

The First Amendment – A Reform Jewish Perspective

I grew up, like many of you, with a school that had daily public prayer. They did not call it prayer; they called it “the thought for the day”. Every morning a student would go to the office to read a “thought for the day” over the loudspeaker. I was often asked and I would always read from either “best loved poems of the American people” or Bartlett’s familiar quotations. Most kids would read from the New Testament. Following the reading we would have silent time. One year I had a long term sub in a class who would lead us in grace before lunch. I was told that if I did not like it I could wait outside during the prayer, (our classrooms faced a sidewalk, not an interior hall.) It was not a good option even in North Carolina during the winter. All prayer in the school stopped after a parent complained... I think it was my mother... I do not think that I was scarred by the experience but I did become a rabbi...

We Jews are used to being different, to standing out; to making sacrifices and compromises in order to practice our religion in a place where we are not the majority. We have grown used to living in a society where the majority religious culture is not ours and our secular calendar moves to the rhythm of Christian religious time, where Sundays are the days with closed car lots, banks, no mail delivery, no alcohol in many places, where Christmas and Easter are national holidays. I am not really bothered by all of that. We did choose to live here and most of those decisions were originally made for commercial as well as religious reasons. However we also live in a country where our tax-payer funded Air Force academy recently had over 50 reports of religious discrimination, including the football coach hanging a “team Jesus” banner in the locker room, the Academy’s commandant sending out a school wide message on the national day of prayer encouraging cadets to use the J for Jesus hand signal. Where cadets placed over 4,000 fliers advertising the film “the passion of the Christ” in the dining hall. Where Jewish and other non-Christian cadets reported harassment and proselytizing from senior cadets. Where lack of attendance at daily Christian chapel services lead to harassment. Where favoritism was shown to evangelical faculty members and there were allegations of discrimination against others.

We live in a country where coach lead prayer is common in locker rooms before football and basketball games in public schools, where classes are cancelled in our local elementary school district just before Christmas so that the kids can go see the Polar Express. Where our local community college pays the regional head of Jews for Jesus to teach classes on Judaism and Christianity, where there are currently bills in two states seeking to declare Christianity the state religion. We live in a country where faith-based funding initiatives funnel money directly into churches, mosques and synagogues to fund social action programs during which active proselytizing can take place. We live in a country where school vouchers can be used to funnel tax payer money from public schools to private religious schools. We live in a country where local school boards force science teachers to read disclaimers about the validity of evolution before they teach. We live in a country where, in June, the Texas GOP issued its platform, declaring America a “Christian nation” and describing the concept of separation of church and state as a “myth.” We live in a country where people try and block access to vaccines based on moral rather than scientific grounds, where decisions on funding of science is based on religious beliefs. Where the Congress attempted to intervene in a family’s very private end of life decision. We live in a country where the separation of church and state is being actively demolished by the religious right. Whatever your political persuasion if you are Jewish or any other minority religion this incarnation of the engagement between politics and religion is bad for you and your children.

As Jew, as an American, I take threats to our freedom very seriously. I, like most of you, am willing to give up a degree of privacy for the sake of security. I am comfortable knowing that my bag may be searched at the airport or the baseball stadium, or that if I visit or call Afganistan, I am liable to have the government look into my motives. The first freedom provided for in the Bill of Rights is freedom of religion. It is this freedom, the freedom to worship or not worship as we

wish, to not have the majority impose their views on us that has made America for 230 years a great place for Jews to live. That freedom is now under attack in ways big and small across our country. It is Rosh Hashana, a time to wake up and pay attention to our world.

The very first freedom enshrined in our Bill of Rights is the freedom of religion. The Union for Reform Judaism claims, "The United States is the first country in the history of the world to build its society on the foundation of the separation between church and state. This is one of America's unique gifts to civilization and the chief guarantor of our religious liberty. The First Amendment is the cornerstone of American freedom. It states, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." Our founding fathers began our bill of rights this way because they saw the horror that state sponsored religion caused in Europe. Our founders had first hand experience being part of an oppressed religious minority. America is good for Jews not because it is a democracy but because it is a democracy that protects the rights of its minorities. A democracy with no protections for minorities runs the risk of causing great harm through the tyranny of the majority. Most people do not use wheel chairs, why go to the expense of making buildings accessible? Most people do not use libraries, why fund them? Most Americans are not poor, why support food stamps? Eighty percent of America is Christian, why not force stores to close on Sunday? Why not have Christian prayers in schools? At work? From the oval office? Why not send money to Christian schools or support seminaries with tax dollars? Because the majority is not always right and freedom in the United States is our most important value.

We are part of a country that recognizes the importance of religion even while it separates religion from government. The Rev. Welton Gaddy, of the Interfaith Alliance Foundation, wrote that our country was founded by people who believed that "it is a nation in which government is appreciative of religion but resistant to any entanglement with religion. Wise people who understood and valued religion rejected the very idea of a government-established national religion or even the slightest possibility of a religion-controlled government. Thomas Jefferson refused to sign bills calling for national days of prayer or thanksgiving, James Madison did not want to count clergy in the 1790 census."

