

# Politics, Religion, and the Right

- Basil Herring.

Why does this verse then add “but you shall not do so unto the Lord your God,” lo taasun ken laShem Elokeikhem? Would it ever occur to a Jew to destroy every trace of the legitimate service of God? Would a Jew ever presume to think it permissible, for instance, to destroy God’s altar? The answer, says R. Ishmael, is that this verse warns the Jew against imitating the idolater by doing things that will ultimately lead to the destruction of God’s Temple.

Let’s have a quick quiz to sharpen your wits: what is the single most important constituency in the Republican Party, analogous to Blacks or Labor in the Democratic Party? What particular group of Americans dominates about half the State Republican parties? Which group of voters represents about 13% of the electorate? There is one answer to all of the above: it is “Christian fundamentalists.” And amongst those fundamentalists, who are so central to the contemporary Republican politics, the increasingly dominant party in American political life, the most influential group is the so-called Christian Coalition, led by Pat Robertson. One more question: who is Pat Robertson? Answer: besides founding and leading the Christian Coalition, he is a fabulously wealthy businessman, owner of the Christian Broadcasting Network that is watched by millions of Americans every morning, he is also the owner of a University and a legal center, and a few years ago he published a book, that has already sold a half million copies, and is entitled *The New World Order*, a major thesis of which is that certain Jewish bankers with names like Warburg and Rothschild, are villains who have conspired to control much of the Western world over the last century or so. This is the man who expects to have veto power over the next Republican presidential ticket, in exchange for his support, especially now that Mr. Dole, after his poor showing in Iowa last weekend, is not an automatic shoe-in for his party’s nomination.

Should Jews be concerned about this man and his growing power? Should we be worried about the rise of the fundamentalist Christian right and its challenge to the liberal traditions of tolerance for all faiths under which American Jews have flourished to date? Or should we cautiously welcome the prospect of a return to fundamental biblical values and practices in American public life, the strengthening of traditional family patterns, an end to the indiscriminate abortion practices that each year terminate hundreds of thousands of pregnancies in this country, and the sorely needed government subsidization of Jewish Day Schools, not to speak of the unqualified support of the State of Israel that those fundamentalists provide year after year? To those Jews whose position on many of the social issues of our time are in accordance with a liberal secular humanism, there is no conflict or doubt on this question: as the biblical expression puts it, they openly and full-heartedly declare “lo mi-duvshekh ve’lo me-uktzeikh”: “we want neither your honey nor your sting,” neither your benefits nor your costs, not your opportunities nor your dangers. And indeed Mr. Robertson has no love for liberal Jews either: in an earlier book, he wrote that such liberal Jews “have forsaken Biblical faith in God,” and that they “have tried to destroy the Christian position in the world.” But what about the growing minority of Jews who do not necessarily regard themselves as secular humanists, but are acutely aware of the erosion of traditional values, biblical values, if you will, who find themselves, or should we say ourselves, in agreement with the fundamentalists on many of the specific policy issues that are now before our troubled and increasingly rootless society, how

should they respond to the growing Christian crescendo in American public life? Do you take the honey and risk the sting? Or do you resist the seductive allure of such strange political bedfellows whose crusading Cross has throughout church history been a dangerous anathema to any self-respecting Jew?

Now you will surely not expect me to provide a comprehensive answer to this exceedingly complex and delicate issue over the course of the next ten minutes. All that I can hope to achieve is make a modest beginning, by way of a careful examination of one or two texts as we encounter them in the literature, as they may point us in a general direction. And in that regard, there is indeed a marvelous starting point, right here in our parshah, as understood by R. Moshe Feinstein, of blessed memory.

You shall surely destroy all the places where the nations whom you inherit have served their gods. And you shall break down their altars, dash in pieces their pillars, burn the trees they worship, and hew down the graven images of their gods, and destroy their name out of that place. But you shall not do so unto the Lord your God. Deut. 12:2-4

The Torah here obviously demands that the Jew, upon entering the promised land, is to destroy every trace and accouterment of idolatry. Well enough. But the Sifri records an excellent question of R. Ishmael: why does this verse then add “but you shall not do so unto the Lord your God,” lo taasun ken laShem Elokeikhem? Would it ever occur to a Jew to destroy every trace of the legitimate service of God? Would a Jew ever presume to think it permissible, for instance, to destroy God’s altar? The answer, says R. Ishmael, is that this verse warns the Jew against imitating the idolater by doing things that will ultimately lead to the destruction of God’s Temple. Now Reb Moshe asks the following question: what sins cause the destruction of God’s Temple? Surely it is the when Jews commit the cardinal transgressions of idolatry, homicide, or adultery. But the Israelites here are not warned against these major infractions that might lead to the destruction of the Temple of God, they are only warned against destroying God’s altar or place of worship, acts which in no way can lead to the destruction of the Bet ha-Mikdash and the exile of the people from their land?

