

Rabbi Stacy Friedman
Rosh Hashanah 5768
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In the Name of God

Wiley Drake is the pastor of the First Southern Baptist Church of Buena Park, California. He is also the former vice president of the Southern Baptist Convention, an organization with 16 million members in over 42,000 churches. In the last few weeks, he has been in the news a great deal; you may have heard about him. Drake is being investigated by the IRS for issuing a letter on his church's stationary endorsing a particular presidential candidate. He said, and I quote, "I don't give a rip about the I.R.S. They don't scare me. I don't believe in separation of church and state." He continues, "Mike Huckabee," the candidate whom Drake endorsed, "is a born-again Christian and I believe he will do what God told him to do." I'll tell you what God told Wiley Drake to do. He asked his followers to pray for the death of the two men who reported him to the IRS, the men he refers to as "enemies of God." Why is Wiley Drake, a pastor and national church leader, asking his followers to pray for another person's death? Because God told him to. God even told him the exact words to say: "Persecute them...let their days be few...let their children be fatherless and their wives become widows." "Yes," Drake admitted, "the prayer does call for serious, serious punishment on people, but I didn't call for that. God did. I was simply doing what God told me to do."¹

My friends, there is a crisis in our country and in our world. Religious fundamentalists are using and misusing God's name to kill, to alienate, to divide, and to hate. And while our nation has been hunting down extremists on the other side of the world, another kind of religious extremists have been gaining control and exerting power right here in our own country. My friends, there are 55 million Christian Evangelicals, and for the most part, they are good people and upright people, but they also form the largest voting block in our country and they vote their values. I'm not talking about politics, not about republicans or democrats, not about Christians or Muslims, I'm talking about fundamentalism, about religious extremism, about what happens when one group aspires to impose its religion and its values and its God on everyone and everything around them. I am talking today about tolerance and humility and compassion, I am talking about real values, the kind that uplift and heal because that is what our nation so desperately needs this year, and that is what our souls need as well.

Why am I talking about this today on Rosh Hashanah? Because this is the day for *teshuvah*, for reflection and for reckoning. This is a day to look backward and ahead, to think about what type of people we want to be and what kind of world we want to live in, we and our children and theirs. And this year, 5768, with the presidential election season well underway, we each have a sacred opportunity and obligation to shape the future of our nation and of our lives. Because there is so much at stake in our world, and so much promise standing before us in this new year of life.

Yes, there is a crisis in our country. The Reverend Pat Robertson, a former presidential candidate, has proclaimed, “we are in a religious war, a war to save America for God” and he is not referring to my God or yours. And to train the soldiers for that war, Jerry Falwell created a university complete with a Law School to prepare a new generation of lawyers and politicians devoted to making ours’ a fundamentalist Christian nation. And the charismatic Evangelist James Kennedy spread his message through his many radio and television programs where he, until his death just last week, reached millions of people every day. Last winter, his 10,000-member church hosted its 10th annual political training seminar called, “Reclaiming America for Christ.” In a pre-conference press release Kennedy said, “America can be returned to moral and spiritual sanity, but that will only happen as Christians return to the public square. This is our land...and with God’s help, we shall reclaim this nation for Jesus Christ. No power on earth can stop us.”

One of the speakers at the conference was the Baptist preacher Rick Scarborough, whom you may have seen on CNN’s “God’s Warriors” broadcast. He, too, is on a mission to save America. After attending an AIDs prevention lecture at his daughter’s school, Scarborough was incensed. That anger lit a fire in his soul, and he went home that night and immediately declared his own war on liberalism. He began preaching to his congregation, telling them to run for public office. They did, and quickly took over the local city council and the school board. He wrote a book called Liberalism Kills Kids. And today, Rick Scarborough is on a crusade, traveling across America to churches and church rallies. He plans on speaking personally with 140,000 people between now and Election Day a little over a year from now, urging people to “vote their values.”

In the 1950’s, the prominent sociologist Will Herberg predicted that by the year 2000, almost everyone in the United States would be Episcopalian, Presbyterian, or Congregationalist. But that didn’t happen. Instead, there are more Muslims than Episcopalians in the United States today. America is home to about six million Muslims, six million Jews, four million Buddhists, one million Hindus, and many more. We have Muslim mosques in the Midwest, Hindu temples in the Deep South, and Sikh gurdwaras in our suburbs.ⁱⁱ And although Pat Robertson and the Reverend Wiley Drake may not like it, that diversity is protected by our own Constitution. The First Amendment prohibits the establishment of any state mandated religion. In fact, the government must be neutral toward religion, not declaring itself for or against anyone’s God or ethics. And the Constitution also states that there can be no religious test for any elected official; it doesn’t matter where someone goes to church or synagogue or even if they do. But today, even the liberal candidates seem influenced by the religious right. Did you see the cover story in the recent Time magazine, “How the Democrats Got Religion.” You have to be afraid today to run for office in this country without going to church and professing belief in God. The fundamentalists are working every day to turn America into a theocracy where their values become America’s values, where their religion becomes America’s religion, and where their God becomes America’s God. But it won’t happen. Do you know why? Because it’s un-American. Because our country was built by people seeking religious freedom, not religious domination. And because they wove the principles of acceptance and tolerance and diversity into the very fabric of American life.

