

Politics, sermons don't mix

By **SHLOMO LEVIN**

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As rabbi of the Lake Park Synagogue on Milwaukee's east side, each week I deliver a sermon in which I try to relate our religious teachings to issues on congregants' minds. But one topic is off limits: the elections. Even though I have a strong opinion about the presidential race, I keep quiet about it when I preach.

If I didn't, our synagogue could lose its tax-exempt status. But now, an organization called the Alliance Defense Fund is organizing a campaign to challenge this restriction as unconstitutional and arranged several weeks ago for a few dozen pastors around the country to endorse candidates from their pulpits in order to provoke a legal fight.

I hope they lose. I wouldn't preach about the elections even if the law allowed it, and we are all better off with the law the way it is.

How many of us already have strained a relationship with a neighbor because of a campaign sign on our lawn? Or had an indignant political argument at work? Or been asked by a friend why we support someone who will take away our freedoms, destroy our way of life and give in to our enemies? (Take your pick, I've heard it about both candidates.) What if this soon-to-be-former-friend adds the accusation that our candidate will encourage sin and doom us to divine retribution? How will we get along after the election? The absolute, uncompromising voice of religion is too polarizing to add to politics.

As a rabbi, my duty is to remind people that we should respect others and get along, in keeping with the Bible's golden rule to treat and speak to others as we would like to be treated and spoken to ourselves. Clergy should teach eternal truths that help us put current controversies into perspective. It can be very hard for a rabbi or pastor with a strong election preference, tempted by the captive audience in the pews, to hold back, especially in the heat of a campaign. But the true role of clergy should be to tone down the political debate, not ratchet it up.

Beyond that, the Jewish tradition teaches modesty and fallibility. Last week, we observed Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, on which we ask God to forgive our sins. We include a confession for sins we committed because we are too confused to determine right from wrong.

If this is true regarding our personal conduct, how much more so regarding political opinions! How can anyone know for sure which candidate truly will be best for our country or spread our values? We don't even know for sure what a candidate will do if actually elected! No matter how strongly we may feel about one side or the other, since we lack omniscience, we may be wrong.

If I did preach politics, I would sermonize that rather than tell us whom to vote for, our religious beliefs send us to the ballot box humbled by the complexity of the issues and the difficulty of making good decisions.

Another confession is for sins we committed by falsely believing to know God's will. Right before elections, it is easy for our egos to make us think that our voting plans are divine commandments, instead of just the product of gray matter between the ears of an ordinary human. Clergy are not immune.

When it required clergy to keep political endorsements out of sermons in order to maintain tax-exempt status, Congress did a mitzvah. I hope the courts at least will see that as an acceptable mixing of religion and state.

Shlomo Levin is rabbi of the Lake Park Synagogue in Milwaukee.