

What will guide your choice this November: A Jewish Voters Guide
Yom Kippur 5777, Community Synagogue of Rye
Rabbi Daniel Gropper



On January 26, of this year I stood in a courtroom in White Plains. I had not been arrested nor charged with a crime. I was there by choice. It was the Supreme Court of New York State. I was one of maybe five caucasians in a sea of humanity - people of all ages, genders, colors, and means. We were the new Americans.



Upon swearing our oath of citizenship the judge reminded us how this country was founded and formed by immigrants; that we should never allow anyone to disparage us or call us “less than;”



and that we should avail ourselves of the rights granted us as new citizens. At that moment I became, by law, as American as any daughter or son of the Revolution. My new passport meant that I would be met with the words, “welcome home,” instead of being looked at as the alien I once was. But, to me, the most important benefit of my status was my voter I.D. card. Now my citizenship mattered. Now I can fulfill the duties the founders of this nation dreamed about and fought for some 240 years ago.

Unlike U.S. citizens who can vote absentee, Canadians cannot. I have watched Canadian elections come and go. The election this November will be the first time in my life that I will cast a ballot. It will be a *shehechianu* moment. Boy, did I pick a doozy. Through an immigrant’s eyes, here is what I see. I do not think this election is truly about Donald or Hillary, Republican or Democrat. This election, I believe, is a referendum. A referendum on the type of America we envision. One vision is an America that is xenophobic, bigoted, misogynistic, homophobic, narrow-minded, and anti-Semitic. This group does not want an America as it is, they want an America as they *believe* it was. This group wants to stop the winds of change that are now buffeting every family — in their workplace, where technological innovation and a changing global marketplace are threatening white-collar and blue-collar jobs; in their neighborhoods, where they see immigrants of different religions, ethnicities, and cultures moving in; and globally, where violent extremists are murdering innocents with disturbing regularity. This America yearns for the “good old days,” if there ever was such a thing. This group feels that that the things that anchor them in the world and provide meaning are being swept away. So they seek a leader who will stop that erosion.

The other vision is an America that is tolerant, open-minded, pluralistic, and loving of those of every race and nation, those huddled masses yearning to breathe free who applied and studied and waited patiently to reach these shores. Those who support this vision understand that 21st century politics require leaders who can respond to the accelerations in technology, globalization and climate change. They acknowledge how these forces are transforming the workplace, geopolitics and the very planet. This group knows that the only way forward is to embrace these changes, to empower more people to be able to compete and collaborate in a

world that is already highly connected and highly interdependent. This America requires a leader who understands that demographics are changing - and that this is not a scary thing, but a reality to be embraced since, as the judge reminded us new Americans, immigrants get the job done. Immigrants built America, and they will continue to lend their talents and experiences to creating our country.

That, my friends, is what I think this election is about. It's about the kind of America we imagine for ourselves and for our children. Do we want an America that exists in the collective memory of some - but overlooks its history of racism, homophobia and xenophobia? Or do we want an America we imagine with a future of acceptance, possibility and potential? This is a political question, it is also without question a religious one.

As Jews we have long held to a messianic belief that while the past is there to guide us, we hold out hope for a better tomorrow. *BaYom HaHu*, we say, a day will come. We are the descendants of prophets and dreamers who saw the world as it could be instead of accepting the world as it is.

This November, as we step into the voting booth (encourage people to vote and to tell their friends, associates, those they work for and those who work for them to vote) we step in as Americans and as Jews. What values will guide us? As Jews, we tend to find ourselves in the intersection of that Venn Diagram between our American and our Jewish identities - those values of having a sense of communal responsibility, service to others, compassion for all people, *tikun olam*. Judaism, after all, is about the application of ethical teachings to the moral dilemmas of our world. Synagogues are to be built with clear windows because our houses of worship are never to serve as places of escape or an excuse to avert one's eyes from the problems of the real world. Judaism responds to the misuse of power, oppression of the weak, and everyday injustices in society. As Jews we tend to be advocates for justice, activists for liberty, defenders of dignity.