I know what it's like to live in a theocracy, I grew up in one in Utah where the lines between church and state were invisible, where the church essentially controlled the government, where every school graduation and football game began with a Christian prayer in the name of Jesus, where my 9th grade science teacher refused to teach evolution because it was a myth, and where every public school in Utah is built adjacent to church property so the students can study church doctrine, and receive school credit for it. I know what a theocracy is, I experienced it there every day, and that's why I'm so angry, furious to see extremists use religion to dominate and to alienate and to divide our country today. I know that alienation; I know what it feels like when my values don't matter, and when my God doesn't count and when my religion is invisible. And I don't want it happening in our country today. It's wrong, it's dangerous, and it's exactly what religious extremists are fighting for every single day.

A war has been declared in America, the one fought everyday in our schools, in our courts, and in our nation's capitol. It is a battle for the very soul of America; it is a battle for God. And you and I, whether we like it or not, are right in the middle of it. It is once again the time for decision-making in our country. And we cannot allow fundamentalists to set our national agenda. And we can't allow them to define God or religion or values for us and for our country.

But it really isn't about them, is it...it's about us. It's about what we are willing do in the upcoming elections and throughout the year with our values and with our faith. Dr. Elliot Dorff, an expert in Jewish ethics and professor at UCLA Law School, has said, "we do ourselves and our religion and the nation a disservice if we think that religion should have no role in shaping national policy. No religion should determine national policy as a matter of right, but each religion must enter the fray of public debate if that conversation is to reflect the nation as a whole."ⁱⁱⁱ And our constitution protects our right to do just that. Religion can and always has informed our national agenda. It is the American way. In fact, according to the ACLU, "no other industrialized democracy has as much religion in the public square as does the United States. We need to take our values public, not so that we can conquer or control or demean anyone else, not so that we can "save America for Adonay," but rather so we can lift up humanity, *b'tzelem eholim*, so we can care for those in need, *gemilut chasadim*, and so that we can repair our world, *tikkun olam*. We need to have a clearly articulated notion of our values, because if we don't, someone else will, and they have.

I will tell you why I believe so strongly that fundamentalist and extremist values cannot and must not overtake our national conscience and why we must get involved. Yes, I know it may seem hypocritical to you that I am standing here today urging you to bring our own values, Jewish values, into the public sphere while I criticize their involvement in national life, their aggressiveness in politics. But I am doing so today because I am so concerned about the power and the harm being inflicted by the religious right in America today. I am concerned and offended by the hate and intolerance and self-righteousness hidden in their values. And although not all evangelicals agree on everything, and some have even broken from official doctrine, like the Reverend Rick Cizik who is now mobilizing other evangelicals to save our planet from global warming, if the religious

right had their way there would be prayer in our children's schools, prayer and theology and dogma that obliterates our own and is forced upon our children. And they would outlaw abortion, even for those whose lives or health are endangered by their pregnancies. And they are opposed to stem cell research—research and treatment that could potentially help millions with life-threatening illnesses like diabetes, and Parkinson's, and spinal cord injuries. Who are they to decide who shall live and who shall die? And while the religious right spends its time and resources focusing on the definition of marriage and the proper role of women in society, so many have become distracted from the real ills facing our nation today. And that is why we need to bring our values, Torah's values, those of tolerance, of compassion, and of love, to the voting booth and to the national conversation this year.

That's what Jerry Falwell told his followers to do in the last elections and that's what so many did—they took their fundamentalist values into the voting booth and we've all seen the results. Just tell me, where are the values, where is God in these statistics, which tell the story of our country today. Since invading Iraq 3 ½ years ago, 3,759 American soldiers, our sons and daughters, have been killed; over 27,000 have been seriously wounded. And in that time anywhere between 50,000 and 100,000 Iraqi civilians have been killed. Some claim that the number is closer to 600,000. And for that our country spends 200 million dollars in Iraq every single day. Is that in the name of God? The Census Bureau just released its latest numbers and do you know how many Americans live in poverty? 36.5 million and the numbers have been rising every year since 2000. And although the number is beginning to even out, still, over 13 million of them are children, the highest rate in the industrialized world. And that is in the name of God? Last year, 47 million people lacked health insurance in our country, an increase of over 2 million from the previous year, and the United States of America has the highest infant mortality rate of any western nation. Is that in the name of God? And meanwhile, we are the number one global warming polluter in the world. And all of that is in the name of God? Whose God are we talking about?

