

PURIM 2001

Since last Purim, we have witnessed a year where this nation's soul has split at its seams. This divide exhibited itself most openly in the arena of politics. But the political fissure is but a symptom of a larger divide in the attitudes of Americans today.

I began thinking about this talk on January 20, 2001, the day that William Jefferson Clinton left his office as President. For millions of Americans, Clinton was quite literally the anti-Christ. Whether he is spending an Easter Sunday engaging in sodomy out of wedlock, lying under oath, or merely consulting pollsters on what positions he should be taking on fundamental moral issues, Clinton is viewed by his legion of critics as the platonic form of amoral ambition. The passion to remove Clinton and his kind from the leadership of the free world was so visceral in much of this country that it could be compared to the desire of a crime victim's family to see that the perpetrator of the crime is brought to justice. Rather than getting mad, however, the Clinton haters fixated their passions on getting even. They would do battle with Clinton's heir apparent, Al Gore. And they would defeat him with one of their own: the son of the very man Clinton beat to come to power. A man, say his supporters, who was largely unspoiled by politics, but who rather devoted his life to God and capitalism, and makes no apologies for either.

Here, a stone's throw from the Beltway, another ethos pervades. In this area, Clinton may not be seen as a hero, but he is viewed as an essentially benign soul with a great mind and a passion to make a significant, positive mark on humankind. His inability to exert a more positive influence, according to this view, is not the result so much of his own moral shortcomings but rather the nefarious obstruction of his opponents: the Republicans. In the Presidency of George W. Bush, Clinton supporters feared the worst. Bush was viewed as a mere puppet for a plutocracy of misanthropic, greedy and selfish individuals. These people, according to conventional liberal wisdom, will strip Americans of fundamental rights (such as the right to an abortion), destroy the environment solely to add another Mercedes to their garage, and pay no attention whatsoever to the plight of the needy. For what do Social Darwinists care about the needy?

It was fitting that an election between these two warring camps should deteriorate into a Hobbesian struggle where the job was to win at any cost. For many, the piece de resistance was to see the Supreme Court act the role of Thief in Chief — their inconsistent rulings climaxed with the principle that we best not count the votes, lest we risk allowing the public to think that our guy really lost. Given the chasm in the national consciousness today, and the total dread that each party felt at the prospect of losing, you can understand why the human beings on the Supreme Court felt that they had no choice but to issue their sui generis opinion.

Exit polls from November reveal an America not merely split, but neatly divided by race, religion and geography. We've all seen the electoral map, where the Democrats controlled certain regions on the coasts, but very little in between. Even more striking is the racial and

religious map. The Dems obtained 90% of the African American vote, 80% of the Jewish American vote, 62% of the Hispanic vote, and 55% of the Asian and other non-white vote. But they lost anyway. And that is because they could not muster 30% of white Protestant males. It is the latter group that provided the balance of power in this election. They may not dominate the popular vote. But they apparently have a stranglehold over the electoral college, and the halls of power.

Some, like Ralph Nader, might view all this as delightful. Democracy in action. Me, I see it as unhealthy, as ominous. An environment where fear and hatred dominate hope and love is not an opportunity but a warning. What then can we do about it — you know, to unify, not divide? That is my task tonight. And my solution is a return to religion.

What, you might ask? Bringing in religion to solve problems of disunity? Isn't that like bringing cartons of cigarettes into a cancer ward? Perhaps. But the answer truly depends on what role religion is to play in our endeavor.

Superficially, it is difficult to imagine a more divisive force than religion. The American Jewish community is a perfect witness to this fact. Abroad, we are fixated on the love-fest in Israel, where Semites hurl words, rocks and speeding bullets at one another, ultimately because of religious differences. In so many respects, Islam and Judaism are sister faiths. They are both forms of ethical monotheism. Indeed, their God is truly the same God -- a spiritual being who must not be depicted and is largely beyond the grasp of human understanding. The Muslims even consider the prophets of Israel to be great prophets and men of God. And yet despite these faiths' similarities, their differences, as modest as they may be, are enough to inspire what appears to be eternal warfare between the Arab and Jewish peoples. Both groups feel that their own religion's doctrines represent the ultimate truth, and view their rival Semites as enemies of that truth and of their own way of life.

