

SHABBAT SERMON
Parashat Shof'tim
5775

I get criticized every time my sermon comes close to a political theme – whether it's American politics or Israeli politics. Some people roll their eyes and shut down internally; every so often, someone gets up and walks out. Some people believe strongly that there should be no politics in the synagogue. How come? I can think of several reasons.

- We are over-saturated with politics and we want some place to get away from all that.
- Politics is dirty and getting dirtier. We want the synagogue to be a place where we get away from the *schmutz*.
- Ultimately, all you'll hear from the pulpit is my personal read on Jewish tradition on the issue – and since I've got all those books in my office, there are few who can argue Jewish tradition with me.

- Finally, whatever I say, at least half of you will disagree with what I have to say – and who wants to go to synagogue to hear someone tell them that they're wrong. Most people go to church or synagogue to hear someone affirm what they already believe is true – not someone to challenge them.

But about politics we must talk – at least sometimes. The synagogue would be irrelevant if it stayed away completely from something that is all around us; something about which we have such strong feelings. The synagogue would be irrelevant if had nothing to say about those parts of life that are so important to us.

More than that: Parashat Shof'tim teaches that the mitzvot of the Torah go beyond the way one worships, eats, works and lives one's personal daily life. The mitzvot extend to the public realm as well.

That the ruler of the land must keep a Torah scroll by his or her side means that:

- He or she will not have all the answers;
- And that he or she must constantly be reminded that they are not above the law.

That the Torah says, *tzedeq, tzedeq tirdof* , Justice, justice you shall **pursue**, is an acknowledgement that the people who lead us and judge us will not be perfect, that justice is something we want them to pursue, but not something we can ever expect them to perfectly achieve.

We are fourteen months away from the general election; six months from the first primary. I personally don't care if the president is someone I'd feel comfortable having a drink with. I don't care if the president is ideologically pure. I don't care how they might have voted on an issue 20 years ago. I

don't want a president who makes decisions based on public opinion poll, but I do want a president who spends a lot of time listening. I want a president who cares more about the people than about the party or ideology or even about getting re-elected.

We've had those presidents. Abraham Lincoln was one of them. Lincoln had hours set aside when ordinary Americans could come to the White House to tell him what was on their minds or to ask him for things.

- Harry Truman, who never forgot where he came from, was another.

Any person we choose will be human being, which means that he or she will be imperfect. He or she will have made mistakes in the past and will do so while in office. Judaism does not believe in perfect leaders – certainly not Moses or David. We only get people who know how to keep their eye

on the ball and move the people forward. It's all about taking care of the people.

It's going to be a long and dirty fourteen months and you may, from time to time, hear what I believe to be a Jewish perspective on what's going on in our country.