

TO SERVE THE CAUSE FOR THE LOVE OF TRUTH: POLITICS FROM THE JEWISH PULPIT

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On June 7, 2017, Rabbi David Wolpe sparked an intense, multi-denominational conversation about politics from the *bimah* (בִּימָה, “pulpit”). In an article titled “Why I Keep Politics Off the Pulpit,” Wolpe describes a no-win situation for rabbis taking political stances, suggesting that “[t]he litmus test for religious legitimacy has become political opinion” and that a rabbi whose opinion differs from congregants’ threatens alienating them.¹ He concludes: “Don’t tie your Torah to this week’s headlines. We are better, bigger and deeper than that.”²

Responses to Wolpe’s editorial ranged from “profound ambivalence”³ to statements that it was “deeply wrong,”⁴ and Wolpe replied

¹ David Wolpe, “Why I keep politics off the pulpit,” *Jewish Journal* (June 7, 2017), accessed at

<http://jewishjournal.com/opinion/220094/keep-politics-off-pulpit> on December 17, 2017. Wolpe has held this position for many years; cf. David Klinghoffer, “A Place for Politics in the Pulpit,” *The Forward* (September 17, 2004), accessed at <http://forward.com/opinion/5336/a-place-for-politics-in-the-pulpit> on December 17, 2017.

² Wolpe, *ibid.*.

³ Rabbi Noah Zvi Farkas, “Rabbis must navigate politics and morality,” *Jewish Journal* (June 13, 2017), accessed at <http://jewishjournal.com/opinion/220348/rabbis-must-navigate-politics-morality> on December 17, 2017.

⁴ Jonathan Zasloff, “A(nother) response to Rabbi David Wolpe,” *Jewish*

to his critics with several points, explaining, “Many people privately ask about my political views and I’m happy to answer. But not from the *bimah*.”⁵ The conversation continued throughout the summer in various Jewish media outlets, culminating in scrutiny of rabbis’ High Holy Day sermons.⁶

This public debate among rabbis, scholars and community members of all sorts has been sharpened by the pronounced social divisions that have intensified during the campaign and presidency of Donald Trump. Trump himself is such an explosive public figure that even David Wolpe saw need to criticize the sitting president on his response to racist aggression in Charlottesville, Virginia.⁷ However, the debate about whether rabbis should speak publicly about political issues is not new; it has persisted since the earliest days of the American rabbinate. Though certain local or national events may at times elevate the visibility of this issue, it never truly quiesces, and the major talking points rarely vary.

A brief survey of historical and contemporary examples will suffice to illustrate the ongoing nature of the debate. These examples will likewise demonstrate that the majority of such conflicts circulate around the appropriateness of a *progressive* view being offered by a rabbi to challenge the *status quo*. Correspondingly, I will argue that rabbinic silence on issues of public concern is also political, serving to

Journal (June 15, 2017), accessed at <http://jewishjournal.com/opinion/220477/another-response-rabbi-david-wolpe> on December 17, 2017.

⁵ David Wolpe, “A response to my critics,” *Jewish Journal* (June 13, 2017), accessed at <http://jewishjournal.com/opinion/220365/a-response-to-my-critics> on December 17, 2017.

⁶ See Ben Sales, “Why some rabbis used their High Holiday sermons to bash Trump—and others demurred,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency* (September 26, 2017), accessed at <https://www.jta.org/2017/09/26/news-opinion/united-states/why-some-rabbis-used-their-high-holiday-sermons-to-bash-trump-and-others-demurred> on December 17, 2017.

⁷ See Rob Eshman, “Rabbi David Wolpe calls on President Trump to repent,” *Jewish Journal* (August 21, 2017), accessed at <http://jewishjournal.com/culture/religion/223386/rabbi-david-wolpe-calls-president-trump-repent> on December 17, 2017.

support and to advance the status quo.⁸ Ultimately, it is impossible for a rabbi to be apolitical; through speech or silence, rabbis advance political agendas.