Rev. Barry Lynn, Director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, stated in a recent interview: "In 1947 the United States Supreme Court put real teeth into that phrase "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion." The Justices made it clear that this prohibition did not just mean that Congress could not set up one "national religion," but that it couldn't give some religions preference over others or even promote religion over non-theistic beliefs."

For several decades, the Supreme Court used that standard to declare unconstitutional a variety of practices by governments including government-written or government-selected prayers that public school students were expected to recite, bans on teaching evolution, and direct government funding of private religious education. It also struck down most restrictions on reproductive choice, which had, as a practical matter, been implemented primarily because of powerful religious interest groups.

Although some of these protections have been watered down over the past 25 years, the essential principles remain strong. They are, however, under relentless attack from those who ignore our history." I am not going to spend tonight tracing the history of the attack on church state separation but it is very real.

Rabbi James Rudin, who spent time as an Air Force chaplain and who recently retired from his position at the American Jewish Committee as Director of Interreligious Affairs has recently published a book called the Baptizing of America, the Religious Right's Plan for the Rest of Us. In it Rudin writes "I am convinced that despite the large U.S. population, the religious diversity, and the Constitutional and judicial guarantees of church-state separation, the campaign to permanently transform America into a faith-based nation where one particular form of Christianity is legally dominant over all other religious communities constitutes a clear and

present danger." Rabbi Rudin, a man who has spent his career building bridges between the Jewish and non-Jewish community is rightfully alarmed. He sees a clear threat from a group he calls christocrats, for lack of a better word. The term christocrats was first used by the founding father Dr. Benjamin Rush, who used the term to describe the founders of our country who hoped to make it a Christian nation. Rabbi Rudin calls this group the christocrats to distinguish them from evangelical and conservative Christians who have no desire to change the relationship between religion and government. The problem is not religion in America it is the attempt to use government to push one narrow religious point of view. "Rudin lays out the threats to freedom, pluralism, and religious expression by enumerating "rooms" that he perceives to be falling under the control of the religious right. Those rooms include: the bedroom, where the religious right is attacking homosexual rights and a woman's right to choose; the schoolroom, where fundamentalists are imposing "intelligent design," fundamentalist bible lessons, and prayer; the hospital and medical laboratory, where zealots are interfering in end-of-life decisions, ending access to abortion, and blocking stem-cell research; the courtroom, scene of a Christocratic takeover of the judiciary; the newsroom, with its thousands of Christian broadcasts, most notably Pat Robertson's 700 Club; the public rooms, where the religious right is waging the "war" against the war on Christmas and imposing sectarian public prayer." (rabbi Chaim dov bialak, book review). It is a very well thought out and comprehensive plan to use the tools of democracy to overthrow what we consider a basic freedom.

I believe in a separation between church and state that is even higher than what the court mandates. I have graciously declined an invitation to offer the invocation in the statehouse because I do not think that a rabbi belongs there. I will not participate in the lighting of the menorah at the Hoffman Estates Village Hall because despite what the Supreme Court says, a menorah is a religious symbol and does not belong in a government office building. I will not apply for government funding under the faith based initiative plan because it is bad for religion and government and I participate only reluctantly in government sponsored interfaith prayer services even though the local Hoffman Estates government offices bend over backwards to be inclusive.

I do believe as a religious person that our religious beliefs and the morals that Judaism teaches should influence our personal political decision making. I take our 10th grade students to DC to learn about how Judaism can inform our political decisions. The first amendment protects our right to speak out according to our moral/ethical/religious consciousnesses.

The barrier between church and state must remain high for the sake of America and for the sake of religion. One of the many organizations working to protect America and the freedom of Americans is the Interfaith Alliance.

They state:

- In order for society to benefit, religious belief and practice must be free and voluntary.
- In matters of faith, government must not take sides.
- Our government must serve all citizens regardless of their religious belief or non-belief.
- No citizen's rights or opportunities should depend on religious beliefs or practices.
- If there is not freedom from the imposition of religion, there is not freedom for the free practice of religion.

You can find literature about them and information about how to help them on the tables as you leave the sanctuary. Rosh Hashanah is called in the Torah Yom Teruah – usually translated as the day of sounding the Shofar. But teruah is not just the sound of the shofar it is a very specific call, it is an alarm, a wake-up call, a call to arms. In Mishneh torah Maimonides wrote, "Even though the sounding of the Shofar on Rosh Hashanah is a decree, it contains an allusion. It is as if the Shofar's call is saying 'Uru y'sheinim; sleepers, awake from your sleep, and you who slumber, arise!' It is time for our community to awake and realize that our freedom and our children's freedom demand our vigilance.