

“Say Little and Do Much:” A Post-Election Reflection

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At the beginning of this week’s Torah portion, Joseph goes out to see how his brothers are doing, pasturing their father’s flocks. There’s no mention that he pitches in to help his siblings with the sheep. Instead, he brings back an unfavorable report about his brothers’ efforts. Later, Joseph foolishly tells his family about a dream, one that his brothers don’t appreciate.

Joseph was apparently not the role model for Shammai, a great first century rabbi, who advised, “Say little and do much.” Sadly, too, American politics isn’t any better than young Joseph.

To be fair, young Joseph isn’t necessarily lying. Torah doesn’t tell us whether his brothers are hard-working shepherds or the slackers that Joseph makes them out to be. And who can deny that Joseph’s dream eventually comes to life?

Still, speaking out negatively doesn’t help Joseph’s cause. I’m not saying that the brat deserves to be sold into slavery, but he certainly does earn his brothers’ ire.

Over a month has passed since we were barraged with commercials wherever we went – on television and on the internet, above all – telling us that this politician or that is corrupt or wicked, incompetent or wrong-headed. Still, the name-calling and negativity continue to ring in our ears, just as Joseph’s negative reports bothered his brothers long after he stopped talking.

At one point during the campaign, I had had enough. I picked up the phone and called a candidate whom I supported. I criticized his television advertisement attacking the integrity of his opponent. The ad didn’t contain a word of falsehood; still, the message wasn’t true. The ad used facts to create the impression that the opponent is dishonorable, rotten to the core, though the facts didn’t prove anything of the sort. On the telephone, the candidate didn’t dispute my point. He claimed that his opponent had gone negative first, a charge that was also factual if not entirely true. The opponent hadn’t besmirched the honesty of the candidate I was supporting.

Politics as usual: Too much was said in the recent campaign. Too little has been done in the last two years. Shammai’s dictum has been turned on its head: Our national leaders do very little, all the while talking a great deal.

Our country faces real, significant challenges. Come January, we will have a President of one party, while both houses of Congress will be led by the other. The gridlock which has increased in Washington in recent years may become worse than ever.

Judaism, though, is a religion of hope. After all, Joseph, sold into slavery by his brothers, becomes Prime Minister of Egypt, saving the known world, including his own family, from famine. Joseph's character may be an even better model. Arrogant and brash as a young man, Joseph learns humility. At the outset of next week's portion, we will see mighty Pharaoh proclaim to Joseph: "I hear that you can interpret dreams." Joseph responds: "Without me, God will see to Pharaoh's welfare." Joseph goes on to invite Pharaoh to recount the dream, which Joseph interprets. Still, when he attributes his ability to God, we can see that Joseph is no longer a haughty youth.

If Joseph can go from the dungeons of slavery to become a world leader, while at the same time transforming from a self-important braggart into a self-effacing servant, then perhaps even our Congress can learn from Shammai: "Say little and do much."

President Obama would seem to have acted on that dictum recently, when he took executive action to delay deportation to millions of immigrants who are in this country without legal authority. Still, the President didn't, and couldn't, solve our country's horrifying immigration crisis on his own. The next President could lift the Executive Order, immediately imperiling millions who might come out of the shadows now. Even if the Order stays in place, it isn't a comprehensive solution to the problem.

Ours is a nation of laws. Our security requires that our borders be controlled. At the same time, ours is a nation of giving hearts. We American Jews know the promise of immigration to these shores, and we also know the consequences of closed American borders. How many of our people could have been saved from Hitler's gas chambers and ovens had the United States welcomed refugees threatened with extermination?

What should our nation do? The answer seems clear: One party places a priority on border security and the rule of law, which should be of great importance to all Americans. Another party favors expanded legal immigration and a path to citizenship for folks who have living here for years, breaking no laws other than those that would have prevented their seeking opportunity here.

When we teach our children about compromise, we explain that nobody gets everything that they want, in order to achieve a solution that everyone can accept.

The real question is whether our national leaders will come to see that what's best for our nation is also in their political best interest. Failing that, recent history teaches that we would be foolish to hope that they would put the nation's welfare above their electability.

