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THE TWIN DANGERS OF HEDONISM AND FUNDAMENTALISM

A High Holy Day Sermon  
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Temple Beth Am, Miami, Fla. 5741-1980

We are involved in a national election which showcases America's political dilemma. The Democratic candidate for President is not really admired even by his own party. The Republican candidate is a man whom his own party has repudiated on numerous other occasions in favor of other candidates. And there is still a third candidate who has spent most of his life flip-flopping from one curious position to another.

The American method of nominating presidential candidates does seem to seek out dictatorial and hostile types. This is an extremely important point. But, on the other hand, the system seems to encourage the nominating of mediocre types. A true statesman would probably not be willing to go through all the hoopla that is required of a presidential candidate. The way things are going now, what is required for such a candidate is not that he have a great plan for America, but that he be good at hand shaking, back slapping, and baby kissing; that he be good at cooking hot dogs at picnics, smiling on T.V., and making compromises in the back room with the pork chop boys. It seems to me that unless we alter the requirements for a candidate in this regard, we are not going to get the caliber of people we desperately need.

I have some real concerns about the future of democracy in America. I see our country divided into three groups, which cut across political party lines and across religious lines. On the one hand, there are the hedonists, those who see the free life of the individual as the great goal of America. These are the people who feel that the individual has no responsibility to conform to group standards, nor do they feel that the individual has the responsibility to make those sacrifices which will ensure the continuation of the group. A hedonist can be part of a conservative or liberal or radical political orientation. All of us are capable of hedonist activity. It is hedonistic to say that my sexual activities have no relation to my family or society. It is hedonistic to say that the individual should pay no income taxes. It is hedonistic to say that the national government has no right to draft its citizens in time of national emergency. We are all hedonists when we want to be, when it suits our interests, but some of us are more hedonistic than others. A person who is basically hedonistic does not make for the healthy survival of family or group life.

A large number of Americans indulge in activities which make them part of our second group, which we will call fundamentalists. A fundamentalist is one who claims that his religious or political philosophy is the only possible philosophy. The fundamentalist claims that all who agree with him are good people and all who disagree are bad people. The fundamentalist generally stands for the power of the group as against individual rights. But he is talking about his group, and he means his group as he defines it and perhaps as he leads it. Some people are so fundamentalist in their economic philosophy that they think anyone who doesn't agree with 19th century capitalism is a Communist. Some people are so fundamentalist about their sexual attitudes that they think anyone who lives differently than they do is going to hell. Fundamentalists bring an important vigor to society. They are sure of their direction, but in some ways they mitigate against individual freedom. Variety and difference of opinion frighten them.

There is a third group of Americans whom we might call liberals. Liberals like to think that they stand between the hedonists, the extreme individualists, on the one hand and the fundamentalists, the extreme group loyalists, on the other. Liberals like to think that they can see the good in everything, and that they condemn nothing. The problem is that the liberal rarely gets into the fight against evil, because he is never quite sure that this evil is greater than that evil. The liberal likes to think that he concerned about the poor, but the liberal is usually well educated and enjoys a good standard of living, so he is reluctant to get down into the gutter and get dirty while he fights the cause of the poor. The liberal tends to be a critic, but he also tends to be outside of the fray. The liberal criticizes the religious fundamentalist for being overly zealous, but the liberal is often guilty of a lack of enthusiasm for his own causes. The liberal criticizes the hedonist for having a lack of discipline, but the liberal may move out of his half-way house towards less and less discipline. The liberal espouses the doctrine of the mean - not too much and not too little - but it is extremely difficult for the liberal to live in this semi-committed lifestyle. Frequently he will move one way or another and become a hedonist or fundamentalist, or he will choose his spots and act one way at one time and one way at another. In spite of their problems, liberals usually provide the people of good will and the spirit of compromise which is important to the functioning of society.

More and more I hear people saying, we have had an excess of liberalism, and what American needs is a turn to fundamentalism. I hear people saying, we need more discipline, we need more patriotism, we need more old time economics, we need more God-fearing people. So far has the pendulum in our society swung to hedonism, to the accent on individual freedom, that many of us who have considered ourselves to be liberals are moving towards the conservative and more fundamentalist camp. We talk more about standards and restraints on freedom of choice. It may well be that the country needs this kind of movement, but I would like to express a note of caution about the dangers of too great a swing towards fundamentalism.

From what I am able to read, one of the best organized sources of political power in the United States now rests with the fundamentalists, a power that is being substantially financed by fundamentalist religious groups, assisted by some very wealthy and highly conservative tycoons. These groups have progressively assumed control of radio and T.V. stations until today they own well over a hundred T.V. stations alone from which they beam their combined religious and political viewpoint constantly. An increasing number of members of congress present themselves as candidates of these groups. Part of the new found power of these fundamentalists is derived from the backlash against the hedonists. The hedonists may be very much wrong, but this does not make the fundamentalists right. Either extreme can be a danger to our country.

