

How We Talk About Politics: Parashat T'tzavveh

With the Israeli elections seemingly behind us, Super Tuesday and the AIPAC Policy Conference in our rearview mirror, and the road to November's U.S. presidential elections squarely in front of us, the conversation about politics is very much on my mind. Plus, somehow even politics seem a blessed distraction these days from talking about the coronavirus/covid-19.

When it comes to how we talk about politics, there is a difference between honesty and full disclosure. I think that when most of us speak about politics with each other – those of us who still have the courage to speak AND TO LISTEN to each other – we speak honestly, but not necessarily with full disclosure.

In full disclosure, is your number one priority Israel? Foreign relations? The Supreme Court? A politician's ethical behavior? A politician's rhetoric toward others? Your pocketbook ...?

Humans are by our very nature group-oriented; this tendency toward partnerships and alliances, from marriage to building societies, is what some scholars believe allowed the *homo sapien* species to dominate over other forms of human life and certainly over the animal kingdom. Yet, also because of our drive for self-preservation, we are highly selective about to whom we disclose ourselves fully.

In truth, there are actions, thoughts, and "truths" that we even keep from those closest to us – and probably rightfully so.

Our clothing mirrors our drive for self-preservation. Clothing protects us from the natural elements and from embarrassment at the nakedness that we feel before others (see Adam and Eve); it is a physical protection and an emotional protection. So too for both physical protection and emotional protection do we as humans keep our full opinions to ourselves.

We must share ourselves with others for the sake of protection – that is, to realize the benefit of being part of a partnership or community. At the same time, we

cannot share too much of ourselves lest we compromise our ability to protect ourselves from the physical risk of isolation that could come from exposing our shame or our unpopular truths.

God knows that if anyone is covering themselves up in an effort to control what others might think, it is the politicians who run for office. If only we could see their innermost thoughts, desires and intentions! Instead, their truths are hidden by layer upon layer of masks and deception.

Our Torah portion this week, Parashat T'tzavveh, speaks in detail of the clothing that the ancient *kohanim* (priests) would wear. Among the prescribed clothing pieces were a breast plate that indicated to all who saw them the priests' two highest priorities: (1) God and (2) the Jewish people. They also were required to wear pointing toward themselves a head covering on which it was written, *Holy to God*. The breast plate was a reminder to others of the priests' priorities; the head covering was the priests' reminder to themselves.

Can you imagine if all our political leaders were required to wear on their front a public statement of their two highest priorities? And that they were also required to wear at all times a reminder of the One who is truly in charge? Cue the music: "What a wonderful world this could be."

But it's not all about the politicians.

Just as we read Parashat T'tzavveh, we are also preparing for Purim. On Monday evening, we will all come to Shaarey Zedek for the reading of the Megillah. Traditionally, on Purim, one comes dressed in costume. While there are many explanations as to the origin of this custom, one lesson that we learn is that when people cover up their real identities they feel freer to expose their inner truths. Another way this is expressed, which represents an additional Purim custom, is *in vino veritas*: In wine, there is truth.

So how about this: for the next week, in honor of Parashat T'tzavveh and in celebration of Purim, let us put on a costume in order to let down our guard: let us share with our friends and family are true top priorities in how we select our political leaders. Like the *kohanim*, what are your top two priorities? Other factors matter too, of course. But most of us vote based on one or two top priorities. What are they?

And what is the one factor about which you hope to remind yourself through this process? What is the one part of your truest self that you want to honor in the way the *kohanim* reminded themselves to be holy to God? Honestly: of what do you need reminding?

You will note, by the way, that I did NOT suggest that you argue with others. I merely suggested that this week we strive to speak AND LISTEN to each other with full disclosure, with total honesty, and with a desire to fully understand what fears and what hopes our loved ones and friends reveal to us as they speak their truths.

Ask each other: what scares you most? What is your greatest hope? And how do you channel those truths into your political views?

Just imagine if not only politicians were telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, but that each of us were to do so as well. Cue the music: "What a wonderful world this would be."

Rebecca, Caleb and Ayal join me in wishing you Shabbat shalom and an early happy Purim!

Rabbi Aaron Starr

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