To be fair, the House of Representatives bucked that recent history only yesterday, passing a bill to keep the government running. The bill features some aspects that one group in Congress abhors, while failing to confront the President's Executive Order as strongly as some would like. Compromise, for the first time in a long time, seems to have ruled the day. Our leaders may not be saying little, but they are doing more than usual.

A couple weeks ago, Congress played politics with our nation's energy and environmental future. Each Louisiana Senate candidate attempted to out-do the other to pass the Keystone XL Pipeline. The pipeline would bring Canadian crude to Gulf Coast refineries. Oil companies favor the deal; environmentalists oppose it.

Nobody needs to explain to folks in Arkansas about the dangers of pipelines. Moreover, the process for removing this particular oil in Canada poses further environmental threats. Still, it seems that the oil is going to be extracted, pipeline or none. Without a pipeline, it will be transported by rail, even more dangerous than pipelines.

I can't help but wonder if the politicians didn't say too much and do too little.

As we can see when we put gas in our cars today, growing North American petroleum production is driving down the cost of fuel. Most importantly, producing oil and gas in the United States and Canada takes money out of the hands of those who fund terror, directly and indirectly.

Environmental concerns are real, but so is national security. Perhaps environmentalists could seek sorely-needed concessions on carbon emissions and added incentives to expand renewable energy resources, compromising and agreeing to a pipeline that is going to be built one day, anyway.

The future of our planet and the security of our nation should not be used merely for political points, with “Keystone Pipeline” as a slogan on each side. “Say little and do much.”

Something important did happen today in Washington. Rabbi David Saperstein was confirmed as U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom.

In the United States, some will claim that their religious liberty is infringed by requirements that private employers cover women’s reproductive health, or because a few states don’t permit those same private employers to discriminate in hiring on the basis of sexual orientation. In other parts of the world, though, men, women, and children face discrimination and degradation, and some even fear for their lives, because of their religious beliefs and practices.

Burma is just one example. The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom has reported: “Religious groups, particularly ethnic minority Christians and Muslims and Buddhist monks suspected of engaging in anti-government activity, faced intrusive monitoring, arrest, mistreatment, destruction or desecration of property, severe restrictions on worship, education, and religious activities, and targeted violence.”

Iran, of course, is even worse. Citing the same Commission, *Forbes* reports: “All religious minorities are at risk, ‘most notably Baha’is, as well as Christians and Sufi Muslims,’ upon whom ‘physical attacks, harassment, detention, arrests, and imprisonment [have] intensified. Even the recognized non-Muslim religious minorities protected under Iran’s constitution—Jews, Armenian and Assyrian Christians, and Zoroastrians—faced increasing discrimination, arrests, and imprisonment.’ So, too, dissenting Muslims ‘were intimidated, harassed, and detained.’

Into this breach steps Rabbi Saperstein, who has led Reform Judaism’s social justice arm for forty years.

Rabbi Saperstein is the first non-Christian to serve as the United States Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom. A leading supporter of LGBT rights and women’s reproductive liberty, his nomination was nevertheless acclaimed and supported by conservative groups ranging from the Southern Baptist Convention to the Beckett Fund. Those organizations knew that the new ambassador wouldn’t agree with them about everything. They also knew that he would be good for religious liberty around the globe. They compromised. The

result is that America now has a stalwart, forthright advocate for religious freedom with the ear of the Secretary of State and President Obama himself. We Reform Jews will be hearing much less from Rabbi Saperstein than we have in the last forty years. Rabbi Saperstein, though, will be actively doing much on behalf of repressed religious minorities around the world.

Tonight, let us give thanks that the election is over, and with it all those nasty commercials. Let us urge our nation's leaders to set aside the negative rhetoric that infects Washington like a cancer. Whether the issue is immigration or the environment, energy or religious freedom, let our elected representatives discuss our nation's issues with respect and dignity. Let them speak not only of facts but of the truth. Let them seek and find new ways to compromise, for the good of our nation. Let them find agreement wherever they can, and let them disagree agreeably. Let them lead as the good rabbi taught: "Say little and do much."

Amen.