

The Senator, the Reverend and the Rabbi; What to do when Wright is Wrong

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Rabbis occasionally experience a problem as the week wears on. It's known as "what do I preach on." It seems that almost all topics have been exhausted, although you know deep down inside that that certainly is not the case, and that careful study of the week's Torah portion will certainly yield an idea. Invariably, something clicks into place and the long hours of waiting and preparation pay off, and a sermon materializes. Sometimes, the opposite is the case: there is a surfeit of topics, and one now is faced with having to make a decision about which one to preach on. And every so often a topic is handed to the preacher on a silver platter. Something happens and you know instantly that this is the topic you'll be preaching on this week. Needless to say, this has been one such week. I had not one good topic, but an over-abundance of hot topics, from the governor of New York, to the situation in Gaza, to Iran's growing Nuclear threat, to Senator Obama's campaign for the presidency, and any one of them provided excellent and ample material for Jewish preaching, so my problem wasn't one of "what do I preach on this week?" but rather, "how can I select from such fertile ground?"

This was indeed my lucky week, for Senator Barack Obama and the Reverend Jeremiah Wright have teamed up to ensure ample fodder for preachers of any and all denominations. And the good news is that this topic is not likely to dry up—we preachers will be able to take this ball and run with it for quite some time to come. Why, this is even better than Mitt Romney being a Mormon, which from my perspective was really a non-starter. Having lived in Salt Lake City for a number of years, I know from

close personal experience and observation that Mormons are the most decent, honest and honorable people one could hope to encounter. Indeed, I have often wished that our Jews could exhibit some of the same behavior traits that Mormons routinely do. I would not hesitate as much as half a second to vote for a Mormon of either party. The mini-storm of controversy which surrounded Governor Romney's candidacy was something started by fundamentalist Christians who have difficulty accepting another variety of fundamentalist Christianity. Are Mormons Christian? I guess it all depends on how you define Christianity, and given their definition, I suppose the Mormons would not qualify but then again, who cares? I remember at one meeting in Salt Lake City when the topic was brought up. As the only rabbi in the state, my opinion was solicited, I responded "to tell you the truth, all you goyim look alike to me." My remarks were very well accepted by the group.

But the Reverend Jeremiah Wright is a different case altogether. He is among other things a licensed minister in the United Church of Christ, a generally upper-class or upper middle class mainstream Protestant denomination the vast majority of whose adherents are white Americans, (Please note: that's the Congregational Church just a block away,) so his remarks would not be regarded in the same light as those of say, the Reverend Jerry Falwell, or the Reverend Al Sharpton, both of whom are noted for making outlandish remarks of one sort or another. The things that one hears from the pulpit of a Congregational Church tended to be liberal, but mainstream, and I would hesitate to apply either of these labels to Reverend Wright.

He does however fall in that category of preachers to be found among African Americans where resentment over slavery, discrimination, and

America's tragic and lengthy civil rights struggle loom large in the group consciousness. It would indeed be difficult to maintain a cheerful countenance if you knew that all you were destined for was a menial career, if indeed the word "career" is not a misnomer verging on the offensive, if educational opportunities were denied you, and dreaming the American dream didn't apply to anyone you knew. While I didn't experience such things directly, I learned about them at a rather young age, as my mother described scrubbing the streets of Vienna with a toothbrush while a Nazi held a gun to her head. There were lynch mobs in the South and there were lynch mobs in Europe. Innocent people were slain by the scores in America, and by the millions in Europe, and so, while statistics really don't count, I think I have a basic understanding of what it means to be regarded as an outsider, and while many African Americans can recite the names of family members who suffered or perished under the oppressor's heel, I can recite the names of family members who were taken away at gunpoint to perish in the concentration camps. Is their pain worse than ours? Is ours worse than theirs? Perhaps it depends on where you are standing and your ability to acknowledge the reality of the other's pain and suffering. But I learned this lesson early on from my parents who were not at all disappointed in me when I was arrested for my involvement in the civil rights movement.

But I think that 34 years in the rabbinate had given me an insight into the role that a religious leader is expected to play and the function that preaching plays in fulfilling that role. A religious leader must endeavor at all times to bring people closer to God, to lift up their spirits, to teach an appreciation for the value of others. I have at times stood in this pulpit and criticized the government for its actions. I have gone to the Capitol, met with Senators and members of Congress and told them where I felt more

effort was needed. I have gone to the White House and spoken up on behalf of Americans whose share in the American dream was compromised. I have at all times done so in fulfillment of my role as a Rabbi and in keeping with the teachings of Torah. Even when I have taken the government to task for its failures to live up to its responsibilities, I have done so in a manner reflecting decency, good breeding, and a concern for the dignity of those whom I was addressing. Not so Reverend Wright.

