

Strong Medicine

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When I was a young rabbi of a small congregation on Cape Cod, I served on the board of an organization, which supported women who found themselves with unplanned pregnancies. We had all kinds of programs to support families, regardless of the choice they made.

I remember an Episcopal minister coming up to me one day and complementing me on my courage. He said, "You are certainly brave to be so public about your support of the pro-choice movement. Aren't you worried about what your congregants will say?"

I was taken aback. If anything my congregants were ahead of me on this on many other progressive issues!" "So no," I answered this fine fellow, "I am not particularly gutsy or bold. I believe what I believe, and truthfully, I do represent a pretty liberal constituency!"

This is nothing new. Historically, Jews have almost always fallen on the liberal side of most social issues: the labor movement in first half of the 20th century, the civil rights movement in the fifties, later the women's liberation, the anti-war movement in the sixties, and a host of other progressive social issues.

The often-provocative Norman Podhoretz, former editor of Commentary Magazine, recently wrote a book entitled, "*Why Are Jews Liberals?*"

He wrote the book for lots of reasons; chief among them is his incomprehension, even irritation because so many of his fellow-Jews support Barack Obama. Seventy eight percent of Jews voted for Obama...three percent higher than in any other presidential election in history.

If you remember, last October, many pundits predicted that Obama's Jewish support would peel away before the election. There was his more nuanced approach to Israel in contrast to McCain's unequivocal position. There was the problem of Obama's association with Rev. Jeremiah Wright, whose venomous attacks on Zionism and Jews bordered on blatant anti-Semitism. Even Obama's middle name "Hussein," a detail that his opponents, (and I do not attribute this to John McCain whom I believe ran a respectable

campaign,) but others on his behalf, attempted to exploit, particularly among elderly voters in Florida—even this had little effect with Jewish votes.

Even now, with right-wing Jewish organizations trying to discredit Obama, claiming he is placing undue pressure on Israel to stop the settlements, and not enough pressure on the Palestinians to recognize Israel and denounce violence, still, the poles seem to indicate that Jews continue to support President Obama in record numbers.

What is it about Jews and their willingness to vote against their own interests?

I learned the answer to this from a fellow I run with during the summer. He is ten years older than I, and probably the only other human being who actually more slowly than I!

My summer running pal is a very smart guy. I have mentioned him before. He is Jewish by birth, but an orthodox atheist by choice.

Speaking of atheists, it reminds me of the epitaph written on the tombstone of a non-believer found in a cemetery in Maryland: *Here lies an atheist—all dressed up and no place to go:*

Do you know that atheists are among the largest growing “religious groups” (kind of an oxymoron if I’ve ever heard one!) in the United States? During the first five months of 2009, according to a recent report, 95 new atheist groups formed through an organization called meetup.com. A book has recently come out, *Parenting Beyond Belief: On Raising Ethical, Caring Kids Without Religion* written by Dale McGowen.

Many atheists are seeking each other out, fulfilling the very basic human instinct for fellowship, a desire to be spend time with people with whom you share your beliefs or lack of beliefs, as the case may be.

Some groups of atheists have begun to develop rites to mark life passages, like death, birth and marriage. Other more radical organizations have adopted ceremonies to purge the religious rituals foisted upon them by their parents.

There is the *de-baptism*, where the individual stands up at an atheist meeting and publicly declares his rejection of the faith into which he was born.

I have to admit I did not come across any rituals of Jewish men attempting to remedy the initiation rite imposed upon them on the eighth day of their life.

Getting back to my Jewish atheist friend, the one I run with in the summer. He defiantly avoids synagogue whenever he can. I am not sure he has ever belonged to a synagogue. He once described his *bar mitzvah*, which took place over fifty years ago in his native New York City. It was a fiasco. Poor instruction, a “rent-a-rabbi in a hired hall...it reflected the worst of Jewish synagogue life. It left him with a bitter taste that never faded.

Oddly enough, in spite of his protests, in my opinion, my friend lives a very Jewish life. He doesn't believe in God or organized religion, but he lives his life as if he does.

He is a physician who has dedicated his life to healing. Until he retired, he took care of patients, many of whom came from underserved neighborhoods, with little access to medical care.

In his retirement he has worked to help reform medical care, tirelessly advocating for the changes he believes will bring better care to more people.

All of these attributes would make him, in my mind at least, a pious man, though if I were ever to say this to him, he would blanch at the suggestion. He might even be offended. **But I know better.**

Because I know that Judaism teaches that it matters little what one *says* to God, and much more what one *does* to God's creations.

