

## “The Jewish American Voters’ Guide”

Years ago, I offered a Rosh Hashanah “voters’ guide” ahead of our national elections. I based it on time-honored Jewish teachings, what many are now calling by the not-quite-elegant term “Jewish values.”

My guide will never tell you whom to vote for, neither explicitly nor wink-winkingly between the lines. I do not believe there is a correct party or candidate for Jews in any electoral race. I do believe, however, that there are Jewish concepts that should strongly influence our thinking process.

In that original Rosh Hashanah talk, I asked you to bring three great Jewish ideas with you into the voting booth (or to the absentee mail ballot), and to keep them in mind each day of your blessed American life. Here they are:

The first is a lesson that the Torah considers so important as to repeat it in one form or another thirty-six times: *ki gerim heyitem b’eretz mitzrayim*. “You were strangers in the land of Egypt.” Which then leads to: *Lo toneh*: “Do not wrong the stranger, for you were strangers.” *Lo til’chatzenu*: “Do not oppress the stranger, for you were strangers.” *Lo ta’anun*: “Do not ill-treat the stranger, the widow, the poor, the orphan, the down-trodden, for you were all of those. If you do mistreat them, I will heed their outcry as soon as they cry out to Me.”

You were strangers in Egypt. Try to remember your own crying out, your own terror. Now remember who and what caused that terror. Now, take *that* memory with you into the voting booth. Vote as the free person who remembers bondage. Vote as the materially-blessed person who remembers sleeping in your pledge garment for lack of a bed. Vote as the secure member of society who remembers not being able to get justice for lack of status or a bribe to the government of fear. Vote as one who hears the cries of the legally un-protected, or of the barely protected whose rights hang in the judicial balance.

Most poignantly in this year of racial awakening in America: Vote as one whose own grandparents were subjected to academic, residential and employment quotas, who were thought to be undesirable immigrant stock, and who were seen as un-white and therefore unwelcome. Vote as if one could imagine being immediately suspect because of one’s skin color or ethnic appearance.

*Ki gerim heyitem*: Remember what it feels like to be estranged. To forget is to return to Egypt, where we were slaves and we didn't even know it.

The second concept: *Im eyn ani li, mi li*; "If I am not for myself, who will be?" *U'ch'sheani l'atzmi mah ani*; "But if I am only for myself, what am I?" *V'im lo achshav, eymatai*; "And if not now, when?"

That's Hillel's dictum from the First Century BCE, famous to the point of cliché. As a voter's guide? Priceless. And most Jewish teachers would agree that it is the quintessential expression of our world-view, much like "Remember that you were slaves in Egypt."

Hillel would tell us to concern ourselves with self-preservation *and* with altruism at one-and-the-same time. He would say that if we are serving both ends of this dialectic in equal measure, then we are succeeding at our human task. Yes, we should vote our interests, including our economic interests and our Jewish people's interests, including the security interests of the State of Israel.

Still, we must always realize that what is good for all *is* in our self-interest. We watch our own back, *and* we remain idealistic to the degree that we keep striving for a society in which no one – not ourselves but not only ourselves - needs to worry about what's creeping up from behind.

"Drink water from your own cistern," says Proverbs, "but give the community its due."

And what is the third *shtikl* of Torah we can take into the voting booth? None other than the Torah of the *malach*, our friend the angel from the first day of Rosh Hashanah's Torah reading, who says "do not fear." *Al tir'i* says the angel to Hagar and shows her the well that can save her son. God says it to Abram and shows him the stars. God says it to Jacob and promises to accompany him down into Egypt and back home again. Moses says it to Joshua and hands him the reins of leadership. Isaiah says it to the Judean exiles in Babylonia and encourages them to find their way back to Eretz Yisrael.

On and on. *Al tira*. Do not fear.

Of course, *al tira* cannot really mean “don’t be afraid” in the usual sense, because indeed we *are* afraid: afraid of social violence, afraid of economic collapse, afraid of growing older without love and community and financial security. Afraid that the pandemic sweeping the world will only grow stronger before we can vaccinate against it. Afraid that it will be next to impossible to retrieve the relationships and social structures that took lifetimes to build and mere months to come apart.

So it cannot mean “don’t be afraid.” Rather, it has to mean, “don’t be afraid to do ‘forward *teshuvah*,’ to turn *toward* the world, rather than *away* from the world.” Don’t be afraid to face the frightening world with all your heart, your soul, and your might. With all your beliefs. With your whole self. *Al tira*. Do not bring fear to the act of voting. Bring courage!

Finally, let the shofar say it best. *T’kiah*: wake up and take notice. *Sh’varim*: there is much brokenness in the world. *T’ru’ah*: respond to the call and be part of the solution. *T’kiah g’dolah*: work toward that big, impossible dream of a just, free, prosperous, and healthy world.

In sum: “We were strangers in Egypt.” “Be for myself but not only for myself.” “Fear not, my people Israel.” And, of course, “if not now” – at this unprecedented and extraordinary time in our history – if not now, then when, indeed?

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