19th Century Overview

Most of the first two centuries of Jewish communities in America was conducted without rabbinic leadership. Not until waves of European Jewish immigration in the first half of the 19th century did communities seek out rabbis, most of whom were foreign-born. Because of the long-established authority of lay leadership, this first generation of rabbis “remained little more than hired help.”⁹ According to Naomi Cohen, a rabbi in this milieu “who discussed current sociopolitical events or expressed opinions at odds with those of his congregants threatened to disrupt the comfortable status quo or, even worse, arouse negative criticism from non-Jewish fellow Americans.”¹⁰

Over time, the role of the rabbi grew in honor and authority, and, by the end of the 19th century, “some rabbis dared more readily than before to criticize their own congregants.”¹¹ To take only one example, the sermons offered by Rabbi Max Heller “continually chas-

⁸ Rabbi Wolpe frames his initial article (see fn. 1) with the following:

I am endlessly besieged by requests to take on this or that political or social issue. ... If it is a left-wing cause, I will be rebuked for neglecting prophetic ethics.... If it is a right-wing cause, I will be reminded of the primacy of peoplehood and objective moral law....

I believe this sets up a straw man, for, historically, it is rare for conservative actors to push their rabbis to speak publicly on political issues; more commonly, progressive voices are the ones agitating for public comment. As I shall argue, this is largely because silence favors conservatism.

⁹ Naomi W. Cohen, *What the Rabbis Said: The Public Discourse of 19th Century American Rabbis* (New York: NYU Press 2008), p. 14.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

tised his congregants, urging them to shake off their middle-class complacency and materialism.”¹² From New Orleans to New York, from Washington to Washington, D.C., rabbis were slowly taking more political liberties than had previously been permitted, agitating their congregants in nearly every case to alter the status quo.

A pivotal figure in this revolution was Isaac Mayer Wise, whose efforts to strengthen American rabbinical training and expand congregational organization forever transformed the role of the rabbi in American Jewish life.

Wise, born in 1819 in the Bohemian village of Steingrub, emigrated to the United States in 1846. In America, he found a home for his ideals of Jewish creativity and progress, teaching that “Ancient Israel... was the prototype of American democracy; loyalty to Judaism was therefore very good Americanism.”¹³ Upon arrival in the United States, he became the rabbi of Beth El in Albany, NY, and like his contemporaries, Wise was expected to serve the community, advancing the interests of the status quo. However, lacking an accommodationist disposition, Wise found himself at odds with the expectations of his congregants. He recounted in his memoir:

I came among these people with a consciousness of independence and mastery which never deserts me, and with ideas on religion and political and social conditions so radically different from theirs, that their struggle and ill-feeling were bound to ensue. True, I might have acted more skillfully and discreetly; but being by nature fiery, earnest, and fearless, I gave expression recklessly to all my principles and views, for which the majority of my hearers could, by no possible manner of means, have been ripe and ready... Old conditions had to be overcome, and new ones created; antiquated abuses had to be corrected; old, running wounds had to be cauterized; the cry of pain followed of necessity.¹⁴

¹² Bobbie Malon, *Rabbi Max Heller: Reformer, Zionist, Southerner, 1860-1929* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press 2013), p. 56.

¹³ Michael Meyers’ *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press 1995), p. 239.

¹⁴ *Reminiscences*, trans. David Philipson (Cincinnati: Leo Wise and Company 1901), p. 72.

Unsurprisingly, Wise was not beloved in this congregation; yet his reputation and influence continued to grow in the ensuing decade. In 1854, he was elected rabbi of B'ne Yeshurun congregation in Cincinnati, which was at that time the Jewish metropolis of the West. There, Wise found a congregation more amenable to his religious reforms, but, being the "only Jewish preacher ... in the entire West," he also found himself delivering sermons to Jews of several diverse congregations.¹⁵ Taking a somewhat more tactful approach to this pulpit, Wise sought an alternative platform for the dissemination of his progressive views, establishing the newsletter *The Israelite* later that year.¹⁶ Contemplating whether to moderate his views in print as he was attempting to do from the pulpit, Wise ultimately chose to remain uncensored:

Conviction, conscience, duty were ranged against policy. I had to decide one way or the other. If I used my talents and my position in a politic way, I would soon become rich, and nothing could prevent me from entering upon pursuing successfully a brilliant career. But if I remained true to my convictions, the bent of my nature, then I must be ready to renounce wealth, honors, recognition, and

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 257-258. The spelling "B'ne Yeshurun" is the one that appears in this translation of Wise's memoir, though other spellings of this congregation's name have been used.