Here I must make a distinction between politics and partisanship. While Judaism has something to contribute to political matters, being a Jew does not automatically align you with one party or another. Our Torah recognizes the importance of private property. It warns, against the dangers of "big government" and the tendency of those in authority to expropriate persons and property for their own purposes. At the same time, that same Torah recognizes the need for periodic redistributions of wealth to minimize income disparities between rich and poor. The Book of Leviticus calls for taking radical steps to limit those disparities —cancelling debts and returning land to its original owners according to a fixed schedule.

Judaism is not partisan. It is also not indifferent. Judaism offers us an ethical framework to guide our political thinking. The values Judaism teaches are clear: dignity of the individual, acting with integrity - we call it *menschlichkeit* and, above all, empathy. Empathy is what enables us to live beyond ourselves, to feel pain that is not our own.

Every time we hear politicians speak, whether about illegal immigration, or economic hardship, or human rights, let us ask ourselves: Are their words and their policy positions consistent with the values of our Jewish tradition? Many Christians ask if a politician's positions and words are consistent with their Christian values. Many Muslims do the same. Why

shouldn't we? The application of these values to actual problems is never simple, but nonetheless the effort must be made.

As we go about this evaluation, the most comprehensive and helpful guide is found at the exact mid-point of the Torah, words we will read this afternoon, a section from Leviticus beginning, "*Kedoshim Tihiyu*, You Shall be Holy." It is sometimes called "The Holiness Code." These verses serve, I believe, as a Jewish American's voter's guide. These words are our moral heritage, our spiritual DNA. These words remind us that holiness is about deep engagement with business, with the marketplace, with laws and courts, with fellow human beings. Holiness is not a life of self-deprivation, of endless prayer, of vows of poverty or chastity. No! Holiness is about finding a connection to God in the very fabric and marrow of life.

Our Torah reading offers many kinds of holy acts, all of them rooted in everyday life: leaving some food for the needy, assisting the disadvantaged. Holiness, the Torah teaches, is not some lofty, abstract concept, but rather part and parcel of daily living. We become holy by honoring parents, showing fairness in judgment, refraining from gossip, refusing to embarrass another person in public, reaching out compassionately to others, and loving our neighbors.

Of course, I know that this holiness code, like much of the Torah, seeks to create a utopian world. There is a reason why the Torah keeps repeating certain commandments, holding out hope that we will achieve that place and time when all will be Eden once again. But we aren't perfect, as Yom Kippur makes clear. That's why we bake days like this into the system, to come in here, to reflect, to repent and to try to do better. The same can be said of our elected officials. They are human. They are far from perfect. Still, the Torah makes clear that even we imperfect human beings can nudge ourselves, and the world, toward the way things ought to be through steadfast deeds of empathy on behalf of others, particularly on behalf of the most vulnerable in society. Our elected officials are, above all, public servants. I still hold out hope that they see their public service the same way our Torah defines holiness.

Allow me then to highlight a few specific verses from The Holiness Code to illustrate what I mean.

One of the first commandments is that we are not to turn to idols. Idolatry is not the worship of statues or stars, or trees, or mountains. Idolatry is the adoration of the self. The squinting selfishness that cares for no other, that sees no other, that feels no other, that imagines no other, that loves no other. It is an adoration of the self that was celebrated by the people Sodom, who, the Rabbis tells us, declared, "*Sheli sheli, v'shelach sheli*" — "what's mine is mine, and what's yours is mine as well." That is the unholy narcissism of idolatry. Eschewing idolatry means not allowing our own egos to grow so large that we confuse ourselves for The Master of the Universe.

