

## Democracy at Risk: A Jewish View

Rabbi Sid Schwarz

To me, the wisdom that a Biblical text can impart always resides between the words in the scroll and the life and times of the reader. For that reason, I was struck this week by the juxtaposition of *Parshat Bo*, which sets the stage for the story of the Exodus from Egypt, the master-story of political liberation, and the anniversary of the January 6<sup>th</sup> assault on the U.S. Capitol and on American democracy.

With the Department of Justice in the midst of its largest ever investigation and prosecution of a single incident and a Congressional inquiry still ongoing, there are still many details of the January 6<sup>th</sup> assault that have yet to be revealed. But at this, one-year anniversary, at least four major contributing factors can be identified.

1. **Xenophobia** (fear of strangers, foreigners, the “other”): White America feels itself “at risk.” By 2045, Whites will be less than 50% of U.S. population. Hispanics, Blacks, Asians and multi-racials are seen as threats by many White Americans. Those fears are easily exploited by politicians who feed such fears and generate legions of followers through the politics of hate. The origins of racism in this country was rooted in the desire to keep “the other” –in this case, Africans brought to this country in chains and sold into slavery--economically and politically impotent. Think about the chant that was heard at the August 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, VA: “Jews will not replace us”.
2. **The appeal of autocrats**: Globalization has upended the economies of the world. There is much economic dislocation afoot, as whole industries are threatened. It paves the way for autocrats who prey on people’s fears, paint complex issues in black and white, and position themselves as “saviors”. Donald Trump may be the highest profile example of the rise of authoritarian heads of state but we can easily add to the list Vladimir Putin in Russia, Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, Victor Orban in Hungary and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, pundits predicted that we were entering an age when democracy would be ascendant throughout the world. Thirty years later, we are witnessing democratic systems and values under full assault all over the globe.
3. **Assault on truth**: Tom Nichols’ 2017 book, *The Death of Expertise*, portrays how we have levelled the playing field in such a way that people with knowledge, degrees and credentials are dismissed as “out of touch” elites and anyone with access to a computer and a bit of social media savvy can build an audience for “alternate facts”, whether it is about climate change, vaccinations or who won an election. The *New York Times* review re-titled the book, “How Ignorance Became a Virtue”. Credentialed news media gets labelled “fake news” and internet platforms like Facebook make money by developing algorithms that privilege posts that polarize and perpetuate conflict between groups. Donald Trump’s new social media outlet is called “Truth”, taking a page out of the Soviet playbook that called the State controlled newspaper, Pravda!
4. **“Fixing” Elections**: Some say that the January 6<sup>th</sup> assault on the U.S. Capitol was an aberration and can never happen again. But not 24 hours after this country was a hairbreadth away from overturning the election of Joe Biden as the 46<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, the bulk of the Republican party rallied around some “alternative facts” about what happened. Since then, in

dozens of states, laws have been passed that will deny the vote to hundreds of thousands of, mostly, people of color that vote overwhelmingly for Democrats. And in dozens of swing districts around the country, pro-Trump Republicans have taken over election commissions that are supposed to be non-partisan bodies used to guarantee free and fair elections.

What is the Jewish stake in all of these developments? I would suggest they include Jewish values, Jewish history and the Jewish future.

**Jewish Values:** It would be an overstatement to claim that democracy, as it developed in England (the Magna Carta), France (the French Revolution) and America (the American Revolution), originated with the Bible. And yet the intellectual and political leaders in all three countries were mostly people of faith who sourced many of the values informing democratic principles in the Bible. The protection of the stranger (*ahavat ger*), the rule of law (*din* and *mishpat*), the commitment to truth (*emet* one of the names of God) are all deeply rooted in Jewish sources.

**Jewish history:** I don't like to overuse references to the Holocaust. Yet Timothy Snyder's short masterpiece, *On Tyranny*, is now a "must read". In the book, he draws numerous parallels between the rise of Donald Trump and the rise of Nazism and Facism in Europe in the 1930's. He wrote the book after one year of Trump's Presidency. Since then, the dozens of parallels he cited could be multiplied many times over. Every one of the four factors I cited above, were building blocks of Hitler's Nazi Germany that ended with the murder of one-third of the Jewish people in the world.

**The Jewish future:** The Jewish love affair with America pre-dates Jewish economic success here. It was rooted in a recognition that America's commitment to democracy and cultural pluralism was unprecedented in any other country on earth and, those two principles, were a guarantee that Jews could not only survive, but could thrive in this country even though our religious/cultural identity was not rooted here. That confidence, built over the course of more than three centuries, has eroded in the space of five years! Just in the last few months, in numerous social gatherings, the conversation has turned to: Where will you move to if Trump wins the Presidency in 2024?

\*\*\*

Writing this message on January 6<sup>th</sup>, the first anniversary of the storming of the U.S. Capitol in an attempt to reverse the outcome of the election of Joe Biden as the President of the United States, I am thinking about one of Mordecai Kaplan's least well-known books. In 1951 he published *The Faith of America*, a book that took all of the principles of American democracy, liberty and pluralism and re-cast them in a sacred key. He understood that cultural values needed a "container" if they would survive. Aware that Judaism provided that sacred container for Jews, allowing Jews to perpetuate a group identity during almost 2000 years without political sovereignty, Kaplan sought to do the same thing for American values. The book created a "religion" of American values.

Of course, Kaplan could not have foreseen how much democracy stands, "at risk" in the first part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But if Kaplan were alive today, I feel certain that he would propose that we create of January 6<sup>th</sup> something akin to an American Tisha B'Av, commemorating a day when the most sacred building in America was attacked and desecrated by people who put blind loyalty to a demagogue above a commitment to the U.S. Constitution and the lawful transfer of power. He would have created a liturgy, songs and poems that would be read in churches, mosques, synagogues, schools, city halls

and civic arenas all across the country. It would be a solemn day of learning and reflection to remind Americans, for years to come, what happens when we don't safeguard the principles that have made America a beacon of democracy for people all over the world since its founding in 1776.

What a powerful day such a new American "holiday" would be! Maybe, we need to create such a commemoration ourselves.

---

Rabbi Sid Schwarz is a Senior Fellow at Hazon, where he runs the Clergy Leadership Incubator, a two-year national fellowship for rabbis. He is the author of *Judaism and Justice: The Jewish Passion to Repair the World* and is the founding rabbi of Adat Shalom Reconstructionist Congregation in Bethesda, MD.