¹⁶ Marc Saperstein notes Wise's equivocation on delivering politically charged sermons:

After being notified by the Board of his new congregation in Cincinnati that "the Board disapprove of all political allusions in his sermon and to discontinue the same in the future," Wise published an article entitled "No Political Preaching..." in which he wrote, "Not one single word have we, as yet, said in the pulpit on the politics of the day." (Marc Saperstein, "'Rabbis, Stay Out of Politics': Social Justice Preaching and Its Opponents, 1848-2014," [proof: p. 2 of 15]; also viewable in *Jewish Culture and History*, 16:2 [2015], pp. 127-41, published online September 1, 2015, p. 128, as accessed on December 18, 2017.)

love; I must be ready to serve the cause for the love of truth... I reached the following decision: "Come what may and how it may, I will not swerve a hair's-breadth from my convictions."¹⁷

The Israelite remained a vehicle for propagating progressive Jewish values in the latter half of the 19th century, providing justification, perhaps, for Wise's adopting a more ecumenical disposition in his sermons. The luxury of his own distributed publications afforded Wise an opportunity to assume both an accommodating presence on the *bimah* as well as a progressive voice in print. However, few of Wise's rabbinic contemporaries were able to avail themselves of similar circumstances, resulting in a more acute dilemma on whether and how to agitate their communities homiletically. If even Isaac Mayer Wise could be cowed by the pressure to stifle one's political views, how much the more so the "average" American rabbi. The general expectation on the part of the laity remained throughout the 19th century that rabbis would serve their congregations, not vex them.

Nevertheless, several exceptional rabbis stand out as forceful voices for political progressivism, countering the entrenched interests of the contemporary status quo. Marc Saperstein has catalogued and summarized the tone and content of several such rabbis in this era, illustrating the growing confidence with which some American rabbis approached their pulpits. For example, David Einhorn, a prominent leader in the early American Reform movement, offered a distinctly political message in his sermon on the occasion of the nation's centennial celebration:

Right in this Centennial Year and in the Centennial City [Philadelphia] that Know Nothing Party, which wishes to take away from non-natives the right to hold state offices, is again enjoying a powerful upsurge, whereas in actuality America owes its prosperity to immigration...¹⁸

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 266-267.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

Even more forcefully, Emil G. Hirsch (Einhorn's son-in-law) directly exhorted his congregants to abandon unjust business practices, simultaneously preempting the likely backlash against a rabbi perceived as improperly political:

If you are the controller of labor, give to labor its dues. If you are in a position to fight against the iniquity of our social organization, fight it... This may be bold talk, for all I know or care, but if the minister today cannot plead for the poor... [and] for the weak and the down-trodden, then, indeed, there is no use for him, and should the day ever dawn when the muzzle is put on us, I for one would rather go into the street and earn my living in any manner whatsoever, honorable, than to be dishonest in an enforced defection from the prime duty of my calling.¹⁹

Such sentiments spread during the 19th century as rabbis grew in their confidence to speak their minds publicly. Commitment to principle over practical concerns of pleasing the congregation continued to be invoked as a primary justification for voicing public opinion. Generally speaking, these voices were liberal ones speaking out against a conservative status quo.

