

Prophets and Politics
Yom Kippur Morning 5780
Rabbi David S. Widzer

This morning's sermon starts with an advisory notice, a heads-up, a trigger warning. In my teaching this morning, I am going to mention climate change, gun violence prevention, and immigration. I will talk about Judaism, politics, and public policy. We will explore what Judaism says about our engagement with the world around us, how we listen to one another, or don't listen, how we agree or disagree with each other, and what we are called upon to do.

Ah, I can see some reactions already. Immediately, there is some squirming in the seats. Did I hear a murmur or two, a muttering under one's breath, or in one's mind? Some of us, I think, are excited to hear about these topics. Others are sitting with rising apprehension and concern. "Will it make me uncomfortable?" you are asking. Uncomfortable because what I believe isn't what the rabbi says Judaism says, and so maybe I don't have a place in this community? Uncomfortable because I have different political views and why does he think he has a monopoly on Judaism? Uncomfortable because I share the rabbi's views but I haven't been acting on them, and this will just make me feel guilty?

Spoiler alert: We are all going to be ok. Everyone, of any political view, has a place in this community. It is Jewish values and teachings that hold sway here, not a particular partisan ideology. I can't promise that you won't feel uncomfortable by what I say, but I can promise you that, no matter your take on the political issues of the day, Jewish values influence our interaction with the world around us and call us to respond.

Now, much as I secretly harbor a desire to be a fire and brimstone preacher, I will NOT take the tack of our prophet Isaiah. We just heard his words chanted beautifully, but it seems likely that his was not a calm, melodic voice. When we read his words, much of the time, it feels like Isaiah is screaming at us. Rabbi Arthur Waskow imagines the setting of the verses we just heard as taking place at the great Temple in Jerusalem, or in some mega-synagogue in Babylon.¹ Picture the scene: the congregation has assembled on Yom Kippur; everyone is fasting and reverently praying. Suddenly, the prophet Isaiah storms in, barges his way to the front, and interrupts the proceedings with raging voice, chastising the people for false piety, declaring that God does not want their fasts, that they are worthless unless they are accompanied by acts of righteousness and compassion. It must have felt like a kick in the hungry stomachs of those assembled.²

This model of disruption and confronting people to prompt them to righteous acts is a hallmark of many of our prophets. Amos yelled at the people for trampling the poor like the dust of the earth and perverting the way of the humble. God would pay no heed to their offerings if justice did not well up like waters and righteousness like an unfailing stream.³ Micah lambasted those who "detest justice and make crooked all that is straight."⁴ Instead, he proclaimed, they must do justice, love goodness, and walk humbly with God.⁵ The prophets were disruptive and confrontational. They made people uncomfortable back then AND today.

So why are we reading such a challenging text on a holy day like today, when our primary focus feels like it should be inward, when we are engaged in the work of introspection and reflection? Many people feel that religion's role should be to soothe our jagged nerves, to be a balm to our souls wounded by the affronts of modern living. I agree. Our worship should be an oasis in time. Our sanctuary should be a sanctuary from the tumult of the world, a place for quiet contemplation and meditation, to connect to our truest selves, to be embraced by our community in love, to commune with God.

And I believe that that is not all that religion should be. The rabbis of the Talmud teach that any place used for prayer must have a window through which the outside is visible.⁶ When we gather for ritual and worship, we may not ensconce ourselves in a place completely removed from the rest of society. When we say the words of the liturgy, we must also be able to see our surroundings and therefore remember the world in which we dwell. We can separate ourselves in a sanctuary for worship, but we cannot remain separate from the cares and concerns of society. It has been said that the role of religion is "to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable."⁷ A rabbinic friend put it a little differently: "Religion must both calm the soul and inspire the heart."⁸ As a source of morality, Judaism calls us to our highest selves. As a wellspring of values, Judaism calls us to imagine the world as it ought to be and compels us to take steps towards accomplishing that vision. Judaism will not let us leave things as they are, but requires our active involvement in taking care of one another and in making our world a better place.

This is why sometimes I feel we are called to play a more prophetic role, to bring to bear on the great issues of our day the wisdom and values of our tradition: to decry violence prompted by hatred and willful ignorance, to demand justice for victims of an unfair system, to speak out when children sleep in cages, when economic inequality distorts a level playing field, when we despoil the environment of the world God entrusted to us. As Rabbi Israel Salanter, a 19th century sage and champion of ethics in Judaism, was said to have taught: "A person should be more concerned with spiritual than with material matters. But another person's material well-being is the first person's spiritual concern."⁹

Religion must provide comfort and soulful restoration, and inspiration and a call to action. It must do both. And so on Erev Rosh Hashanah, I spoke about building and rebuilding our inner spiritual Tabernacle. And today, as part of our Yom Kippur evaluation of our lives, I'm speaking about our responsibility to the outside world.