When Israel had a king, he was to have the book of Deuteronomy written for him and placed next to his throne. He was to read that book day and night, to know the laws he was to follow. He was to study that scroll to understand that there were limitations on his power. The king of Israel was to rule with the humility that he too was flesh and blood, that he too answered to a higher power and that he too was subject to the law of the land. Simply put, when I vote I

want to vote for elected officials who know the law, who know the limitations of the law and who live and act within the limitations of those laws - both in spirit and in letter. That is what it means to strive for holiness. (Ramban on Lev. 19:1)

A little farther down, in verses 9 and 10 we find the commandments to leave the corners of our fields and the gleanings of our harvests for the poor and the stranger. *Tzedakah*. Tzedakah addresses the inequity between rich and poor, the haves and the have nots.. In his last public address, former Vice President and Presidential candidate Hubert Humphrey said, “the moral test of government is how that government treats those who are in the dawn of life, the children; those who are in the twilight of life, the elderly; those who are in the shadows of life; the sick and the needy.”

When we step into the voting booth, Judaism asks us to consider not only our self-interest but also our obligation to every other citizen. You and I are both aware of the growing income disparity in this country. We read about it in the papers, we recognize it on the subway, we see it on the streets. There are many statistics. I ask you to consider two:

- IN 1965, American CEOs earned about 24 times the amount of the average worker. In 1980 it was 42 times as much. Today, CEOs earn 325 times the average worker.
- The top 1% earns 20% of the nation’s income and owns 40% of the nation’s wealth – the greatest divide we’ve seen since the 1920s. Our wealth disparity in America has returned to early 1900s levels.

My colleague Rabbi Ken Chasen shares the following visual: Imagine we are on the Titanic – with all of us, enjoying the splendor of E Deck, while the masses are corralled below us in steerage. They’re largely content with their lot, enjoying their own parties and pleasures while the ship is afloat. But when crisis hits – say, a major recession or a war – they discover that the lifeboats they see aren’t for them. They peer through locked metal gates that bar the way to safety. As the ship begins to sink, they look through those gates, those stares become glares and those glares soon burn with rage... at us.



Let’s be clear – a lot of us know how they are feeling, because a lot of us aren’t in the top 1%. There are plenty of worshipers in this room – plenty – who have seen their own financial fortunes take a marked turn for the worse, who can’t find their niche anymore, who are afraid they’ll never be what they once were, who fear they’ll never be able to retire or last in retirement on what they’ve saved. I’m your rabbi, which means you tell me your stories – and I know that there are many frightened people sitting among us.

Still, there are many others in this country whose situations are far worse. People who have lost their homes, their savings, the sense of security that comes knowing they have a financial safety net. We much prefer to think of other people as the rich ones – and there is always someone richer than you are. But if we are really truthful on this day of atonement, even

if your financial situation has recently made a downward turn, most of us are lucky enough to sit among the highest echelon of earnings or accumulated wealth. If we are not the 1% then many here are probably in the top 5 or 10%. If we look at the stark reality in this country, and certainly all over the world, the truth is that we are sailing together on E Deck. Even if we don't have what the people down below think we have, they're looking through the gates at us, and they're angry. This is the 2016 election. (Rabbi Ken Chasen, "Rigged," Rosh HaShanah 5777).

Judaism commands us to create dignified ways for those who sail beneath the surface to help make for themselves a life of meaning and purpose. It was the great Maimonides who taught that the highest degree of *tzedakah* is to sustain a person before they become impoverished by offering a substantial gift in a gracious manner, by extending a suitable loan, by helping them find employment or by establishing themselves in business. But here's what's interesting about *Tzedakah*. It is not only for those in need; *tzedakah* is also for us. The commandment to leave the corners, to leave a little bit behind reminds us that we need to guard against selfishness, against greed, against the acquisitive, ruthless ambition that reduces the human being to the most base of instincts. And *tzedakah* reminds us of our obligations to the larger society. It reminds us how we are to live with a spirit of generosity.

Or consider verse 14 in The Holiness Code, our "Jewish voter's guide": "do not insult the deaf or place a stumbling block before the blind." At its most literal level, this means neither to make fun of nor to take advantage of a person with disabilities. At a deeper level, it means not to take advantage of someone just because you can get away with it (*Sifra*). One's weakness, intellectual deficits, or lack of proper information is not fodder for your gain. Their blindness, whether in politics or the marketplace, is not an opportunity for profit.

