

Voting MATTERS

AN NCJW SERIES

by RABBI MARLA J. FELDMAN

There has been much talk this election season about religion and politics and “values voters.” Unfortunately, the media-generated perception of “values voters” refers to a small cohort of fundamentalists who care only about restricting access to abortion, stripping evolution from science textbooks and preventing gay and lesbian couples from enjoying the privileges of marriage. If religion is to elevate politics, people of faith like us must stand toe to toe with such right-wing extremists and raise our voices on behalf of our progressive religious values.

Remembering Those Who Need Us Most

Thirty-eight million people live in poverty in the US, including one in five children. The working poor struggle to pay for housing and food, unable to sustain themselves or their families on minimum-wage salaries that have not kept pace with today’s realities. Seniors who worked their entire lives are forced to choose between heat in the winter and prescription medications. Forty-seven million Americans, including 9 million children, do not have health insurance, leaving illnesses untreated, creating a fiscal crisis for public hospitals, and contributing to the cycle of poverty. Certainly, the wealthiest nation on the planet can do better than this.

In Deuteronomy, we are taught: “If there is a needy person among you, do not harden your heart and shut your hand against him. Rather, you must open your hand and lend him sufficient for whatever he needs.... Give to

him readily and have no regrets when you do so.”

Enlightened by this teaching, we should ask the candidates:

- ▶ Does your domestic spending policy provide a safety net to meet the daily necessities of the hungry, the homeless, and those who are otherwise vulnerable?
- ▶ Will your national budget consider the needs of children by fully funding programs like Head Start and the State Children’s Health Insurance Program (SCHIP)?
- ▶ Will you establish a minimum wage that allows a full-time worker to support a family?
- ▶ Will you establish welfare programs designed to lift families out of poverty rather than punish those who fall on hard times?

Preserving the Principles of Justice

In our post 9–11 world, we have “recalibrated” the balance between

our security needs and civil rights, undermining due process, imprisoning journalists, and permitting torture. We are allowing our halls of justice to be usurped by partisan politics, sowing seeds of distrust and undermining confidence in our elected and appointed leaders. We are building fences and chasing down immigrant families who want only a better opportunity for their children, like our parents and grandparents, while we reject the pleas of refugees fleeing for their lives.

Jewish tradition would have us build a different type of society. Embedded in the center of the Torah is a collection of laws known as the “Holiness Code,” which envisions a community where all are treated fairly and outsiders are welcome: “You shall not render an unfair decision; do not favor the poor or show deference to the rich; judge your neighbor fairly.... Do not stand idle by the blood of your neighbor.... Love your neighbor as yourself.”

We are told to treat the stranger in our midst as one of our own, for we were strangers in the land of Egypt. From our own historical experience as outsiders, we have learned to embrace the “other” — the stranger, the non-citizen, the outcast.

Inspired by such teachings, we should ask the candidates:

- ▶ Will you preserve the principles of justice that have been the hallmarks of the American judicial system, despite the fears we face in our dangerous world?
- ▶ Will you guard our timeless Constitution, even when it is politically inconvenient?
- ▶ Will your immigration policy and civil rights laws secure justice for today’s “strangers in our midst”?

We must bear in mind that these values are not partisan; rather they are rooted in Jewish tradition and amplified by our historical experience. There is no single economic theory that characterizes the Jewish community — we have been capitalists, socialists, communists, fiscal conservatives, and spend-and-tax liberals. Yet our community has been consistently among the most outspoken activists on issues of social justice and equal rights, and proudly so.

The Challenges Ahead: A Call to Action

Our nation needs Jewish values voters. The moral test of any society

is how it treats the most vulnerable: the weak and needy, the elderly and the ill, the stranger, and, above all, the children; these values should be reflected in our national budget. Our devotion to our national principles is measured by our willingness to uphold and preserve the constitutional freedoms and rights we treasure so highly, particularly in dangerous times such as these.

As others have said: Where there is an injustice, the Jew feels outrage; where there is suffering, the Jew hears a call to action. The challenge before us is great — nothing less than deciding the very nature of the society we will bequeath to our children and their children. >

This article is the third in a series exploring voting in the United States, created to educate and mobilize readers in preparation for the 2008 elections.

A PARTNER IN ACTION

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