

EDITOR'S NOTE

“A PISTOL SHOT IN THE MIDDLE OF A CONCERT”—AND A SHOCKING STATEMENT OF R. KOOK

Should rabbis be political? Should they be involved in partisan political campaigns? Should they express themselves from the pulpit? Fifty years ago, before so many things changed, it was almost unthinkable for an American rabbi to endorse a candidate in public. It was considered bad taste or even an illegitimate encroachment on the secular; and though many Jews might have asked their *mara de-atra* who was best for the Jews or for Israel, I doubt that most would have been influenced by rabbinical positions on controversial social, economic, or international affairs.

The situation in Israel was different. There explicitly religious issues were prominent in public discourse. *Rabbanim* could not be expected to remain neutral regarding questions of Shabbat, *kashrut*, and the status of marriage and family law, among other subjects. Insofar as these questions were central to the platforms of particular parties, it was natural that rabbis would insist that voters give primary consideration to their positions on the place of religion in the state of Israel. None other than the Chief Rabbi Isaac Herzog, a sage not known for reckless protrusiveness, had brokered the formation of the United Religious List for the first Knesset elections.

To be sure, even in Israel leading rabbis and the rabbinate were not identified with clear-cut partisan positions on “secular” questions. There were exceptions that proved the rule. Rabbi Kook, to whom we will return later, notoriously jeopardized his standing when, at the end of his life, he spearheaded a campaign for the exoneration of the Revisionist Avraham Stavsky, who had been dubiously convicted in the Arlosorov murder case, and he was vilified by the Labor movement for his troubles. Rabbi Herzog, by condemning Jewish terrorism, courted the displeasure of some on the Zionist right. Generally, however, when Zionist rabbis wrote responsa on military and other public matters, during the first generation of the State, they justified the government, and thus propped national consensus. In Israel the consensus no longer exists, in part because

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of the greater influence of rabbis, and the communities that listen to them, in the public square, and in part because many have chosen to judge military and settlement policy as a subject for straightforward halakhic ruling, no different than the laws of Shabbat or *kashrut* or marriage. Rabbinic pronouncements on policy questions have therefore contributed to social divisiveness and are often deplored for that reason.

The appropriateness of religious neutrality is far from self-evident. After all, if Torah speaks to all areas of life, not only the parochial *kashrut* and Jewish culture issues, one would expect rabbis to proclaim the truth. And if certain candidates or parties are likely to promote or undermine the truth, why should rabbis refrain from saying so to all and sundry? Especially today, when the battleground between Judaism and all that is opposed to traditional religion runs through the fault lines dividing American social and political culture—the primacy of traditional family life, abortion, and euthanasia being much discussed examples—one might think it remiss for spiritual leaders to be silent. All the same, many take the received taboo against speaking out as a given, and disapprove its transgression.

The 19th century French writer Stendahl compared “politics in a work of literature” to “a pistol-shot in the middle of a concert, something loud and vulgar, and yet a thing to which it is not possible to refuse one’s attention.” Is politics in the pulpit any less disturbing? Is it vulgar? If so, is that a good enough reason to banish it? Or, to the contrary, must we speak truth, and command attention, against the conventions of silence and putative good taste?

II

Why should a religious leader shun political controversy? One answer is fear. Even in a constitutional republic, as John Marshall knew two centuries ago, the power to tax is the power to destroy. The expansion of the modern state since his day has only amplified the enormity and range of governmental intervention. Mighty is Caesar. If you must speak truth in his hearing, be wise and indirect; do not provoke his animus. He tolerates you; your institutions are tax-exempt; he smiles at your jokes. Why try his patience? Good taste, from this vantage point, is the residue of prudence.

For many, the clergyman who tells you what and whom to support undermines the very axioms of self-government. We have inherited the beautiful myth of the democratic citizen, burning the midnight oil over political position papers, eagerly communing over them with one’s fellow citizens, pondering the qualities and convictions of each candidate, and

coming to the moment of decision in the Protestant solitude of the voting booth. To accept one's political truth ready-made, as it were, from the pulpit mocks the sacred ritual of individual deliberation, cheapens the political process, and degrades the individual citizen's choice. The term "priest-ridden" conjures an image of ignorant unwashed masses whose blind obedience to their imperious shepherds renders them unworthy of the free man's franchise. Something of this polemic is evident in Prime Minister Gladstone's exchange with Father Newman after papal infallibility was declared. In the United States it fueled attacks on the New York Catholic Al Smith, whose presidency, we were warned, in 1928, would allow the Pope to dictate via a subterranean transatlantic tunnel. Lingering anti-Catholic prejudice was not neutralized until the West Virginia primary of 1960, when a modest financial investment in strategically situated Protestant ministers helped bring about a Kennedy landslide—a blow for toleration, perhaps, but a warning of the corruption that occurs when religious functionaries are bribed for less noble ends.

