

Say No to the Religious Right

Yom Kippur Morning

October 13, 2005

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There is a very important issue I need to discuss with you this morning. So I am going to get right to the point: the religious right is aggressively working to impose Christian dogma on the public policy issues of our country.

The religious right wants to push its vision of personal morality onto you, me, our children and grandchildren.

In a way we've never seen before, fundamentalist Christianity has successfully entered the public sphere. In response to Islamic terrorism, the American public has become more willing to tolerate such religious involvement in politics.

Please do not misunderstand me. I have great respect for Christianity. Fundamentalist Christians have as much right to their faith as I do to mine. What I object to is the imposition of their fundamentalist religious agenda on my life or on yours. It is the avowed purpose of the religious right to dictate public policy, to convert the tenets of Christian fundamentalism into the law of our land.

The political agenda of the religious right is to take away from us many of the freedoms and liberties we hold dear:

To abolish women's reproductive rights,

To diminish the civil rights of gay people,

To demolish the wall of separation between church and state,

To prohibit life-saving stem cell research,

To replace the scientific study of evolution with biblical creationism in our public schools.

This dangerous religious agenda, plus the Religious right's intense campaign to turn the supreme court into its ideological rubber stamp and to use its political muscle to intimidate, should be of utmost concern to all of us.

What do I mean by intimidation? Having been threatened by religious right extremists for legal decisions that do not go their way, federal judges now require police protection. A few have been murdered.

Afraid of a national boycott of its films, Hollywood makes movies with overtly and covertly pro-christian messages.

Cadets at the Air Force Academy in Colorado have complained that evangelical Christian commanders use their positions of authority to promote their faith.

Fundamentalist Christian pharmacists have started to refuse to fill prescriptions for which they have moral or religious objections.

Evangelical Christianity insists it speaks in the name of god. Fundamentalist Christianity claims to know god's will with absolute certainty, without the possibility of error. Their truth is the only truth.

Despite its status as the most powerful political movement in America today, the religious right believes it is being persecuted by a sinister secular elite. This deluded mindset espouses a "culture of life" but sees no moral contradiction in taking the lives of doctors who help women with their reproductive choices. This deluded mindset deprives others of their civil rights, defending themselves from imagined attack by attacking back. The religious right wants to roll back the clock to an idealized mythic past, where abortion is completely outlawed, even if the mother's life is in danger; where gay people have disappeared, having returned to the closet; where children can pray in public school and read the bible in biology class.

Incidentally, the intelligent design movement is a ploy to skirt the united states constitution. Intelligent design portrays itself as a respectable scientific alternative to evolution. In

fact, intelligent design is nothing more than Christian biblical creationism in more sophisticated form. It is not science but pseudo-science. Intelligent design is a Trojan horse. It is a “clever attempt to sneak [Christianity] cloaked in the guise of science, into the public schools.”

In short, we must understand that the religious right supports a repressive and reactionary political agenda. We must understand that the religious right has become a permanent fixture on the American political landscape and is likely to successfully convert some of its doctrines into law. We must understand, and this is what worries me most of all: recent history has taught us that all ideologies that subscribe to a vision of the world made more wholesome to its mind by an abundance of group think and the lack of any diversity bear fascist overtones.

We, the reform Jewish community, must begin

- To speak out and to stand up for the causes we believe in: women’s rights, civil rights, the wall of separation between church and state.
- We must challenge the misuse of god’s name
- To justify a repressive and reactionary agenda.
- We must communicate to our elected officials that we are also a religious community and the religious right does not speak for us.

But wait a minute: don’t we also employ the name of god? How are we different? The difference is this: The religious right insists that the divinity of scripture necessitates a fundamentalist, literalist interpretation. There is one and only one correct interpretation. We assert that the divinity of scripture requires there to be a meaning deeper than the literal one. Our sages of old disliked literalism. They believed scripture held multiple meanings. We believe that the purpose of spirit is not to legislate personal morality but to promote peace, social justice, environmental protection, nuclear non-proliferation, a commitment to end poverty, hunger, homelessness, and inadequate health care.

We do not know god’s will with absolute authority. We seek to discern it. Therefore, we operate from a place of humility, not arrogance. Therefore, we will never deprive anyone of his or

her civil or religious rights on the basis of *our* faith. Above all, we believe that god does not choose sides. We believe that god is on everyone's side.

The evangelical right is a formidable opponent. The National Association Of Evangelicals has 30 million members and 45,000 churches. Every week, the movement's TV stations, radio stations, and organizational newspapers mobilize people to lobby their elected officials at all levels of government. The religious right has the capacity to deluge elected officials with hundreds of thousands of snail mail, emails, and phone calls. The religious right has a huge broadcasting industry, book publishing companies, regional newspapers, state-based think tanks that do legislative lobbying, and legal firms devoted exclusively to Christian right causes.

The religious right is a formidable opponent indeed. Nevertheless, we must enter this culture war. We must confront the religious right and its ambition to convert America into a theocracy rather than a democracy.

While on sabbatical last spring, I attended the consultation on conscience sponsored by the Religious Action Center Of Reform Judaism. I heard one my colleagues from Kansas City, Rabbi Susan Talve, speak about her teenage daughter's congenital heart defect. In the long-run, Adina's only hope is stem cell research. In the short-run, it is highly likely that Adina is going to die. Nevertheless, the religious right in Missouri successfully pushed through legislation criminalizing all stem cell research in the state. Rabbi Talve's remarks had everyone in tears – myself included. I believe that Adina's 17 year old life is more important than the life of a stem cell embryo that will remain frozen forever.

Every Jewish denomination agrees, including the orthodox that stem cell research must go forward because it may fulfill the commandment of *pikuach nefesh*. Stem cell therapy has the potential to save lives. But who holds the power of life and death over Adina? Who holds the power to restrict her religious freedom as a Jew to participate in stem cell therapy? Not Adina.

Not her parents. Not her doctors. Not even the state of Missouri. The power of life and death over Adina is held by the religious right. If we are not concerned by this, we should be.