Here in this country, the religious battles that Jewish Americans face are not quite as violent, but they are no less profound. These battles are not merely external, but are waged inside the Jewish community. During this past year I read a best selling book, Jew Versus Jew, that describes the battle for the soul of American Judaism currently fought between the Ultra-Orthodox, Conservadox, Reform and Secular Jews. This battle has manifested itself in bellicose political struggles over whether Orthodox Jews can change zoning ordinances to build a new temple. It is reflected in the movement of women to be ordained as rabbis or to sit beside men at synagogue, a movement which has not yet won the day in the Orthodox community. The battle is waged in dorm rooms throughout the nation where Reform students who regularly attend synagogue years after their bar or bat mitzvahs are told by a Conservative or Orthodox classmate that they are not *really* Jewish, since only their father was born Jewish. Indeed, this battle is waged whenever a more observant Jew states sanctimoniously that only through observance of ritual does a Jew gain authenticity. It is also waged whenever less observant Jews look at the Orthodox as narrow-minded, bigoted anachronisms.

Jews now represent well under 3% of this country. And yet even that relatively small group finds itself bitterly divided over religion. How, if this is the case, can religion ever

become a unifying, rather than dividing, force in this nation at large? How can this society use religion to make disagreements over values and politics more civil?

What is potentially unifying about religion is not the *possession* of religious truth. We've all seen what happens once a person feels that s/he possesses even a morsel of that ever so rare commodity. No. What is potentially unifying about religion is the *search* for religious truth. Specifically, the prospects of a lifelong, communal search for wisdom concerning the fundamental issues of religion. The key, then, is the journey -- not the destination.

By largely devoting one's own life to that search, and by actively encouraging others to embark on a similar lifelong journey, any of us can do so much to unify the spirit of this country that cannot be done simply by economic measures. In encouraging such a search tonight, I am speaking to any adult in attendance, but particularly to two specific types of adults: parents and teachers. These individuals do not only shape the views of this generation, but of future generations as well. And it is through such future generations that I am hopeful that the search for religious truth can become a common lifelong passion and a transformative unifying force.

Before I can defend why this search is so potentially unifying, allow me to explain what I mean by such a search. Later, I will focus on why a certain type of religious search for truth can be so valuable a means for social civility and unity.

Let us begin our effort to create a common conception of a lifelong, communal search for religious truth by first discussing the meaning of the word "religion." This word does not refer simply to an organized faith that has become institutionalized, with recognized leaders and time-honored doctrines that must be accepted by all "authentic" devotees. That, I suppose, is one colloquial meaning of the word. But there are other, more useful definitions. Let me instead offer the following: Any coherent framework for resolving issues of ultimate ethical and metaphysical significance is a religion. Under that definition, secular humanism is a religion, even though it rejects God altogether. But more to the point, under that definition, secular humanism would be a religion even if only one person believed in it and it never turned into an organized movement.

Once religion is defined, and defined quite broadly, our next step is to consider what is meant by religious *truth*. In other words, what is the object of our search. If the search for this object is to be a unifying force, we once again need to define our term broadly, inclusively. Religious truth here is not meant simply in the sense of being according to reason. It may be that the truth one person seeks is a feeling in one's heart that lifts up the spirit. Or, it may be the truth one seeks is a proposition that better comports with logic than any alternative. Each individual should decide for him or herself what the criteria is of truth. I am using this term, then, in what philosophers have called the "pragmatic" sense, that the truth is whatever works for the individual who engages in the search. A philosophical search could be the answer. But so can a search through the annals of poetry to a conception that stirs the soul, even if it appears to be no more defensible logically than a number of alternatives. A more mature search might even incorporate both of these elements — both philosophy and poetry. The more facets, the more traditions that the searcher brings to bear in his or her journey, the more rewarding and

successful it is likely to become.

The third and final part of our definitional task is to understand what is meant by a *lifelong, communal search* for religious truth. This is the kicker. The person who embarks on this journey must show it ultimate respect. He or she must realize that because the questions of religion are so awe-inspiring, so profound, and because the answers are so elusive, the searcher must have the humility to recognize that one cannot reach one's destination in a fraction of a lifetime. This must be a lifelong, and rarely interrupted, endeavor. If one stops along the way and says, "Eureka!" they have missed the point. The fundamental questions of religion are not like discrete problems of math or science that can be solved definitively. They lead, not to solutions, but to deeper and deeper forms of soul searching. But, like the search for scientific truth, the religious analogue sometimes leads to radical transformations of the thoughts and feelings that we had once come to cherish but now must discard.