Fear is also fear of offending and alienating our audience. Shared politics often lends cohesion to a community. Perhaps non-Orthodox rabbis and theologically liberal Christians speak so much about politics because they cannot preach religious belief or uncompromising everyday morality without seeming to disapprove of their congregants. Where support, or criticism, for a particular brand of Israeli or American patriotism is widespread, rabbis can sooth their listeners and enhance their own security, at small cost, by playing to their expectations.

Politics tends to get personal. To repudiate your candidate or cause, on religious grounds, or to endorse, on religious grounds, a politician or policy you loathe, is like an insult. Where general communal agreement is lacking, taking sides in politics, thereby arousing strong feelings and intense loyalties that reflect deep-seated, incorrigible convictions, can provoke profound discord among our congregants and students and estrange them from each other and from us. Even where nearly everyone marches in step, the individual outside the tent is liable to feel excluded and unwelcome.

You remind me that religion too tends to be personal; which is why nice people avoid discussing either religion or politics in company and often look askance at those who do. Indeed many rabbis feel obliged to watch their words and tiptoe carefully when speaking about Shabbat, interpersonal relations, even fundamental beliefs. Nonetheless, it is understood that an Orthodox rabbi or teacher is obligated professionally to uphold the tenets of his faith, and is presumed competent to preach Orthodoxy in a judicious and un-invasive manner.

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Fear is also the often justified fear that many rabbis are out of their depth commenting on international politics, economics, or social and cultural controversies. The voluble ecclesiastical equivalent of the pistol shot in the middle of a concert may be a sure but shortsighted means to arouse interest. In the long run, especially when such orations become predictable, the transient spike of attention threatens to overshadow the intellectual authority in Torah, in ethics, and in religion that are necessary for spiritual leadership. The pontificating rabbi with his political megaphone risks becoming one more shouting voice in a raucous public arena, and not the best informed one at that. Where he is taken seriously, the ostensible influence of his status makes laymen reluctant to question him; especially when the rabbi's intervention is ill-judged, as Josh Fitterman observes, it seems to close off the kind of compromise that is often necessary for political solutions.

Twenty five years ago, I wrote about the propriety of rabbis judging public issues in the name of Torah.¹ I thought then, and continue to think now, that religious authorities are entitled to do as they see fit, so long as they recognize the attendant dangers. I also explained, and commended, the doctrine of indirect communication. Kierkegaard showed that truths pertaining to inner transformation are not conveyed directly in the manner that one relays an item of information. The teacher's goal is to bring the learner to the truth by reduplicating the teacher's experience of the truth. Our most fundamental ethical-religious orientation, our ideas of God and our relationship to Him, fear, love, yearning and obedience, the meaning of our existence before Him and the nature of our love and concern for other people, require such subjective appropriation.

One reason that political beliefs are held with such deep-seated fervor is that these beliefs are often rightly or wrongly experienced as fundamental to one's entire worldview, perhaps to one's very identity. To challenge and seek to transform such convictions is not unlike the endeavor to educate and convert the individual to religious existence.

Occasionally, to be sure, the religious teacher must speak directly, even urgently, in favor or against a particular political position, just as one is compelled to declare the principles and details of halakhic practice. More characteristically, however, the religious teacher is not called upon to exhibit authoritative mastery of subjects like the intricacies of immigration

¹ See "Who Speaks for Torah—and How?," in Shubert Spero and Yitzchak Pessin, *Religious Zionism: After 40 Years of Statehood*, 1988; available online at www.atid.org/resources/carmy/whospeaks.asp. See also "Murderers, Nazis, Traitors, Wise Men and Noise," accessible at www.atid.org/resources/carmy/murderers.asp.

reform or health care or climate control. What justifies discussing such topics in a religious context is precisely the way in which political judgments reflect fundamental and often deep-seated ethical and religious orientations. It is important to lead the listener to appreciate how and why one's response matters religiously: to examine, for example, our attitudes towards the stranger and our concern for the integrity of national culture; the value of health and the proper limits of governmental intrusion as opposed to independent initiative; our desires for the immediate present and our commitment to future generations; and so on. As R. Soloveitchik used to say, the vocation of the religious teacher is to create the religiously informed "frame of reference" within which the individual does his or her own thinking.

At worst, then, we feel constrained to separate political discourse from rabbinical teaching for mundane reasons like fear of negative reactions or deficiencies in our competence. At best, limits on political speech may be part of a positive educational strategy, one that encourages respect for individual intellectual and religious-ethical maturity and the cultivation of inwardness.

