

**“Investigate, Interrogate, Explore:  
In this election year it is an obligation as an American and as a Jew”  
October 9, 2008  
Yom Kippur 5769  
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I concede I engender strong responses. After my first High Holidays, I received no fewer than 40 emails, phone calls and notes from people expressing how and what they felt about the presentations I made over the course of the three days. Some were complimentary, one person even wrote to my parents to share their joy over the work I had done – and then there were some not so complimentary. I remember a few people who actually made appointments with me to review individual sermons and comments. Some of the criticism offered was constructive and some, I'll be honest with you, was just plain mean. But nothing compared to a comment that was offered by a member of my previous congregation.

When I gave notice that I was coming Har Zion Temple, I recognized the need people had to say their good-bye. In my desire to find some closure with people who were, and continue to be, very important to me, I started meeting with people. One day a member of the community came in and said, “I'm really going to miss you.” I said, “the feeling was mutual.” He then remarked, “You have really grown in your time here.” I said, “I appreciate the opportunity to try new things and to feel the safety of a congregation that knew how young and inexperienced I was. With that I said, as I have said so many times before and since, “I was honored to serve and to be permitted into your lives at such sacred moments.” Then he said, “We hired you even though you have that terrible lisp.” Hmmm... That was just not nice. That was hitting below the belt but that was okay. When I arrived at this congregation people talked about how high my voice was when I got excited, or how I spoke too quickly. I worked long and hard on these, however, a lisp is really hard to overcome. I think he was just being spiteful. I am sure some of you are now trying to note the problematic “s” as I sloppily let them fall out. I am sorry for that but you won't be able to focus on the content of what I say for the next few minutes. However, if you can focus, there will be ample food for thought.

For some reason, the minute our attention is drawn to a flaw, irregularity, or what appears to be a weakness, that is all we can focus on. Today I ask you to do something completely abnormal. Don't. Stop listening to the eccentric and the outlandish, but rather listen for the content. We are at a significant moment in history. Texas tycoon T. Boone Pickens has been dubbed the "Oracle of Oil" and has suggested that, in the not too distant future, the world will witness the greatest transfer of wealth it has ever seen. Although Pickens may or may not be correct, he has gotten our attention because essentially he is saying that we have it now and someone else will have it next, if we don't immediately address the issue of renewable energy. He has tapped into something, no pun intended, and he has touched a nerve. In many ways Pickens has simply added a sense of urgency to the global warming discussion. He has engaged that segment of our population who simply don't believe the temperature of the world is rising. He has also reframed the discussion about the clash of civilizations between the West and the rest of the world. With one phrase, he has alerted us to the fact that we are losing our grip on the global economy. It seems that Marxism reduced to the cliché, “Money makes the world go round” or even worse “Money talks,” still resonates. We are in desperate, dare I say “depressive” times.

After all, we measure the success of presidential campaigns by the dollars raised. We can't help but be awed by the amount of money individuals can access in order to attain the highest office in this land...millions and millions of dollars. I can't help but think that this money could be better spent on the very causes they are touting.

This summer, I watched each of the conventions as the speakers offered their orations. On the screen just below their image, facts were posted. One of these facts really stood out for me. It was the fact that for both the Twin cities where the Republican convention was held, and Denver, where the Democratic convention was held, these cities stood to bring in 150 and 160 million dollars just for hosting their respective conventions. I suppose it costs a tremendous amount of money to run a week-long infomercial and I am pleased that the residents of those cities were the beneficiaries. But money can't fix all our problems, only we can. Therefore, I ask you to make good choices and good decisions in the next few weeks. I ask you, to investigate, to interrogate, to explore but most importantly to listen carefully.

I realize I ought not mix politics with the pulpit (as an incredibly insightful piece warned this week in the *New York Times*.) This story says that when Lyndon Johnson was running for re-election to the Senate in 1954, he was opposed by a couple of non-profits that urged voters to reject him and his radical communist ideas. (And you thought things were crazy today.) In response, Johnson had new language inserted into the section of the IRS code, which defines a tax exempt entity. His addendum declared that an exempt organization "does not participate in or intervene in (including the publishing or distributing of statements), any political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for public office."

Now, in the middle of the 2008 election, several dozen pastors are challenging this amendment by speaking in favor of a candidate on the pulpit (usually John McCain). Copies of the sermons were sent to the IRS. These copies openly cross this line, the line which the law has drawn since 1954. At the same time, the bill (H.R. 2275) repealing the Johnson amendment, has been introduced by Walter Jones, Republican Congressman of North Carolina. This bill has now been referred to the House Ways and Means Committee where it awaits action. (October 5, 2008)

The most remarkable part of this presidential race has been the focus on personality, the soldier versus the rock star. We have seen and heard sound bites and staged gatherings in historic locations. We have been, and will be, bombarded with even more commercials. The polls will be taken and the gaps will widen and shrink daily, with each media stunt. We will have to look deeper. We will have to investigate, interrogate, explore, but most importantly we'll have to listen carefully. We are well trained for that.

We are the people of the book. From the earliest of ages we have been trained to read. We have long been engaged in the process of trying to figure out what is being communicated to us. We open our Torah and ask, "What does God want us to understand?" We highlight some words and discard others. We amplify certain stories while we relegate others to more peripheral status. We raise the banner of some while we marginalize others. We do it as Jews engaged in the transmission of a sacred legacy and we ought to do it as Americans engaged in progressing the human project. We are at a cross roads and we have choices before us. As Jews, we are uniquely positioned and distinctively qualified to have an impact on this election, and therefore, the world.