To be a unifying force, the search for religious truth must not only be lifelong, but communal. This, on the surface, is a surprising term. Any search about questions of ultimate significance must largely be personal, even lonely. But what I am advocating is the courage to raise one's own search to the communal arena, to share with others one's trip to date and one's most likely itinerary for the conceivable future. This requires that the searcher be able to verbalize one's thoughts and feelings both inwardly and to others. Further, it requires the searcher approach this trip with an open mind. Otherwise, the journey cannot be a search for truth, but only for rhetoric or rationalization. It is this open-minded nature of the journey that is perhaps the single most important component of its ability to unify. There is nothing more unifying than an activity where people truly try to *learn* together about issues of ultimate importance. This is an intimate and loving activity. By contrast, there is nothing more divisive than to listen to a close-minded, sanctimonious person preach about questions of ultimate importance, when every intelligent person knows that there is no single correct answer to these questions.

These, then, are the basic elements of the journey that I am advocating. They must be considered together -- remove any part, and you are on a very different voyage. And when these elements are considered together, you will realize how rare it is for a person in this society to attempt such a search. In the abstract, most adults in our society, most adults in attendance tonight, would have no trouble responding "hear! hear!" to a call for a lifelong, open-minded, communal search for religious truth. It sounds as wholesome as mom and apple pie. But it is easy to eat apple pie, or to love one's mother. It is much more difficult to pursue the kind of search that I have been discussing. And when the rubber meets the road, nearly all adults in this society decide that this is a journey of which they want no part. Oh sure, they might be willing to be devote an hour or two a week to religion. They may even make this commitment throughout their lives. Indeed, during this hour or two, they might occasionally even pick up a book that promotes a philosophy different from their own. But an hour or two a week does not a passionate search make. It does not satisfy a hunger for truth, or quench a thirst to transform oneself into a higher state of consciousness. In short, it might be analogized to getting one's feet wet, rather than risking a voyage down a choppy river.

The search I am advocating is a voyage with which many, if not most, religious people in our society have dabbled. It is a traditional pastime of 22 year olds, who might take a year off from the rat race to “find themselves” before they have to return to a life of practicality — of responsibilities, professionalism and, most importantly, of mammon. When these young adults turn 23, they are often reminded that, if they’re not careful, this wholesome search for truth will morph into self-indulgence. “Of course there is nothing wrong with reading a few books about comparative religion or philosophy. That’s a fine hobby, like gardening or philately. But when this hobby becomes a passion, a consuming drive that potentially interferes with your life [meaning your bourgeois endeavors], then you will have gone too far.” You see, according to those whose conduct becomes the model for our culture, the search is not what religion is truly about. Instead, religion is focused on observance of ritual, of membership in organized communities of faith, of fitting into a structure that doesn’t ask why but how.

In short, the current focus is not on the open-minded search for truth but on how best to bask in the knowledge of a particular religious approach. When these young adults grow up and have a family of their own, they learn that they can attend a place of worship sponsored by an organized religion, and there they will find a sense of belonging. They are taught to believe that to bask in this communal spirit, this sense of belonging to a tradition that has stood the test of time, *this* is the highest object of religion. By contrast, to get bogged down as an individual in the search for religious truth, some never-ending, inherently frustrating endeavor that is not supported by virtually any mainstream institution, is simply to miss the point of religion. This message is never stated explicitly. Yet it is delivered, loud and clear, by the words and actions of the luminaries who are considered role models to those in our society who are young enough to contemplate a lifelong, religious search.

Modern folks used to engaging in tasks that offer clear, short-term results or obvious hedonistic benefits, have little use for the search we are discussing. When they ask questions, they seek answers, not simply alternative theories and additional questions. Rest assured, however, that there are numerous profound advantages to the individual to pursue this lifetime pastime with passion. The search cannot help but make one a deeper and livelier thinker. It can ground the searcher emotionally. And it can radically transform the searcher’s values and, therefore, his or her lifestyle. Tonight, unfortunately, we have time simply to discuss in detail a single set of benefits of the search: namely, its potential to unify our society into one that is more civil, respectful and cooperative.

