prayer:

Ha-noten t’shu’ah la’malachim, u’memshala la’ne’sichim.

May the one who granted authority to rulers — bless and protect, help and exalt all who hold positions of leadership and responsibility in our national life.

Let your blessing rest upon them, and make them responsive to Your will — so that our nation may be to the world an example of justice and compassion.

Deepen our love for our country and our desire to serve it. Strengthen our power of self-sacrifice for our nation’s welfare. Teach us to uphold its good name by our own right conduct.

Cause us to see clearly that the well-being of our nation is in the hands of all its citizens.

Imbue us with zeal for the cause of liberty.

May peace and good will obtain among all the inhabitants of our land.

Amen.