Since we have been the object of such hatred, and have grown to know such conflict, we have developed a greater sensitivity to world trends. We have learned to listen. Can you imagine that there are those who, like 1939 Germany, are once again charging that the Jews are responsible for the economic decline, dare I say recession. We were listening. We have always been able to listen better. Maybe we are superstitious, but we have always had our ear to the ground listening for sounds of anti-Semitism rising. We have fine-tuned our hearing to the sufferings of others. Ellie Weisel rises for the plight of Darfur because the instrument of listening for the injustice has been refined in the ear of the Jew.

Our Torah is filled with law after law. It is packed with proscriptions and dictates. Yet, at the end of the five books, Moses, as he is about to bid farewell, comes to the Jewish people and reiterates that we must make our own choices. In statement after statement Moses says, "I have gotten you this far, but now you must decide for yourself." The first step of personal responsibility may not even be perceptible to others. It is making up your own mind, and to do that you must investigate, interrogate and explore, but most importantly, listen very carefully.

The great mitzvah of this season, the most easily identifiable ritual of this time of the year, is the blowing of the shofar. We have been blowing it every day since the beginning of the Hebrew month of Elul, in preparation for the season of awe. Remarkably, the week before Yom Kippur the shofar goes silent until tonight. Not a peep, nothing. After hearing its voice every day for the past 30 days, it has gone quiet. So, we wait for it. All day we sit counting the minutes until we hear it. In its absence it is even louder. Isn't that true of so much? We are asked to do it as Americans, now, during this election cycle.

In a great midrash, it recalls the moment of the giving of the Ten Commandments at the foot of Mt. Sinai, amidst the fire and thunder and amidst the powerful, pounding voice of God. It is then that Moses bids, begs, and implores the Jewish people to listen. How could they not. The sound and light show has their attention, yet the Midrash has Moses remark, "*Lo Domeh shomeah the l'roeh.*" (Mekhilta D'Rabbi Yishmael Parashat Yitro 2) You must pay attention to the content of the message, not the context. Listen! The greatest of all prayers, the Shema, says listen. Listen! To do that truly, we must investigate, interrogate, and explore but most importantly, listen carefully. *V'darashta v'chakarta, v'sha'alta heteiv* (Deuteronomy 13:15)

Do away with the lies. Do away with the fabrications and rumors. In this day and age when everything is accessible by the Internet, you can read each candidate's position on just about anything. Listen to the issues and solutions, read the position papers, see how and what they say. Whether it's a critical issue, like the strong relationship between Israel and America needing a loyal ally in our President, or any number of secondary issues, such as a woman's right to choose, these issues will certainly be in the forefront of the next presidency. Likewise, there is the issue of two more potential Supreme Court justice appointments.

Maybe your concern is the role and cost of a modern military and what its role ought to be world-wide. So often it has been reduced to a conversation about the war in Iraq, Iran or Afghanistan.

Perhaps your issue is the next armed struggle against an enemy that seeks to harm us. Today, this is really a discussion about how we relate to the rest of the world and what our responsibility is for human rights or world hunger as well as the issue of diplomacy.

Or school vouchers which has morphed into a discussion of charter schools which is really about providing competitive educational opportunities for all, while addressing the impossibly difficult task of finding ways to pay for the ever-rising cost of higher education.

Or healthcare reform and how we must make sure every citizen in this country can access the greatest of medical advancements. This, too, is really a conversation about the allocation of scarce resources and its assorted attachments, such as malpractice and lawsuits, providing for the needs of all or at least some of our children.

Or turning up the volume on taxes during this time of economic malady, which is really a conversation about the role of government in our lives. Coached in terms of big government or small government, it is really a conversation about whether we are responsible for each other or if everyone is on their own.

Or finally, the environment, which is now referred to by one simple word “green.” However, it is infinitely more complicated, which is really a conversation about energy. I would be happy to discuss any or all of these issues and what I believe our sacred legacy has to say, but that would be inappropriate in this forum and would take more time than we have right now.

This I can say. We are not a single-issue voting bloc, in fact we are not a voting bloc at all. We don't live in an age of coercive communal behavior. No one can tell us how we should vote or what we should care about. Not even your clergy would dare. There is no question that we put forth an agenda of what we believe in. So, we need to get out and vote. We may not be a voting bloc but we certainly must vote.

I believe we need to care for ourselves. I believe we have to care for each other. I believe we have to work against hunger and injustice in our own community. We have to care for the orphan, the widow and the stranger. I believe in compassion, joy and forgiveness for ourselves and for others. I believe we have to try to attune ourselves to the will of God.

There is no doubt that for the past 15 years in the rabbinate, I have tried to bring a path towards meaningful living. I have tried to bring joy and consolation through the medium of what I understand to be God's will. However, you get to decide what role that plays in your life. I am passionate and believe I am right, but you must make those choices for yourself.

So, we wait for the sounding of the shofar, the wake-up call to listen, because it is the starting voice for the rest of the year.

So, we wait to hear the shofar, just as we wait to hear the voices of our past, voices that informed, instructed, led and encouraged us, even when others tried to hurt us.

Like the shofar, our loved ones' voices, voices that we heard everyday for past decades, have gone quiet. So, we wait. All day we sit, counting the minutes until we hear it. In its absence sometimes it's even louder. Isn't that true of so much? Remember, to do that we must investigate, interrogate, and explore the deep recess of our memory and our souls...and most importantly...listen carefully!