

Religious Literacy: Our Newest Civic Responsibility

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I want to thank the entire congregation for your support of my leadership role on the New Providence Diversity Task Force, where I serve as tri-chair, along with Pastor Murdoch MacPherson of Faith Lutheran Church, and New Providence Councilman Brooke Hern.

I am very pleased with the Task Force's work thus far. With 24 people, the Task Force reflects representation from Christians, Jews, Muslims and Sikhs; from whites, blacks, and Hispanics; from straight people and from gay and lesbian people. Indeed, the broadly-diversified composition of the committee itself is its first significant achievement.

As you may recall, this task force was created by New Providence Mayor John Thoms and the New Providence town council in response to the enormous upset surrounding Councilman Vengrow's insensitive and hurtful remark last November. The mandate of the task force is to assess New Providence's climate toward religious, cultural, and sexual diversity, to identify its strengths and weaknesses, and to make recommendations that will create a better framework for inclusiveness and unity within the borough.

Of course, matters of tolerance and intolerance are by no means limited to New Providence. Summit and every other community in the region have their own issues to address.

In my judgment, our most important civic task for this New Year is for all of us is to pay more close attention to overt and covert expressions of intolerance directed at others, not ourselves, and to react appropriately on their behalf. Although we may not see it or hear it, casual putdowns, racial, religious, and sexual slurs, even hate crimes, go on around us. We need to do more to foster a climate in our community where people who have been victimized by a prejudicial incident feel safe to come forward.

Needless to say, we all have a moral obligation to recognize our own biases and to transcend them. Nor can we allow the prejudices of our friends and neighbors to go unchallenged, as unpleasant as that is to do. Silence is the worst response on our part. For silence sends the message that prejudice is okay, that bias is acceptable.

But there is another way in which all of us can help to promote the welfare of our community and nurture the common good. And that way may come as a surprise.

Our newest civic responsibility is greater religious literacy. We need to know more about Judaism. We need more knowledge about religious traditions other than our own. Why is religious literacy so important? And how is religious literacy a “civic” responsibility?

In one way or another, religion dominates the nightly news. From the Sunni-Shi’a schism, the internal dynamics of Iran, and the Israeli conflict with Hamas and Hezbollah, to domestic public policy issues such as stem-cell research, intelligent design, abortion, and same-sex marriage -- religion is at the center of it all.

As responsible citizens, we want to make more informed decisions about the direction of our country’s foreign policy. We must command far more nuanced knowledge about Islamic religion and culture than the fear-mongering stereotypes, the “clash of civilizations” stuff, so frequently fed to us by our media and our low-level political discourse.

So, too, with domestic policy. As Professor Stephen Prothero, chairperson of Boston University’s religion department observes, “The fact is, American political life is awash in religious reasons, religious arguments, and religious motivations. What good can it possibly serve for citizens, religious or otherwise, to be ignorant of all this?”

The dynamics of globalization underscore my call for greater religious literacy. America is no longer home for just Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. All the world’s religions are here, including 1,200 mosques and more Hindu temples than anywhere else in the world except India. Practitioners of Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and Native American religion are no longer an abstraction we read about in a comparative religion textbook. They are our friends or our neighbors or our fellow citizens.

Is it not then our civic responsibility to be more religiously informed?

In a globalized world, religious literacy has emerged as a core competency. In the 21st century, a truly educated person must know the Five Pillars of Islam and the Buddha’s Four Noble Truths no less than the Judeo-Christian golden rule. And our work is cut out for us. It is well-known that most Americans revere the Bible....they just don’t read it! No wonder pollster George Gallup has called the United States “a nation of biblical illiterates.”

A significant minority of Americans believe that Sodom and Gomorrah were husband and wife. Ten per cent of Americans think Joan of Arc was married to Noah. I didn’t make that up. I swear. Most Americans cannot name the first book of the Bible. Only half of Americans can name even one of the four gospels. Few Americans can name all Ten Commandments.

Nor is religious literacy any better at the college level. Professor Prothero observes, “Every year colleges provide bachelor’s degrees to students who think that Jesus parted the Red Sea and Moses agonized in the garden of Gethsemane, who know nothing about what Islam teaches about war and peace, and who cannot name one salient difference between Hinduism and Buddhism.”

How do we become more religiously literate? Where do we start? In this new year of 5768, I would love to see more members of this Temple Sinai make a commitment to study Torah -- to actually read the Bible.

How can we engage in interfaith dialogue or the public policy debates of our day, without knowing what the Bible contributes to those conversations? As the people of the book, how can we not know the book our ancestors gave to western civilization? And here at your Temple Sinai, this literacy is so easy for you to obtain. At every 7 pm Friday night service, and at our Sharing Shabbat service every Saturday morning at 8:30, which precedes our Bar/Bat Mitzvah service, Cantor Merel or I teach Torah.

Come learn not just what the Torah says but what it means in its original historical context. Learn contemporary spiritual, psychological, and interpretations of the Torah for our own day. Learn how the books of the Bible actually disagree with one another about the great issues of their day. Learn the Bible so that you will know whether or not the “politicians and the pundits are reading the Bible correctly or abusing it for partisan political purposes” (Prothero).

The demand for religious literacy in a globalized world also underscores why it is so important for our teenagers to continue their Jewish education beyond Bar/Bat Mitzvah. Professor Prothero rightly argues that our teens and college students must know more about religion, their own and others, in order “to participate fully in the politics of the nation or the affairs of the world.” The costs of religious illiteracy “are too high in a world in which faith moves, if not mountains, then at least elections and armies.”

So, parents, if you have not already told your child that he or she can quit after Bar/Bat Mitzvah, please don't bring it up. If you have already promised your children that they can quit after Bar/Bat Mitzvah, please take it off the table. Yes, you have my Rabbinic blessing to renege on that promise!

Here at Temple Sinai, it gives me great joy to say that 70% of our teens continue in our post-B'nei Mitzvah program. If your high schooler is not one of them, I respectfully urge you to reconsider that decision. There is so much at stake here. For despite the powerful forces of modernization and secularization, all kinds of belief persist in the 21st century and they are not going away. As Professor Mark Taylor, Professor of Religion at Williams College remarks, “the 21st century will be dominated by religion in ways that were inconceivable just a few years ago.”

We must understand that most of this world continues to speak the language of political theology, a language in which politics must be brought into line with God's will and divine revelation. Indeed, millions of people around the world reject our vaunted American concept of the separation of church and state. They think of it as just an experiment, and a strange one at that. “We in the West,” observes Professor Mark Lilla of Columbia University, “find it incomprehensible that theological ideas still inflame the minds of men, stirring up messianic passions that can leave societies in ruin. We had assumed that this was no longer possible, that human beings had learned to separate religious questions from political ones, that political theology died in 16th century Europe. We were wrong. It's we who are the fragile exception.”

While we may not personally accede to religious fundamentalism or believe that “God has revealed a law covering the whole of human affairs,” we must learn how to engage in respectful dialogue with the millions around the globe who do. And with our next door neighbors who do. There are walls of racial, religious, and sexual polarization around us. They are higher than we realize. Therefore, I hope you will embrace my call for all of us – adults, teens, and children -- to study Torah and grow in religious literacy as one of your personal resolutions for this New Year.

If we will learn to know each other better religiously in Berkeley Heights, Chatham, New Providence, Short Hills, Summit, Warren and Watchung, we will avoid so many misunderstandings and hurt feelings for the future. Greater religious literacy on all our parts will promote more appreciation for what we share and, for how we must differ from one another, more mutual respect and sympathetic understanding.

For the New Year, what a blessing that would be!