There is an exception for the Civil War era, however; during these years, rabbis of all political persuasions spoke out, providing a unique moment in American Jewish history of prolific and diverse political commentary. Upon the surveying of dozens of rabbinical statements on the issue of slavery, Bertram Korn concluded, "rabbis participated in the various political currents which eddied through American life."²⁰ Thus on the one hand, Morris Raphall, of New York City's Congregation B'nai Jeshurun, writes in his pamphlet *The Bible View of Slavery*, "How dare you, in the face of the sanction and protection afforded to slave property in the Ten Commandments – how dare

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 130. See also *Sermons by American Rabbis* (Chicago: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1896), p. 111. Though the precise date of this sermon is not recorded, it appears to have been between 1881 and 1896.

²⁰ Bertram Korn, *American Jewry and the Civil War* (Jewish Publication Society, 2001), p. 20.

you denounce slaveholding as a sin?"²¹ In response, David Einhorn issues a scathing reply in one of his last major rabbinical statements in Baltimore before moving to Philadelphia under pressure for his abolitionist views. Einhorn writes:

The ten commandments, the first of which is: "I am the Lord, thy God, who brought thee out of the land of Egypt,—out of the house of bondage" can by no means want to place slavery of any human-being under divine sanction.²²

Overall, as Jonathan Sarna and Adam Mendelson note, "religious leaders could be found on both sides of this struggle, and many, especially in border communities, searched for a middle ground where all sides might be reconciled."²³ In other words, rabbis at this time were as vocal (and multi-vocal) as their congregants.

During the Civil War era, rabbis of diverse political stances exercised the confidence they had found relatively recently in expressing their views publicly. Such outspoken pioneers began to shift the Jewish communal expectation on rabbinic leadership. As the 20th century dawned, American Jews more readily viewed the pulpit as the domain of the rabbi rather than as an extension of the congregation. Thus in 1897, Rabbi I. L. Leucht of New Orleans shared with his colleagues in the Central Conference of American Rabbis, "The position of 'rabbi' in most cases is now honorably independent and independently honorable."²⁴ This evolving perspective would pass through a critical turning point in the first decade of the 20th century,

²¹ Morris Raphall, *The Bible View of Slavery* (New York City, 1861) as accessed online at <https://www.jewish-history.com/civilwar/raphall.html> on December 18, 2017.

²² David Einhorn, *Response to The Biblical View of Slavery*, translated from the German by his daughter, Johanna Einhorn Kohler in *Sinai*, Vol. 6, pp. 2-22, as accessed online at <http://www.jewish-history.com/civilwar/einhorn.html> on December 18, 2017.

²³ Jonathan Sarna and Adam Mendelson, *Jews and the Civil War: A Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), p. 159.

²⁴ I. L. Leucht, "The Rabbi as a Public Man," in *Yearbook of the Central Conference of American Rabbis* (Cincinnati, OH: May & Kreidler, 1897), pp. 11-18, esp. p. 14.

highlighted by a drama playing out on the front page of the *New York Times* for four days in January 1906.²⁵

Stephen S. Wise and the Free Pulpit

The figure standing at the center of this Jewish communal storm was Stephen S. Wise. Heir to a dynasty of six generations of rabbinic leaders (though bearing no familial connection to Isaac M. Wise), Stephen Wise graduated from Columbia University, where he also earned a PhD. Ordained as a rabbi by Adolf Jellinek²⁶ in Vienna and at the age of 19 beginning his career as assistant (and later senior) rabbi of New York City's Congregation B'nai Jeshurun, Wise, a brilliant writer and gifted orator, was believed to be – and believed himself to be – the natural leader of America's 20th century Jewish community. Wise left New York to establish himself as the preeminent rabbinical authority of the Western United States, assuming leadership of Congregation Beth Israel in Portland, Oregon in 1900. From there, Wise was positioned to return to New York City, the center of American Judaism, in search of its most prominent role: as spiritual leader of Manhattan's Temple Emanu-El, America's largest and most prestigious congregation.

In 1905, Wise was invited to deliver a sermon series at Emanu-El as part of the congregation's search for a new rabbi.²⁷ Competing with more than a dozen other rabbis, Wise distinguished himself as a leading candidate. Though no job offer was made, the leadership of the congregation did discuss with Wise his conditions for serving the community. At the top of his list was the freedom to speak on whatever topics he chose: "I must have an absolutely independent

²⁵ See A. James Rudin, *Pillar of Fire: A Biography of Stephen S. Wise* (Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press, 2015), p. 82.