Reverend Wright is a demagogue, he is a racist, he is an anti-Semite and he is a polarizer, not a uniter. One does not profess a love for America even when disagreeing with its policies, and say the words he uttered from the pulpit. No one of any decency should ever harbor the thought concerning 9/11 that America had it coming. No one should ever say the racially polarizing and divisive things that he did from the pulpit and presume to call himself a representative of a religious tradition.

At the same time, one can recognize the background from which he speaks. The interesting thing, however, is that he never experienced any of those things. He grew up in a comfortable middle class environment, attended quality schools where he received an excellent education. But he has found what works with his constituency who emerge from a background of the deprivation to which I referred earlier, and it is entirely reasonable to expect people coming from such a background to be angry and upset, but it is also reasonable to expect people to look for ways to solve the problem rather than to "get back" at those who did this to them. At least this is the lesson which my Jewish faith teaches me. We could say that the Egyptians had it coming for what they did to us, but from the Midrash we learn that when the angels rejoiced that the Egyptians were drowning in the sea, God rebuked them saying: "my creatures are perishing, and you sing praises?" It

is easy and indeed right to be angry with the oppressor, and yet we are told time and again that Christianity is a religion of love and compassion. Where are these virtues to be found in Reverend Wright's oratory?

The other day we were treated to a sermon by the current preacher of the church that Reverend Wright served for so many years, and he contrasted the great deal of good accomplished by this man, comparing them with the "sound bites" served up by his detractors. Again, all I can say is that it is not a matter of proportionality, many good things contrasted with some intemperate remarks, but a hate filled man baring his soul. One might as well say that Hitler, while he did some wicked things, nonetheless built roads and hospitals, advanced the cause of science and art, and loved children and dogs. To give a lifetime achievement award to Louis Farrakhan is not a mistake, it is an evil act. Enough of Reverend Wright.

Senator Obama, on the other hand, is cut from entirely different cloth. He is a man of distinction, of honor, discernment and certainly a person whose views do not match those of his pastor. Of all three candidates currently running for the presidency, he is quite arguably the strongest in his advocacy position for Israel. Senator Obama has made it totally clear that the United States should support Israel, that it is not the purpose of the United States to dictate terms to Israel nor to drag the prime minister of Israel to the negotiating table, and that the Palestinians will simply have to learn to accept the reality of a two state solution and live in peace alongside Israel. There have unfortunately been a great many remarks circulating characterizing Senator Obama as both an anti-Semite and someone who is opposed in some way to Israel or its right to exist as a sovereign state. Let me state right now clearly and unequivocally that such statements are outright lies and bear no relation whatsoever to anything Senator Obama has

ever said or—if I may make so bold as to conjecture what goes on inside this man's head, even thought. He is solidly on our side, and should he be elected, we Jews need have no fears either about where he stands, or what he might do.

There is further, no question about his ability to serve as president of the United States. Indeed we are blessed with three candidates any one of whom could fill the office in a responsible and honorable fashion. Yes, there are matters of politics and any one of us may prefer one above the other two, but none of us need have any fear that the election of any one of the three would result in disaster for the nation. At the present time, Senator Obama is not the man I would vote for, but as a Jew I would have no fear about anything he might do should he be the man that other Americans choose to be our 44th president.

At the same time I must register my dismay at the way Senator Obama has handled this controversy over Reverend Wright. I understand that he has a long relationship with his pastor, a man who brought him to his Christian faith, and who has meant a great deal to him and his family. I am particularly appreciative of the manner in which he articulated that relationship and expressed his undying appreciation for his religious mentor. He furthermore made abundantly clear that he did not share his mentor's views as they were reflected in the remarks mistakenly referred to as "soundbites." That was good. He doesn't have to agree with everything that his pastor said. As a man who aspires to national leadership however, he should have said not only that he disagreed with them, but they were wrong and wrongheaded, and that Reverend Wright was wrong in ever having uttered them. It would not have been out of order for him to register shock and dismay at Reverend Wright's remarks, and I am disappointed that he

failed to do so. He knew for quite some time about his pastor's feelings, and this is why he removed him from delivering the invocation when he announced his candidacy for the presidency. So the publication of Reverend Wright's remarks, while they caused great shock and concern to many Americans, came as no surprise to Senator Obama.