The sages of the Talmud spoke about non-believers. In fact the question was posed: when is it acceptable to be an atheist? When you pass a beggar in the street seeking alms, and you say to yourself, “I can ignore this man. After all, doesn't the Bible say that God created the world and everything in it? If God didn't want there to be beggars, he wouldn't have created them. Who am I to question God's judgment, and try change the Divine plan?”

Said the sages, in that case, deny there is a God and give the poor man alms.

One of my teachers once put it this way: If you took a scissors and cut out every passage of the Bible that deals with *kashrut*, what you can eat and what you are forbidden from eating...you'd a couple of empty spaces.

If you took a pair of scissors and cut out the parts of the Bible that have to do with Shabbat, one of Judaism's most unique and central gifts to the world, you would have a few more empty spaces.

If you went looking for the parts about bar and bat mitzvahs...good luck. They are not even mentioned in the Bible. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob never had bar mitzvahs...thank God. Because it would have been near impossible to find a DJ in ancient Canaan.

What you will find in the Bible is verse after verse about economic justice, about being honest in one's business dealings. There are those words we will hear in next week's Yom Kippur *haphTORAH*, "Why, one your fast days do you see to your business and oppress your workers?" That has to do with how one treats their workers.

And then there is that famous verse, the foundation of not just our faith, but every worthy religion: Love your neighbor as yourself.

Last year, clergy of all denominations got a-twitter about a spate of books written by philosophers attacking religion and defending atheism. Martin Marty a very wise Christian theologian and long-time contributor to Christian Century magazine claimed in an essay that to try defend religion is a waste of time. To prove the existence of God, is a foolish misuse of effort and energy.

Rather, he claimed, if God, and by extension religion, needs to be justified, better its adherents spend their time living up to the highest ideals of their faith. Then people will see the legitimacy, purpose and value of religion.

One of this generation's boldest and most influential Jews is Michael Steinhardt. Steinhardt made a ton of money, established a number of charities, the best known being Birthright. This organization takes college age kids on all expense paid trips to Israel. Most have never been to Israel, many of these

young people have very loose connections to Judaism and have drifted from any organizational life.

Steinhart believes if you offer an all-expense-paid trip to Israel, to young Jewish adults, their Jewish soul will be stirred and their pride in Israel, the Jewish homeland will be ignited.

Michael Steinhart is an atheist. He believes in the Jewish people, but not so much in the religion. He contends that Jews developed a series of core values over the centuries: education, tzedakah, belief in the, a strong sense of group responsibility, and an ability to succeed in any society in which merit is valued over prejudice.

And that in a nutshell is the answer to Norman Podhoretz, who doesn't understand why Jews are so quick to vote against what that others might perceive to be their own self-interests.

Voting for more funds for education; greater equity in health care, advocating for the alien, for the poor, the marginalized...these are core Jewish values that from Biblical times have never been in doubt.

It would be a serious misrepresentation to claim that God is not at the heart of Judaism. For there to be a *mitzvah* a commandment, there must be a **commander**. However there has never been an oath required to gain admission to a synagogue. Because we are not a religion of dogma. We are a people of deed.

What is between you and God is your business. How people relate to one another? That is how Judaism is expressed in the world.

One of my favorite stories of all time, for it best embodies my own philosophy on life is about an unusual custom found in an unknown town, far from any major city. It was their practice to employ a man who would sit all day and night in a watchtower near the road entering the town. His job was to await the coming of the Messiah.

The plan was that when he spotted the Messiah in the distance, he would carefully descend the rickety steps of the tower, and run to the town to alert the people so they would be ready to greet the Messiah.

A stranger happened upon the tower, and curious, he called to the watchman. What are doing?

Answered the watchman, "I am waiting for the Messiah."

"Tell me," asked the stranger, "Do you like your job? I'm sure it doesn't pay very much."

"That's true...but its very steady work."

It is the same for us...whether you believe that the Messiah will come one day or not, whatever your theological convictions...one of the supreme *mitzvot*...the most sacred of all commandments in Judaism is to engage in the work of *tikkun olam*, to bring healing to the broken and hope to the defeated.

The great theologian and social activist, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote in his opus, *God in Search of Man*, "God is hiding in the world. Our task is to let the divine emerge *from our deeds*."

Ours is not a religion of blind or bigoted faith. To be a Jew is to yearn, and question, to seek and reason; to hope, to listen, to love by embracing the world, with all of its splendor and its flaws.

That has been the mantra of our Jewish faith since the days of the prophets. It is the hymn, which our ancestors sang. It is the standard behind which, God willing, Jews will march for all eternity.