²⁶ Adolf Jellinek (1820-1893) was himself a renowned speaker, a prolific scholar, and a progressive thinker. He served in Vienna, where he founded the Beit ha-Midrash Academy and served as a communal, religious, and academic leader. See *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, eds. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, Vol. 11. 2nd ed. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), pp. 119-120.

²⁷ Details in this paragraph drawn from Rudin, Chapter 6: "The Battle of Temple Emanu-El," pp. 75-89.

pulpit, not dominated or limited by the views and opinions of the congregation.”²⁸

Emanu-El balked under the stalwart leadership of the formidable Louis Marshall.²⁹ They maintained the traditional understanding that ultimately, the rabbi is the servant of the congregation, and, as such, “the pulpit should always be subject to and under the control of the Board of Trustees.”³⁰ Marshall insisted that this difference of opinion was a matter of principle that had never before caused a conflict with the congregation’s rabbis. Neither he nor Wise backed down, laying their case before the public in the pages of *The New York Times*.³¹

In the end, Wise did leave Portland for New York but not to serve Temple Emanu-El. Instead, he founded his own congregation called the Free Synagogue. This synagogue was the first of its kind, emerging in stark contrast to the laypeople-led communities of America’s first centuries. As James Rudin describes it:

The process that created the Free Synagogue was a role reversal. Most congregations are founded by laymen and women and not by a rabbi. Usually, a rabbi is selected only after a synagogue has sufficient enough members

²⁸ Quoted in Rudin, pp. 77-78, which in turn draws the quotation from Carl Voss’s *Rabbi and Minister: The Friendship of Stephen S. Wise and John Haynes Holmes* (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1964), p. 55.

²⁹ Louis Marshall (1856-1929) was a prominent constitutional and corporate lawyer, having been elected to multiple New York State constitutional conventions. Following this encounter with Wise, he would go on to help found and then to serve as the president of the American Jewish Committee (1912-1929), and he was active in the Versailles Peace Conference. See *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, eds. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, Vol. 13. 2nd ed. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), pp. 580-581 and Rudin, pp. 87-88.

³⁰ This quote is drawn from a letter written from Louis Marshall to Stephen Wise, reprinted in Wise’s public response to said letter in *The New York Times* (January 7, 1906, “Rev. Dr. Wise Surprises Emanu-El Trustees”).

³¹ In addition to above article, coverage of this feud appeared in *The New York Times* on January 8 (“Says Dr. Wise Favored Politics in Pulpit”), January 10 (“Rabbi Wise on Jerome”), and January 11 (“Pulpit and Pews”) of 1906.

and adequate funds to hire a spiritual leader ... But Wise reversed the process by first organizing the synagogue himself, and then he began an effort to gain members and funds to support his personal endeavor.³²

Ultimately, this model was a success, and the Stephen Wise Free Synagogue is to this day a thriving community, whose building faces today's Temple Emanu-El across the expanse of Central Park. Moreover, Wise succeeded in altering the landscape of rabbi-lay relations, helping to reorient expectations of American Jews that their rabbis should have the freedom to speak on whatever issues they desire. As Jonathan Sarna has noted, Stephen Wise "profoundly influenced generations of young Reform rabbis (and some Conservative and Orthodox ones as well) who continued to model the rabbinate on that of Wise."³³ Throughout the twentieth century, rabbis expressed increasing confidence in raising their own voice from within their rabbinic roles.

Civil Rights

The environment most recognized among today's community for such rabbinic activism is the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Jews and non-Jews alike point to pioneering voices of conscience such as Joachim Prinz and Abraham Joshua Heschel as paradigms of moral rabbinic leadership. Undoubtedly, advocacy of this sort depended on the groundbreaking achievements of rabbis of earlier generations.