Indeed, while Senator Obama stated that he was not present in the church when these remarks were delivered, and we can certainly believe him on that score, there is no question that he was aware of his pastor's sentiments. Whenever a preacher makes remarks from the pulpit that are somewhat controversial, there is a buzz within the congregation that almost as rapidly as the speed of light spreads out to those who were not present on that particular day. The phone lines are buzzing, the conversations start up at the supermarket, or other chance encounters, "did you hear what the pastor said the other day?" There is no pastor who believes that his words on the pulpit will not spread throughout his entire congregation, particularly to a man who has been an active and involved member of that congregation for over two decades, a man who is a local leader and who aspires to national leadership. Barack Obama knew, and it would be more than slightly disingenuous to even intimate that he did not. He should have taken his pastor to task long ago. To his credit, he did say the following words: "The profound mistake of Reverend Wright's sermons is not that he spoke about racism in our society. It's that he spoke as if our society was static; as if no progress has been made; as if this country – a country that has made it possible for one of his own members to run for the highest office in the land and build a coalition of white and black; Latino and Asian, rich and poor, young and old -- is still irrevocably bound to a tragic past. But what we know -- what we have seen – is that America can change. That is true genius

of this nation. What we have already achieved gives us hope – the audacity to hope – for what we can and must achieve tomorrow.”

I am glad that he said these things publicly, not only because I believe them to be true, but because I also believe them to reflect the kind of man that Barack Obama is. However, in private to his pastor, he should have said "You are a racist, and I am not. If you are going to maintain a public position that expresses hatred for America, despite its many flaws, articulate positions which are anti-Semitic, praise Louis Farrakhan, condemn a background that no longer exists and from which you yourself did not emerge, then I do not believe that I can remain a member of this church, much as I appreciate the many things you have done for me, and the abundant good that you have accomplished. Although you have done great good, you have used and misused your position to foment racist, hate-filled, anti-Semitic teachings, rather than unite people in the love of God." He didn't say those things, and in fact made clear that he could not say those things, and I am saddened and disappointed that he did not. And in fact he should have said them years ago, not when the issue became front-page news. Of course Reverend Wright is behind the times, but he is also a bigot and Obama failed to say that, and it is this failure that leaves me deeply disappointed. It is also his failure to say or do anything about this until it became impossible for him to ignore it that leaves me saddened and disappointed, because Barack Obama is truly a great man, someone who would bring credit to the United States and to the office of the presidency. At my most charitable, I must say that it is simply one of the human failings of a truly great individual, and let it go at that.

I confess that I am still waiting for Senator McCain to distance himself from the remarks made by pastor John Hagee, who while he is in a

manner of speaking pro Israel, is also very intensely anti-Catholic, anti-Muslim, and anti-Arab. As I said at the beginning of this sermon, there is no shortage of topics on which to preach.

As a Rabbi I know that I cannot say anything from the pulpit without word spreading throughout the congregation. A few years ago I gave a sermon about homosexuality, and my willingness to officiate at same gender unions, and I received a standing ovation. But there were those who walked out. I disagree with these people though I respect their right to their views, and I can absolutely respect the integrity of an individual who says: "Rabbi, your religious and or social views have reached a point where I can no longer abide them, and I feel that I can no longer be a member of the synagogue that supports your views." Such people have integrity.

Sometimes they say to me, "Rabbi, I disagree with your views, but I will not leave the Temple because it means too much to me, and I hope that you will in time come to change your mind about these issues, or that the next Rabbi will have a viewpoint that differs from yours. In the meantime, I will continue to attend worship and participate in synagogue life, because my life as a Jew is about God and Torah, not about the Rabbi." This too is the mark of an integritous person. It is also the mark of a thoughtful person, and I am pleased when such controversies arise, because it means that both they and I can learn from one another. Unfortunately, as we know all too well, when people leave the synagogue over a dispute with the Rabbi, it is seldom over a religious issue, but one that has to do with a petty procedural dispute: "I'm mad at the Rabbi, he's a jerk who didn't do what I want, or he offended me in some personal fashion, so I'm outta here." Or they do the other thing: they remain in the congregation but don't participate in any way, not by attending services, not by attending any of the social events, not by participating in the

educational program, in short they absent themselves from synagogue life as much as they possibly can because of a personal matter, not a theological or religious disagreement with the Rabbi. I will tell you that as a Rabbi I know that I cannot express a controversy over viewpoint from the pulpit without the phone lines starting to jingle, and eventually the phone calls reach me. Thank God they do, because these calls give me the opportunity to learn and to grow, and to engage in meaningful religious dialogue with members of Temple Beth David. And as anyone who knows me, I have changed my views over time because God isn't finished with me yet.

In short, I believe that Wright was wrong, and I also believe that Senator Obama should have done more to reflect his disagreement with Wright's political, religious and racial viewpoints, and he should have done so long before it became a public issue. At the same time, I am overjoyed with and deeply in love with the American political tradition which holds its leaders to account for their words and their deeds, and our value as a society depends entirely upon our process, not upon whom we vote for.