I know that this makes some of us uncomfortable. Some of us don't want religion to be intertwined at all with political affairs. I suspect there are several different explanations for this discomfort. One reflects a growing change in the way our society approaches public policy. It used to be that there was an important distinction between the terms "political" and "partisan." "Political" meant having to do with the affairs of society, its government, and its public policies. "Partisan" meant support for a particular political party, a specific ideology, or an individual candidate. One could talk about political issues without necessarily taking a partisan side.

Perception of these terms has changed. Political issues themselves feel partisan. I could mention climate change, gun violence, or reproductive choice, or religious freedom, tax cuts, or free markets and you might make an assumption about my partisan beliefs based solely on the political topic I discuss. The approaches or solutions to these issues are now so firmly identified with particular partisan parties that they cease to be topics of mutual conversation. People today seem so hyper-partisan that they cannot talk about a political issue without immediately jumping to a partisan conclusion.¹⁰

I will tell you that many rabbis are now cautious about raising any political topics, for fear of being accused of being partisan. This makes it very challenging to fulfill the prophetic part of the rabbinic mandate and to focus on the role of Judaism as a moral voice in the world. For me, it is not about being partisan or endorsing any particular ideology or party policy. For me, it's about starting with Torah and texts and the Jewish values embedded within them, then seeing how those texts and values call us to action in our world.

For example, when I think or teach or speak about the environment or the changes happening to our climate, I begin with God's placing Adam in the Garden of Eden *l'ovdah ul'shomrah*, "to till it and tend to it,"¹¹ and the concept of being *shomrei adamah*, "guardians of the earth." When I approach the topic of gun violence prevention, I first explore the value of *pikuach nefesh*, the requirement to preserve human life, I study rabbinic teachings about self-defense,¹² and the verse in Leviticus that we will read this afternoon: *lo ta-amod al dam rei-echa*, you shall not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor.¹³ When I consider immigration, I study the thirty-six times the Torah reminds us of the right ways to treat the strangers among us, for we were strangers in the land of Egypt.¹⁴

After study and contemplation of these teachings, I try to figure out how I would want to see those values translated into policies and actions. Jewish tradition is broad enough and deep enough that any two of us approaching the same topic might find different texts to study. We might uncover different ways the values contained in those texts shape our interactions with the world and the policies we might support. And that's ok. The key is to engage with our texts and values and to enact them in the world in ways that feel authentic to us.

Sometimes, the discomfort in talking about religion and politics comes when we reach different conclusions, but feel like there isn't any room for dialogue and discussion. Earlier this year, I preached a sermon about immigration and the challenges of this moment in history. I spoke from texts and values in examining the policies of our current government, and how they measured up or fell short of what I believed Jewish tradition required. A week later, I received a letter in the mail from a visitor who had happened to be at that service and who vehemently disagreed with me and the policy solutions I had advocated. He wrote that, out of respect for the service and my role as rabbi, he didn't want to interrupt the sermon and argue with me, but that he felt Judaism supported different ideas than then ones I had presented. He said that my words made him feel like there wasn't a place for him in our Jewish community because of the opinions he held.

That certainly was not my intention. But I understand his discomfort. As a rabbi and a student of Jewish texts, I have an expertise in Jewish tradition. But that

doesn't mean that my understanding of Jewish values, and the public policies that might put them into practice, is the only valid one. Not that I was railing like Isaiah, but if we only follow the prophetic model of strident righteousness, we shut down conversation and close people off from discussion.

Fortunately, our prophets are not the only model in Jewish history of how we engage with Jewish values. Another model is provided in the Talmud by Rabbi Hillel and Rabbi Shammai, a pair of opposing rabbis who took vastly different approaches to Jewish law. The schools of thought they founded dominated Jewish life for a century on either side of the year Zero. They disagreed quite often, on matters big and small. Though most of the time, Hillel's opinion became binding law instead of Shammai's, the Talmud made sure to preserve the arguments of both sides, recording and exploring their dialogue and debate. Though the two schools disagreed ideologically, they still showed respect for one another, and the opinions of both are included in our legal texts.¹⁵

This can be a model for how we engage each other in the Jewish community on political issues. We can have debates, discussions, and dialogues, in classes, forums, and meetings, based on values, on texts, on tradition. Disagreement is ok when it reflects respect for one another. In this model, I could tell the letter-writing, dissenting guest, "I have presented my 'Hillel views.' I respect, and would be interested in hearing, your 'Shammai views.' Or vice versa!"¹⁶

I have said before, Isaiah isn't a Democrat or a Republican. Amos and Micah are not Libertarians or Greens. The prophets are not the province of one party or ideological view. Their words certainly are political, in that they wanted society to be ordered according to our community's values, but they are not partisan. Isaiah proclaims that we must feed those who are hungry and shelter those who are homeless,¹⁷ but makes no determination of the best way to do that. He doesn't mandate food pantries or food stamps, block grants or welfare work requirements, or any other specific government programs. We can disagree about how best to implement Jewish values in relation to the problems of hunger and homelessness. We can have a Hillel-Shammai discussion about policies and politics. How we care for one another is up to us to decide. That we must care for each other is not up for debate.