The answer, is that such an act can indeed bring about such consequences. For what does it mean when I destroy someone’s altar? By that act I deny the validity of his faith and his worship, and I undermine the fundamental awareness of life sanctified to the one and only God. It is as if the Torah is saying: if you want to worship an idol, or commit adultery—that is your problem, and you will pay the price personally. But if you presume to prevent others from worshiping God, if you stand in the way of their religious expression, you will cause the destruction not only of yourself, but of your people. For such religious intolerance will in the end lead to religious warfare, doctrinal witch-hunts, sectarian extremism, elitist exclusion, and mutual hatred. As long as your fellow Jew serves one God, and avoids paganism, don’t destroy his altar. For if you do, the end result will be the destruction of everything you cherish as you worship the one true God.

This is illustrated, says R. Moshe, by the following story, found in the gemara Sukkot 56b: It happened when the Greeks ruled over Israel that Miriam of the priestly family of Bilga became an apostate to the faith, and married a member of the Greek royal family. When the Greeks overran the Temple, she went over to the altar and kicked it with her shoe, saying “You are like a wolf, for you consume the precious possessions of the Jews, which they sacrifice upon you, without your saving them when they really need you?” When the Sages of Israel heard this, and

returned to the Temple with the help of the Hashmonaim, they punished her family and their associates... Why did they punish her family? In accordance with the expression “what children speak in the street reflects what they hear at home.” And why did they punish their associates? Said Abaye it is in accordance with the people’s expression, “woe to the wicked, woe to his neighbor.”

What was her terrible crime? Was it idol worship? Was her family punished because she married out of the faith? Amazingly, serious as intermarriage is, the answer is No: it was her intolerance, insensitivity, her religious bigotry, manifested by kicking the altar at which her fellow Jews worshiped, even as she professed to have their best interests at heart! Moreover, it was not she alone who was guilty, she must have learned such infectious prejudice at her parent’s proverbial kitchen table, and from the implicit behavior of those around her, who at the very least tolerated her behavior that should have been intolerable and condemned.

There is, I believe, a fundamental lesson here, taught to us by our Sages, and amplified in these words of the great Rabbi Feinstein in our own time, and it is this: a God-fearing civil society in which Jews can live in accordance with the Torah and the will of God, can only be achieved on a foundation of thorough religious tolerance. But if building a society that subscribes to biblical values and practices requires that you make common cause with those who do not demonstrate beyond any reasonable doubt that they are tolerant of others, open to varying religious traditions, or sensitive to the modes of worship of their fellow citizens, then you make a terrible, potentially disastrous mistake. Much as you are attracted by a group’s adherence to so-called “traditional” or “family” values, and for all that they offer a comforting and supportive framework to strengthen your own religious or political agenda, in the long run you do yourself no favor to align yourself in a marriage of convenience with those who ultimately reject your claim to moral and religious legitimacy, and who, when pressed, cannot plausibly deny that in the end you and your fellow Jews will see their truth, and embrace their faith, or else be condemned to eternal damnation. And this is certainly true when, as in the particular situation at hand, such potential partners have demonstrated a dubious proclivity to use code words such as “European bankers,” when they should know full well that their followers are all too quick to associate such terms with the Jews, perfidious or otherwise. Why strengthen or legitimize such people for short run gain?

And American Jews, I dare say, really do not need religion ensconced and empowered in the high places of the land. That will not make more young Jews turn out of conviction and piety to the tenets of our faith. It will more likely lead to the kind of religious exclusion and shallowness that will cause them to turn even further away from our faith. And as for the benefits of a greater social cohesion that will supposedly come from a more religious society, such a thesis is questionable at best: to the contrary, by weakening the wall that separates Church from State, this country will quite possibly exacerbate social divisiveness, as evidenced by the contemporary religious wars in Northern Ireland, Bangladesh, Russia, Algeria, India, Egypt, the Sudan, and elsewhere. And more prayer or religion in public places will not necessarily abet the assorted pathologies of this land: as a society we already have more prayer, more church attendance, more charity, more parochial schools, more people who believe in God, than any other westernized nation—and, at the same time, we also have more crime and other social problems as well.

Last week, I quoted George Washington’s letter to the Jews of Newport, on the subject of tolerance. Today, and in conclusion, I would quote that other Founding Father, Thomas

Jefferson, on the subject, of all things, the altar of God. For when in 1800 Jefferson ran for President, the full fury of the Christian clergy of Philadelphia was unleashed against him, alleging that as Ambassador to France he had allied himself with the anti-Christian godless forces who supposedly worshiped reason, and not God. When he heard of this attack, Jefferson wrote a letter in which he stated "I have sworn upon the altar of God, eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man." These words, which are engraved in stone at the base of the rotunda of the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, are taken by most people who see or hear them, to be a reference to tyrants such as George III or Louis XVI. In fact, however, Jefferson was referring to the Christian clergy in Philadelphia, the city of the Liberty Bell, where American freedom was born. Indeed as we have seen, it is the very altar of God, which stands as silent testimony against the religious imperialism, and the tyranny of the prejudice of the prelates, of which Jefferson spoke.

Today, Americans need have no fear that the British will once again impose their will on these rebellious colonies. But today, as we prepare for 1996 and beyond, there is every reason to be vigilant that our hard won religious freedoms, too often taken for granted, might be at risk, not from the tyranny of kings, but of ministers and the minions of men of the cloth.