It is incontrovertible that the organized Jewish community – rabbis along with many others – were outspoken proponents of Civil Rights. As Hasia Diner summarizes:

American Jews actively worked on the national, state, and local levels with other civil rights organizations, and sometimes on their own, to push through civil rights

³² Rudin, p. 93.

³³ *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 251.

bills... Jewish support for the civil rights struggle encompassed the actions of thousands of individuals who felt obligated to create a more just America.³⁴

However, this advocacy required little sacrifice of the American Jewish community on the whole, which overwhelmingly lived outside of the Jim Crow South.³⁵ Within the South, Jewish engagement with the Civil Rights movement was far more complicated, and rabbinic advocates faced much more pressure to remain silent than did their northern colleagues.

For southern Jews—unlike their northern counterparts—desegregation would mean significant changes in their own lives and those of their neighbors. The conversation was about “us,” not about “them.” And, for the Jews of the South, who had endeavored to endear themselves to their white neighbors and to rise to echelons of prominence and success among them, supporting Civil Rights would put them at odds with the very neighbors with whom they longed to coexist. In Diner’s words:

The outspoken support of national and northern Jewish organizations for civil rights, and particularly for the imposition of those rights by the federal government on a very reluctant South, put Jewish southerners in a complicated and uncomfortable position. What Jewish leaders, organizations, and the press were calling for indeed involved dismantling the status quo and upsetting the cherished equilibrium that had allowed southern Jews to thrive.³⁶

Unsurprisingly, then, many southern Jews did not support the Civil Rights movement, and they resented northern Jews speaking to the contrary on their behalf. So explained Isaac Toubin, a writer for the *Southern Israelite*:

³⁴ Hasia Diner, *The Jews of the United States, 1654-2000* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), pp. 265-266.

³⁵ In the mid-1950s, southern Jews constituted less than 2% of American Jewry. Cf. Diner, p. 271.

³⁶ *Ibid.*.

Jews who espouse and defend the cause of civil rights jeopardize the security of isolated Jewish communities in the South, threaten their social integration and economic position, and ultimately even their physical safety.³⁷

In other words, Toubin and his contemporaries believed that “southern Jewish survival demanded acceptance of the status quo.”³⁸

Therefore, the rabbis of the south were in a difficult position. They were both pastors to their communities and, by and large, believers in racial equality.³⁹ Most rabbis, “fearing retribution from both the white community and their own congregants, refused to take public stands on the issue of civil rights.”⁴⁰ Their silence, in this context, lent support to the status quo. Especially in the face of such loud Jewish voices for integration bellowing from the north, to say nothing was to bolster the stance of the segregationists, even if the rabbis were privately opposed.

However, a small number of rabbis, whose notoriety grew throughout the Civil Rights movement, did speak out. As Clive Webb writes:

The most principled stand in support of racial integration by southern Jews came from the rabbinate... Southern rabbis feared that the confrontational tactics of the civil rights movement would only impede racial progress by stirring greater resentment among embattled white southerners. The rabbis instead favored the tactics of moral suasion, hoping through the power of their

³⁷ Marc Dollinger’s “‘Hamans’ and ‘Torquemadas’: Southern and Northern Jewish Responses to the Civil Rights Movement, 1945-1965,” in *The Quiet Voices: Southern Rabbis and Black Civil Rights, 1880s to 1990s* (ed. Mark K. Bauman and Berkley Kalin, Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1997), p. 71.

³⁸ *Ibid.*.

³⁹ Though some rabbis, such as Houston’s William Malev, ideologically believed in segregation, most were opposed. They supported civil rights even if they chose not to speak publicly on those beliefs. Cf. Dollinger, pp. 72-75.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

public addresses to convince whites of the righteousness of racial integration.⁴¹

These “public addresses” were southern activist rabbis’ strongest tool, their cudgel against the status quo. Such public advocacy wasn’t easy, but it was made possible by the political rabbis who had preceded them:

To stand up, the rabbis required self-confidence, moral fervor, and determination. The activists often had role models such as Isaac M. Wise and Stephen S. Wise or rabbis from their youth who supported the independence of the clergy and a free pulpit.⁴²