And that, when we drill down to the core value, is what Judaism truly says about religion and public policy. We cannot ignore the affairs of the world and the challenges that beset our society. There are plenty of topics to discuss, plenty of people who need help, plenty of broken pieces of our world. What we may not do is ignore them. The Book of Deuteronomy teaches that when a neighbor is in need of assistance, *lo l'hitalem*, "you may not remain indifferent," or, literally, "you may not hide yourself."¹⁸ The second century sage, Rabbi Tarfon, taught, *lo alecha ham'lacha ligmor, v'lo atah ben chorin l'hibateil mimena*, "it is not incumbent upon you to complete the task, but neither are you at liberty to neglect it."¹⁹ And the great teacher and social activist, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, writing in the midst of the struggle for civil rights in this country, reminded us, "This is no time for neutrality. We Jews cannot remain aloof or indifferent. We, too, are either ministers of the sacred or slaves of evil."²⁰ We must be engaged in the affairs of the world around us, guided by our Jewish texts and seeking to make our Jewish values manifest in the world.

Judaism doesn't have a one-size-fits-all approach to public policy. There are times when we must be Isaiah and rail against the systems of injustice and wrongdoing that darken our world. And there are times when we must engage one another in respectful Hillel-Shammai debates, not disputing whether we should use our values to shape the world into what we want it to be, but how we should do so. We begin, always, with Torah values and figure out how best to implement them so that our society can better reflect our ideals.

When we do so, when we see through the window of our sanctuary a world we want to improve, when we listen to one another, agree or disagree agreeably, when we seek to reflect our values and teachings in the workings of our world, then the words of Isaiah ring out:

“Then shall your light blaze forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily, your righteousness shall go before you, the glory of the Eternal shall be your rear guard. Then, when you call, the Eternal will answer. When you cry, God will say, ‘Here I am.’”²¹

May we seek in this new year to heed the words of Isaiah. May we find ways to make our values manifest in our repair of the world.

Kein yehi ratzon, may this be God's will.

And let us say, Amen.

¹ <https://theshalomcenter.org/content/leopard-isaiah>

² Rabbi Mark Greenspoon captures this sentiment in his excellent poem, “Just When An Introduction in Poetry, to the Haftarah of Yom Kippur Morning,” in *Yom Kippur Readings*, edited by Rabbi Dov Peretz Elikins (Jewish Lights Publishing, 2005), p. 139.

³ Amos 2:6-7; 5:21-24.

⁴ Micah 3:9.

⁵ Micah 6.8.

⁶ See Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 34b.

⁷ The phrase dates back to 1902 and was originally used concerning newspapers. In 1987, Martin Marty used it for the first time about religion. See

<https://www.dictionaryofchristianese.com/god-comforts-the-afflicted-and-afflicts-the-comfortable/>;

<http://baptistsearch.blogspot.com/2017/02/god-comforts-afflicted-and-afflicts.html>

⁸ Rabbi Eric Stark, in a conversation among rabbis on this topic. I am indebted to a remarkable group of colleagues whose insight on the topic of preaching about political issues shaped this sermon in numerous ways.

⁹ As referenced in *A Code of Jewish Ethics, Volume 2: Love Your Neighbor As Yourself* by Joseph Telushkin (Bell Tower, 2009), p. 169.

¹⁰ Thank you to Rabbi Tom Alpert for inspiring this insight.

¹¹ Genesis 2:15.

¹² See Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 72a, Shabbat 63a; Rashi on Exodus 22:1.

¹³ Leviticus 19:16.

¹⁴ In the Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia 59b, the Rabbis refer to 36 times, but provide no definitive list. Rabbi Seth Limmer recently counted and published his own list in his Rosh HaShanah sermon on Identity Politics. See

<https://www.chicagosinai.org/worship/sermons/our-identity-our-politics>

¹⁵ Famously, despite their different approaches, Hillel's disciples were willing to marry women from Shammai's school of thought, and vice versa, out of respect for one another. See Mishnah Yevamot 1:4.

¹⁶ Thank you to Rabbi Ariel Edery for this helpful framing.

¹⁷ Isaiah 58:7.

¹⁸ Deuteronomy 22:3

¹⁹ Pirkei Avot 2:16.

²⁰ Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, in "No Time for Neutrality," *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essay edited by Susanna Heschel* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997).

²¹ Isaiah 58: 8-9.