

Holiness in Words and Deeds: Reverend Wright & the Problems of Our Country
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A question has been running around in my head for the past couple months.
Why is Reverend Jeremiah Wright such a problem?

You could answer that question from many different perspectives.

As a preacher, as a member of the clergy, I was a bit puzzled at the argument against him for a while because I looked at his relationship with Barack Obama as a relationship between a congregant and his pastor.

Pastors provide spiritual support, help in times of need, help to sanctify special moments in life...

Congregants don't always agree with every thing their minister or rabbi says....

After all, there wouldn't be many members in synagogues around the country if the criteria for staying a member was agreeing with every thing your rabbi said...right?!

It seems it's a matter of context...

The sound bites that we saw on YouTube. How could we judge them without their context?

The rhetoric of Reverend Wright as a black preacher from Chicago. Until this past week, Rabbis in the Chicago area have not been very concerned about the nature of Wright's words or rhetoric as it has played in the press. One Chicago Jewish communal leader was quoted in the New York Jewish Week saying "We understand a little more about the rhetoric Rev. Wright and others have used from the pulpits; we take it with more of a grain of salt." They work with black churches all the time, with Rev Wright on the streets, in the communities; they've heard the other preachers and live in the home town of Louis Farrakhan.

For Obama, I think he was saying it was a matter of context as well. He didn't look to his minister to advise him about politics, he looked to his minister to support him in his personal spiritual journey and to bring holiness into his life through the celebration of lifecycle events.

I think it is worth it for each of us to ask ourselves why we find Rev Wright a problem in the context of the elections.

Haven't other presidents had radical preachers like Billy Graham serving as their spiritual advisers. Have we ever had a litmus test for the spiritual advisor to the President. [Has anyone challenged John McCain on Reverend Hagee?]

For many people Reverend Wright is the angry Black man that they haven't seen in Obama but before whom they are scared and anxious.

For many people Reverend Wright was not a problem because of his race but because of the socially dangerous views that he holds on America and America's role in terrorism, some views that are based on bad science and some views that are driven by bigotry and hatred. We are also concerned about the views he holds on Israel and Zionism.

For Obama, Rev Wright was not a problem until he went on a speaking spree that dominated the press and strongly and arrogantly stated that

If Senator Obama did not say what he said, he would not get elected.

Wright was saying that Obama didn't really mean what he said about Wright and he was just saying it for political purposes, implying that Obama still connected himself with Wright and therefore believed as Wright believed...and then he proceeded to display his beliefs with an incredible lack of judgment clouded over by arrogance and ego.

Reverend Wright stood on the national stage and rather than defend his parishioner, he attacked his integrity.

I think this is why Obama finally strongly denounced his preacher.

For Obama his words are his candidacy. He wants to be judged on his own words. What he has said he stands for.

For Obama, what is important about him is that what he says, he means. He speaks with integrity and he demands that and wants us to demand that of other politicians.

I believe this has been reflected in his strategy against other candidates. He focuses on their words.

Interestingly, Clinton's emphasis is on her deeds. She wants to be judged on what she has accomplished in her political career. She sees integrity as the display of one's beliefs through one's actions.

By the way, McCain, when he speaks will stress that in words and deeds he has accomplished what one must accomplish to be a good Republican president...

But I am not here to analyze political campaigns or in any way to endorse any candidate. What the debate over Reverend Wright has highlighted for me are two things.

First, through Reverend Wright we have been exposed to a character that many of us fear, each probably for many different reasons—we should not deny when our own prejudice or racism is ignited. We should, however, try to overcome it. We really have to ask ourselves what any of this has to do with Barack Obama's ability to be an effective, successful president. What does any of this have to do with the real problems that plague our country such as the War in Iraq, the troubled economy and social injustice.

Second, comparing the character of Reverend Wright to the character of Barack Obama has led us to an interesting debate about the standards that we place on a politician and a clergyman. Those individuals represent a constituency. How many of their views have to be accurately aligned with their constituency for it to be a successful relationship? Are they judged by their actions more than their words or their words over their actions; or the relationships in their lives and the actions of others that have nothing to do with what they believe or how they would act...

Interestingly, our parasha this Shabbat teaches us about holiness and the ways we must strive for holiness in our lives. I believe the radical concept of this week's parasha is that

HOLINESS is not just a matter for priests and for worship. Everyone is viewed as holy and expected to live lives filled with holiness.

Holiness is demanded by God because God is holy. God's nature is reflected in how God acts in the world, God acts in holy ways.

How do we become holy?

How do we elevate our lives, connect with God, a power greater than us who can inspire us and elevate us....how do we access the divinity within each one us?

We must bring holiness into every aspect of our lives

We must acknowledge the sacred nature of every aspect of our lives

the world around us, the sacred acts of ritual, study, maintaining a sanctuary

AND ALSO the sacred nature of our speech and our behavior wherever we are

In particular, we must work to elevate the sacred in places where destructive social trends work against others—

We can not be blinded by the fear of the other, by fear of race/gender/religion/sexual orientation

We can not be blinded by fear but we must find the sacred in us that can view the sacred in others and make sure the we, the ones who were slaves, the ones who are the minority, the ones who know what it is to be hated/to be the victims of prejudice and hatred/ that we bring KEDUSHAH into human relationships

We are not just to worship in a certain way, observe Shabbat, resist idolatry

We must bring holiness into the world like the prophets. We must act in the world in such a way that we show that the person in front of us is holy no matter their background, social position or core identity.

To be holy is to respect our parents, even when we disagree with them; to respect our parents rather than take them for granted.

To be holy is to watch out for the poor, the hungry, the stranger, because they are sacred individuals as we are and holy as God is.

To be holy is to be honest in how we speak and to be honest in our business dealings.

To be holy is to pay those who work for us fairly and promptly, not to abuse our station or be neglectful with someone's means of making a living.

To be holy is to work for justice in every area of our own lives and for others in our larger community and around the world.

By living a life filled with holiness, by treating our words AND our deeds as sacred, we will bring God and goodness into the world and eventually, God-willing, there will be no difference between KODESH and HOL, no difference between the holy and the ordinary.....we will have brought about the perfection of the world through our own words and deeds, guided by God's MITZVOT.

When Reverend Wright came to his Chicago church 36 years ago, there were 87 members. Today the church claims 8,000 members and has built up a ministry that reaches out to those in need and those suffering injustice. The church, under Reverend Wright's leadership, houses the poor, feeds the hungry, cares for children, takes care of

people suffering with HIV/AIDS. Reverend Wright has used his position to do a bring a great deal of holiness into the world. Unfortunately, Reverend Wright has at times abused his position by spreading a message of hate and promoting fear and distrust rather than partnership.

It is my hope that we will each go home and think about why Reverend Wright is a problem. I hope we will each ask ourselves what racism and hatred we can claim and try to remove from our hearts. And then, I hope we can focus on the issues with which our communities struggle. I hope we will be blessed to work in our community for good, to build partnerships with other houses of worship that are looking to increase holiness in the world.

May we be careful to remove hatred from our words and deeds and bring holiness into our lives through our words and deeds.

Shabbat Shalom!