These rabbis— notable among them Ira Sanders of Little Rock, Julian Feibelman of New Orleans, Emmet Frank of Alexandria, and Perry Nussbaum in Jackson⁴³— through their activism “nurtured a counter-acting climate of conscience in their communities.”⁴⁴

During these decades, when Jewish leaders across the country were pushing for aggressive Civil Rights legislation, southern rabbis experienced considerable pressure to remain silent. The status quo advanced the private interests of many southern Jews, and more broadly, the Jewish community feared rejection by their dominant, white neighbors. Whether a rabbi publicly addressed civil rights or kept his peace, he could not avoid lending support to one side or the other. Silence advanced segregation; outspokenness supported equality. As had been the case in previous generations, speaking out was the brave and countercultural choice, embraced by the few who refused to lend their credibility to the program of segregation by remaining silent.

⁴¹ Clive Webb’s “A Tangled Web: Black-Jewish Relations in the Twentieth-Century South,” in *Jewish Roots in Southern Soil: A New History* (ed., Marcie Cohen Ferris and Mark I. Greenberg (Lebanon, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2006), p. 204.

⁴² Mark K. Bauman and Berkley Kalin’s *The Quiet Voices: Southern Rabbis and Black Civil Rights, 1880s to 1990s* (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1997), p. 17.

⁴³ *Ibid.*.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

For generations, the brave rabbis of the South and the Jewish community more generally have been lauded as pioneers in Jewish and American moral progress. These leaders have inspired countless individuals in their own quest to help America find justice. In many respects, the common view of rabbinic evolution ends here, as though today's rabbis are younger versions of the same rabbis who fought for civil rights more than fifty years ago. Certainly, the rabbinate has continued to change in the ensuing decades, but one factor remains unchanged: community members often feel uncomfortable when their rabbi becomes "political."

The Israel Exception

To this point, I have argued that, throughout American history (with the possible exception of the Civil Rights era), rabbis have faced dual options: To remain silent on current events and political topics and thereby to support the status quo or to speak out on issues of public concern and thereby to contest the status quo. The prevailing instinct is silence, which provides steady comfort to the present community and fends off the unwelcome specter of change.

In contrast, rabbis who have been seen as "speaking about politics" have generally been understood to be progressive or liberal, enemies of the status quo. There has often been dominant expectation that rabbis will steer clear of current events in order to avoid controversy and offense. However, an exception holds for "speaking about Israel."

Whereas by and large, communities (and community members) with predominantly conservative leanings have pressured their rabbis not to speak about current events—for "speaking about politics" is code for speaking progressively—these same communities (and community members) often insist that rabbis do respond to current events in Israel. Many rabbis regularly address topics related to Israel, and they do so from both liberal and conservative viewpoints. In the case of Israel, the status quo that silence supports is disengagement from or apathy about the Jewish state rather than partisan politics.

Usually, rabbis' public statements on Israel focus on North Americans' opinions on policies, events or circumstances there. From time to time, however, an explicit bridge is built between domestic politics and Diaspora-Israel relations. For instance, in 2015 during

public debate around the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (the “Iran Deal”), President Barack Obama spoke directly with rabbis in support of his foreign policy initiative.⁴⁵ At the same time, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee distributed resources to rabbis opposing America’s entry into the agreement.⁴⁶ In 2004, Rabbi Alan Lew used his High Holy Day pulpit to denounce right-wing American and Israeli policies,⁴⁷ while Rabbi Elan Adler urged his congregation to support Israel by supporting George W. Bush.⁴⁸ The sinews connecting the pulpit and politics are strong when it comes to Israel, on both the left and the right, providing one political arena into which communities do expect their rabbis to enter.

Contemporary Discussion

The “Israel exception” aside, I have sought to demonstrate that throughout American history, rabbis who speak out about current events or political topics are seen as invariably liberal or progressive.