The Talmud asks, "what's the big deal about insulting another, especially a deaf person when they can't even hear the insult or a blind person who may not see the faces you make in front of them?" And the Talmud answers, You shall not insult any-one because your use of coarse language diminishes you as a person. (Shavuot 36a). It doesn't matter whether the insults come from your mouth or your pen or your Twitter feed. Doing so diminishes you as a person. All of us, but especially our elected officials must be held responsible for what they say, how they act, what they post, what they tweet. I might not agree with what they say. My view of their policy positions on a host of issues may be vastly different but I want my elected officials to be measured and intentional and thoughtful about what they say. It reflects on them. It reflects on us.

The Baal Shem Tov once instructed several of his disciples to embark on a journey with no defined purpose. The students allowed Divine Providence to direct their wagon, confident that the destination and purpose of their trip would be revealed in due time.

After traveling for several hours, they stopped at a wayside inn to eat and rest. Now the Baal Shem Tov's disciples were pious Jews who insisted on the highest standards of kashrut. When they learned that their host planned to serve them meat in their meal, they asked to see the *shochet* (ritual slaughterer) of the house, interrogated him as to his knowledge and piety, and examined his knife for any possible blemishes. Their discussion of the kashrut standard of the

food continued throughout the meal, as they inquired after the source of every ingredient in each dish set before them.

As they spoke and ate, a voice emerged from behind the oven, where an old beggar was resting amidst his bundles. “Dear Jews,” he called out, “are you as careful with what comes out of your mouth as you are with what enters into it?” We must ask the same of our elected officials - are you as careful with what comes out of your mouth as with what enters into it?

These are but three of the verses in Leviticus Chapter 19 but I think you get the point. The Holiness Code serves as a guide for the people we aspire to be. It encourages us to become the people we are yet to be and not to settle for who we are today. This is why it begins with the words, “you SHALL BE holy” as opposed to “you ARE holy.” It is aspirational. These words remind us, as the Psalmist declared, that we are “but a little lower than the angels. We can be crowned with glory and honor” (Ps. 8:5). Shouldn’t we expect the same, or more, from those who represent us?

This November, when you step into that voting booth, imagine that you are stepping into an *Aron HaKodesh*, into a holy ark. You write your own Torah with the choices you make. What you inscribe on that ballot will affect the lives of our children and perhaps their children as well. Imagine that inscribed over the voting booth are the words that most commonly adorn arks in synagogues around the world, *Da Lifnei Mi Ata Omeid*, “Know before Whom you stand.” As you pull that lever or mark that “x” (remember, I’ve never done this. I don’t know the correct metaphor), know before whom you stand.

A Final Story: Once there was a wise old man and a smart little boy. The boy was driven by a single desire – to expose the wise old man as a fool. The smart boy had a plan. He had captured a small and very fragile bird in the forest. With the bird cupped in his hands, the boy’s scheme was to approach the old man and ask him, “Old man, what do I have in my hands?” to which the wise old man would reply, “You have a bird, my son.”



Then the boy would ask, “Old man, is the bird alive or is it dead?” If the old man replied that the bird was dead, the smart boy would open his hands and allow the bird to fly off back into the forest. But if the old man replied that the bird was alive, the smart boy would crush the bird inside his cupped hands, and crush it, and crush it, until at last the bird dies. Then the boy would open his hands and say, “See, old man, the bird is dead!”

And so as the story goes, the smart boy went to the old man and he said, as planned, “Old man, what do I have in my hands?”

The old man replied, “You have a bird, my son.”

“Old man”, the boy than said, his voice dripping with disdain, “is the bird alive or is it dead?”

Whereupon the old man looked at the boy with his kindly old eyes and replied, “the answer is in your hands, my son.”

My friends, to the type of America we want to create, the answer is in your hands.

*With thanks to Rabbi Ken Chasen for inspiration from his sermon, “Rigged,” Rosh HaShanah 5777 and Rabbi Jonathan Blake and Andi Hessekiel for their editing wisdom.