III

There is another strand in the popular discomfort regarding rabbis who take partisan positions that we have yet to reckon with. Were it not for the following passage of R. Kook I might have continued to dismiss this factor:

There is a saint who is good to all, so that even when judgment is aroused against the Gentiles his heart is pained within him. Sometimes he acts against his inner inclination out of love for Israel, so beleaguered by the oppression of the nations. Yet he must afterwards cleanse himself of the impure forces attached to the traits of anger and wrath. He then returns to his place, to elevate the horn of Israel in a form that is full of loving kindness and overflows with streams of loving kindness for the entire world, and liberates the entire world from judgment. "You [Abraham] loved to justify My creatures and hated to condemn them."²

The subject is opposition to evil. R. Kook is not here talking about righteous indignation concerning policy issues where the religious community

² *Meorot ha-Reiyah, Yerah ha-Etanim* (Makhon ha-Rav Tsevi Yehuda, 1998), ed. Ben Zion Shapira, 55. Quote from *Genesis Rabba* 49:7.

has a stake or about the perennial conflicts about fundamental political and moral principles. Naturally he sees the urgency in vigorous opposition to hard-core oppressors of Israel. The surprise is R. Kook's statement that opposition even to Czarist minions or to the burgeoning anti-Semitic agitators of the late 19th and early 20th centuries goes against his inner inclination. And then, appallingly, R. Kook avers that the saintly person must cleanse himself of the stigma of anger inseparable from his opposition. One can only imagine his judgment about the divisions between garden variety Reaganites and Clintonites, or run of the mill liberals and libertarians.

Does one need to react that passionate opposition to such wickedness is no vice? That, to the contrary, the absence of strong resentment in the face of evil is an abdication of moral and religious responsibility? R. Kook fully endorses the struggle against evil, and yet, with the idealism that is perhaps a practical defect and surely is his spiritual glory, he aspires to be purified of the spiritual aftertaste of the righteous indignation in the name of an undifferentiated all-encompassing impartial love.

Such desire as R. Kook expresses is a rare spiritual phenomenon. When adopted as a sentimental ideal by anyone but the spiritual elite for whom R. Kook speaks, it is a dangerous, pernicious ideal, because it dissolves hatred of evil in a warm bath of self-indulgent *ersatz* sanctity and quickly degenerates into tolerance of evil and indifference to evil. No wonder these lines were not published in R. Kook's lifetime. Nonetheless, the awareness that angry resentment, even when justified and morally necessary, is a spiritual diminution, strikes a deep chord within us.

When people object to religious figures advocating a political position, perhaps it is not only out of annoyance at the intrusion of God into their secular, God-free lives, or the perception that the clergyman is not fully up to the task, or even the conviction that one's own sensitivity and comprehension make such involvement unnecessary and meddlesome. Perhaps it is because the layman or laywoman, who is quite removed from the intense world of R. Kook's notebook, is not totally unmoved by his aspiration. Perhaps such individuals yearn for the presence of a spiritual personality who transcends human partisanship, who embodies all-embracing love, and they project that yearning onto the local clergyman.

Perhaps this impulse to imagine the man of God who is beyond human partisanship is even stronger for individuals whose own daily comportment lacks consuming spiritual vision or religious rigor, for whom the thought of spiritual completeness is transferred vicariously onto the improbable figure officiating in their local pulpit. One is tempted to dismiss such thinking as the reflex of the attenuated, secularized Christianity

in which we live, with its failure to come to grips with evil, its compulsive separation of religious ritual from real life, the mild, effete image of its clergy, its avoidance of God as a commanding and demanding presence. Yet we can hardly say this about R. Kook. Is it not possible that the drama in R. Kook's study leaves some faint imprint on the dreams of the many?

One significant reason that people want their house of worship non-political, as we noted, is their reluctance to confront religiously informed insights that challenge their own favored positions. Robust infusions of religious thinking, they fear, will disturb them. We now consider an additional reason: the partisan rabbi offends their idea of what a clergyman ought to represent. Offense is especially liable when candidates and particular policies, rather than general philosophical orientations, are endorsed or condemned because it is the advocacy of a "political platform," with its characteristic pointed vehemence and triumphant jubilation that is experienced as partisanship, as taking sides, thus violating their wish to see the rabbi as above such things.

Few of us are worthy of, or aspire to, the enormous, lofty servitude that R. Kook willingly bore. Few can fully comprehend the inner world of unconstrained love for humanity that enabled R. Kook to meditate on this universal love, and to feel "defilement" due to his righteous anger at the promulgators of unmitigated evil. In our time, one of increased polarization between the upholders of traditional religion and its ethical values and those who are indifferent or hostile, although we recognize our inadequacy in the light of R. Kook's standard, there are many reasons to call attention to our commitments, even when the comfort-seeking audience in the concert hall of Jewish ritual finds the noise disturbing and distasteful. Yet the very same estrangement makes it ever more important, for us and for those we address, that we speak in a way that is not attention-grabbing in a vulgar way and that enhances, rather than diminishes, the respect we bring to the human condition and the human being.