One of the acknowledged leaders of the new fundamentalists is the Rev. Jerry Falwell. "Newsweek" does a profile on the Rev. Falwell in its September 15, 1980, issue. The Rev. Falwell conducts the old-time gospel hour on Sunday mornings over 681 T.V. and radio stations. The yield from this and other fund raising operations, according to "Newsweek," is one million dollars a week. In addition to his many religiously oriented activities, Falwell runs "Moral Majority, Inc.," a political action organization aimed at unseating politicians who reject his "Recipe for a Righteous Republic." Moral Majority, as Falwell calls his group, is against abortion, E.R.A., gay rights, sex education, Salt II. the Dept. of Education, and defense cuts. They are for free enterprise, a balanced budget, prayer in the public schools, and, happily for us Jews, a secure Israel.

One of Falwell's recent disciples is the Rev. Keith of Gainesville, Florida. Recently, the members of Keith's church in Gainesville entered the primaries running for seats on the local county Democratic Committee. They won 42 of the 53 seats they were after.

By far the most controversial of the evangelical political groups is the highly partisan "Christian Voice." Earlier this year, the Christian Voice prepared a list rating all the members of Congress on how they voted on what it described as fourteen key moral issues. On the basis of these ratings, Christian Voice issued a "hit list" of 36 Senators and Congressmen having a poor "moral voting record." While Rep. Richard Kelly of Florida, one of the Abscam bribery defendants, was given a perfect 100% rating, veteran Senator Frank Church of Idaho was given a very low rating, and they are out to defeat Sen. Church in the election.

Jimmy Carter may be a born-again Christian, but he is not Christian enough for "Christian Voice," and this fundamentalist organization is now beating the bushes in the south, including Miami, trying to elect Gov. Reagan. The influence of the fundamentalists on the Republican Party Platform, according to "Newsweek," was considerable, and Reagan himself, speaking at the convention of the fundamentalists in Dallas is quoted as saying to them, "I know you can't endorse me, but I want you to know that I endorse you." Let it not be assumed, however, that all fundamentalists are for Reagan; Carter has his share.

Fundamentalists like to claim that they are the super-patriots, and that they alone know what is basic Americanism and what was in the minds of the Founding Fathers. Nothing could be further from the truth. Those who wrote the American Constitution, men like Jefferson and Franklin, were as far away from fundamentalism as is a flaming liberal. These men were clearly fearful of the fundamentalist religious sects of their time, which is why they so carefully wrote into our Constitution guarantees for religious freedom. Fundamentalists in Florida are now pushing for a state law requiring prayer in the public schools, but Jefferson insisted that no person should be compelled to frequent a place of worship.

The fundamentalists of 1776 were the Tories, talking about the divine right of the king and the exclusive validity of the Church of England. No, the American Constitution is hardly a fundamentalist document. Modern hedonists, for their part, would have us believe that the Constitution was only concerned with the rights of the individual and his freedom to do whatsoever he wishes. It is true that the American constitution was a landmark document in the guaranteeing of certain human rights, borrowing much from our own Bible, but one cannot read the Constitution in full without understanding that the document speaks of rights under law. This is not a society where unattached citizens rove where they wish without regard to communal needs. Human rights are able to exist only because the healthy society is there first. The constitution speaks of freedom with responsibility. The citizen who ignores the needs of society cannot claim any rights from that society.

Most of us here today would identify with either the liberal or moderate conservative camp. You might say that we belong to the center of the political spectrum. Yet, the center in American politics is confused today. Most of us see the problems with the two extremes - hedonism and fundamentalism - yet we are not sure what we stand for in a positive way. We find difficulty in getting the kind of candidate we want nominated, and we think, some of us, that it is useless to vote in the coming election because we are faced with a choice between tweedledum and tweedledee.

The Jews of America seem especially confused about whom to vote for in the coming elections. Our problem is compounded by the fact that in addition to being concerned about all the other issues which bother other Americans, like inflation and taxes and E.R.A., and race relations, we are especially interested in what happens to the State of Israel. Jewish supporters of President Carter were confused by his seeming flirtations with the P.L.O., but the President has tried to make amends for his apparent inconsistencies. The Camp David Accord is not a small achievement, and it may well become the foundation for peace in the Middle East.

While some national Jewish leaders continue to support Carter, others support Reagan. There are still others who feel that the two candidates are not far apart on the issue of Israel and that any American president will inevitably be influenced by the Arab nations from whom we import so much oil. It is my personal feeling that Israel is not an issue in the Presidential election. Nonetheless, I think it is terribly important for Jews to get out and vote.

As some of you may know, I am the Regional Co-Chairman for the Synagogue Council of America, and our advice from the national office is that both political parties are monitoring the precincts where Jews vote very carefully. Whichever party wins will want to know whether Jews were a factor in their victory. If Jews are a factor, they can hope for a more sensitive ear from the victor's advisors. If the Jews do not come out to vote, you can assume that the causes we favor will be of little concern to the elected president and his party.

Those of us who consider ourselves as part of the political center cannot afford the luxury of standing idly by in the coming election. We will have to take a position, and if we are not wild about any one of the candidates for a particular post then we ought to base our vote on these questions: which are the forces which will come into power with the victory of one person over the other, and do I want those forces gaining greater influence in America?

The forces on either side of center are gaining strength in America every day. It is time for the great center to arouse itself and to find new and effective ways to reach those goals first projected by our founding fathers 200 years ago.