⁴⁵ See *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, “In Pre-High Holidays Call, Obama Tells US Rabbis He Plans to Meet Soon with Netanyahu,” *Jerusalem Post* (September 11, 2015), accessed at <http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Politics-And-Diplomacy/In-pre-High-Holidays-call-Obama-tells-US-rabbis-he-plans-to-meet-soon-with-Netanyahu-415931> on December 18, 2017.

⁴⁶ See “AIPAC High Holiday Guide 5776,” accessed at <https://www.aipac.org/-/media/publications/policy-and-politics/aipac-periodicals/high-holiday-guide/high-holiday-guides/hhd5776.pdf> on December 18, 2017.

⁴⁷ See Joe Eskenazi, “Is the bimah the place for politics,” *The Jewish News of Northern California* (September 3, 2004), as accessed at <https://www.jweekly.com/2004/09/03/cover-story-br-is-the-bimah-the-place-for-politics> on December 18, 2017.

⁴⁸ See *Jewish Telegraphic Agency* with contributor Tom Tugend, “America Decides 2004 Kitchen Politics: Debate over Candidates Heats Up in Shuls, Homes and Chat Room,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency* (October 26, 2004), as accessed at <https://www.jta.org/2004/10/26/archive/america-decides-2004-kitchen-politics-debate-over-candidates-heats-up-in-shuls-homes-and-chat-room> on December 18, 2017.

This is because, I have argued, speaking out on a political topic disrupts the status quo.

Conservative columnist Dennis Prager agrees. He observes that when rabbis speak politics from the *bimah*, “Invariably, there are two constants: The rabbi is non-Orthodox, and the sermons are left wing.”⁴⁹ In seeking to explain the reason behind this phenomenon, he offers the following:

[Why don't] rabbis with conservative political views... use Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur to advance conservative political positions?... Because separation of pulpit and politics is a conservative value, not a liberal one. Therefore, rabbis with conservative political beliefs do not use their pulpit to advance their political agenda. And because no conservative believes that advancing the conservative political agenda makes you a good person. Like Judaism, we know that becoming a good person demands arduously working on one's character, not having the right politics.⁵⁰

In this essay, Prager advances a view of virtuous American democracy in which personal morals and public positions need not overlap. In my view, this perspective is not only inaccurate, it also practically favors conservative politics. Insisting on silence on political issues from the *bimah* gives support to the status quo, advancing a conservative agenda. Prager's words underscore the theme of political sermons throughout American history, exposing them as almost invariably progressive.

Prager rehearses the common belief that “political” equals “liberal.” It should be noted, however, that rabbis are “political” whether or not they speak out about current events. One who chooses to remain silent on a given issue lends support to its status quo, and one who chooses to speak out generally opposes the status quo. A rabbi can signal priorities and beliefs as strongly through silence as

⁴⁹ Dennis Prager, “When rabbis politicize the High Holy Days,” *Jewish Journal* (September 14, 2011), as accessed at <http://jewishjournal.com/opinion/96073> on December 18, 2017.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*.

through speech. In this regard, every sermon is unavoidably political to some degree.

Therefore, calls for rabbis to be “less political” are often, in effect, calls for rabbis to be “less liberal,” since silence favors conservatism. Those who wish to advance conservative agendas from the pulpit are in their rights to advocate appropriately. But claiming—as have Prager and David Wolpe—that silence is bipartisan is an attempt to coat an underlying anti-progressive sentiment in a veneer of political correctness or communal sensitivity. In other words, those who are troubled by progressive sermons from the *bimah* should say not, “be less political;” say rather, “make your politics more like mine.”

The role of the rabbi will undoubtedly continue to change and to grow as the nature of religious and communal leadership continues to evolve. Once congregations were lay bodies that hired rabbis as their functionaries; today, they are often tied to and followers of their leading rabbi. As synagogues, Jewish institutions and rabbis themselves develop in the coming generation, so too will expectations of rabbinic leadership.

If history is any guide, though, one element will remain constant: a rabbi’s voice will carry the authority of tradition, and those who hear it will look for validation therein. So too, American rabbis will continue to draw inspiration from their forebears in assessing whether and how to deploy their greatest gift, a public persona that is indelibly political.

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