At the darkest time in our nation's history, near the end of the Civil War, a minister from the North came to President Abraham Lincoln and said to him, "Let's just hope the Lord is on our side." And Lincoln responded, "I am not at all concerned about that.... but it is my constant anxiety and prayer that I and this nation should be on the Lord's side." My friends, God doesn't take sides. God isn't a Republican or a Democrat. God wasn't for the North or the South then and isn't for the red states or the blue today; God isn't a Christian or a Muslim or a Jew. God is in here. And out there. We can't claim God as our own, God claims us. God created us, created us in God's own image, *b'tzelem Elohim*. We need to be on God's side, on the side of all that is holy in our world, on the side of kindness, of goodness, and of peace. How dare people use God's name to control and to divide and to hate. Where is the humility?

What does it mean to be on God's side? It means to fight for the poor, to feed the hungry, to love the stranger, and to care for most vulnerable people in our society. Those are our values, and we are fundamentalists about them because these values have sustained our people for hundreds of generations, even in the worst of times. These

values have lifted our world and brought light and humanity to our world—even to the darkest places. The Torah teaches in Deuteronomy 15:7- if there is a needy person among you, do not harden your heart, *lo ta'amez et levavcha*, rather open your hand and lend him what he needs, *tiftach et yadecha*. We are commanded to help people in need, to care for them, to make sure they have what they need like food and medical care and dignity. Genesis implores us to care for our earth, and protect it, *l'ovdah ul'shamor*. And Isaiah 58:7 instructs: share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house.

Millions of people in our country go to bed hungry every night and we have the means to feed them. Tens of thousands of people still remain homeless in New Orleans, and even more in the cities and towns around the country. “Bring them into your house,” our Torah teaches us, and that’s why we went to New Orleans last year and why we’re going back again this spring—to build houses and bring hope to tired and needy. We not only profess our values, we live them, we bring them out into the streets just like we did in New Orleans where we met Thomas, a seven year old boy who spent two days on his rooftop during Katrina, terrified, before he was finally rescued and brought to the Superdome. When I asked how things have been for him he said, “Well, it gets a little hot and crowded in our FEMA trailer.” Of course it had, he had been living there for 18 months with his family of six! We are fundamentalist about the 100 times our Bible implores us to love the orphan and the widow, and about the 36 times the Torah says to love the stranger because we were strangers in the land of Egypt. That’s why members of Rodef Sholom went to the Canal last winter during the immigration raids, to stand side-by-side with the people there, to let them know they were not alone when they felt most vulnerable and afraid. And while we were there, we learned more about their stories, their dreams. We met their children, some of them brought us donuts and coffee, and they cried out from their cares, “we love you America.” And they do. And all of that is in the name of God!

So where do we go from here? When we stood in the Canal on those cold, dark mornings with bright candles in our hands, we were not alone, we stood side by side with people of many religions, Catholics and Buddhists, Presbyterians and Muslims and Jews. We prayed together, we shivered in the cold together, we got to know each other, many for the very first time, and we each brought our values and our faith into the public square to heal and unify, to make God’s holiness and goodness real in our world. And that’s been happening throughout Marin County. Last year, under Rabbi Lezak’s direction, our congregation participated in Panim, community conversations that are also taking place in 30 other religious and nonprofit organizations around Marin County. And this year, for the very first time in this county’s history, all of these groups will meet together to form a county-wide agenda, to explore the issues of poverty, immigration, transportation, and housing in our community, each bringing our own values and through them, lifting up our county and its residents. I hope you will join us on November 15th as we begin this critical conversation on the future of our community.

And join me in January when I will co-teach a class along with experts from our community on the critical issues of our day, like healthcare, stem cell research,

immigration, and the environment. We will look at Jewish perspectives on these issues so that our tradition's wisdom can inform our choices and our action in the upcoming year. Join me, because there is so much at stake in our nation and our lives and because you and I have to power to do so much to bring healing and compassion and sanity to our world and to our lives.

At the lowest point in American history, just weeks before the end of the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln stood before the nation to deliver his second Inaugural Address. At that time, over 600,000 American soldiers had been killed, more than in any other war in our nation's history, even to this day. The United States of America was divided, nearly ripped in half. And Lincoln stood before the people and with humility and reverence spoke. Speaking of the North and the South he said: "Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other...God has his own purposes." And he continued, "With malice toward none; charity for all; with firmness in the right, let us strive on to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan—to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations." Just a few weeks after this address, the war was over and the country began the work, the holy and sacred work, of healing its wounds and repairing its soul.

The time is upon us now to rise up, to repair the soul of our nation and to heal the wounds of all people. Now is the time to bring compassion and goodness and peace out into the streets and into our world because this year, 5768, nothing less will do.^{iv}

ⁱ See www.jewsonfirst.org

ⁱⁱ See "Symposium on America: The Moral Nation", by the Reverend Jerald Stinson

ⁱⁱⁱ Religion as a Public Good, p. 245, ed. Alan Mittleman

^{iv} Thank you to the Reverend Carol Hovis and Sister Judy Donovan for their ideas for this sermon and for their inspired leadership in our community.