The unifying nature of the lifelong search for religious truth is obvious to anyone who has embarked upon it. We have already discussed one of the unifying features: the notion of a common journey. When the voyagers embark on the search, it doesn’t matter that one is a Jew, another a Christian, and a third an atheist. Those are labels that divide. But to the searchers, they are mere adjectives — as in “I’m a Jewish *searcher* for religious truth,” or “I’m a Christian *intellectual* fascinated by religion.” These folks all travel together, embarking not merely on a trip but on a very challenging and lengthy trip. It is difficult not to view all who attempt this trip fraternally. On the one hand, they all share the joys of contemplating the classic works of philosophy and other forms of religious writing and art. They presumably can discuss a number of these literary and artistic achievements, basking together in the beauty of these

accomplishments and working together to build a higher synthesis. On the other hand, they are all fellow sufferers, becoming attached to a particular theory and then discovering down the road that this theory, like all others, can be effectively criticized, if not lampooned.

An equally important unifying feature of the religious search is the humility that it engenders. Unlike those who gain support for the truth of their religious views from fellow congregants, the searchers are constantly gaining grounds for skepticism. For every great author who agrees with one's particular perspective at any given time, there are dozens of others who dispute that perspective. Some dispute it with respect, others with ridicule. But the net impression any religious searcher receives is that any religion is inherently limited. Indeed, any religion may be considered fatally flawed as the basis of a logically consistent and emotionally compelling philosophical system.

This realization makes it more difficult to feel too much superiority when contrasting one's own views with those of others. To be sure, one encounters adults with childlike conceptions. An example is the mother who defended the truth of her son's statement to my little girl that all Jews will fall and burn throughout eternity unless they have accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. Yes, that view is absurd, and it is difficult to hold too much respect for the speaker. Yet even as the searcher might ridicule the absurdity of certain antiquated beliefs, s/he must recognize that one's own views, taken to their logical extremes, can similarly be the subject of ridicule. If we ourselves do not possess *the* truth about fundamental religious topics, who are we to look far down on the primitive beliefs of others?

Still another crucial unifying feature of the search I am advocating stems from the breadth of the term "religion" that forms the content of our search. Those of us who define religion broadly are baffled by the large subset of the modern American intelligentsia who appear unabashedly to view the study of religion with apathy, as if educated people can take it or leave it as they please. If the question were "how should you view *organized* religion," I suppose that apathetic perspective could be defended. I personally wouldn't try to do this, but I respect why others might. Still, "organized religion" and "religion" are two very different things. And when religion is viewed as the subject of all efforts of the heart and mind to address the fundamental ethical and metaphysical issues facing our species, it boggles the mind that educated Americans could approach this subject with anything less than sheer fascination.

By taking a broad view of religion, the searcher realizes the interrelationship among a person's philosophy of God, ethical views, and even one's political philosophy. Some religious thinkers, like Spinoza, explicitly begin their philosophical systems by confronting the topic of God, and then spin out an approach to ethical and political issues based on their views of divinity. Others may approach these topics in reverse order. But the important point to note is that whenever religion is viewed broadly, all of these topics will inevitably be addressed together. Hence, when potentially divisive public policy issues are raised, the religious searchers will call upon their views of metaphysics and ethics to help shape their public policy views. The right to an abortion is an obvious issue that cannot be addressed without considering the broader religious question of when human life begins. But, frankly, all public policy issues have a religious underpinning. Even such a topic as the optimal tax rate on the wealthy, which many

see as among the most secular topics imaginable, may not properly be separated from religion altogether. One person's religious views may include the need to redistribute wealth in order to preserve the dignity and fundamental equality of all human beings. Others may see equality of opportunity as the sole obligation of policy makers, whose primary charge is to ensure that the impulse to redistribute wealth does not cause the economic pie to shrink over time.

Once the religious underpinnings of public policy issues are appreciated, it is easy to understand how the search we are describing leads to greater unity. The searcher is humbled in his or her inability to find the truth. When a question of public policy arises, the basic answer should inevitably be the same: "how the heck do I know?" And yet because this search has such an addicting quality, and because it is being attempted communally, the searcher should never be too shy to opine, and to do so with passion. The difference between the searchers and the true-believing political dogmatists that we all have had the misfortune to encounter is that the former will have much more respect for the possibility that they themselves are wrong, and their opponents might be right. This is not a formula for apathy. It is simply a recognition of the fact that political questions, as they are ultimately shaped largely by fundamental religious issues, have no right or wrong answers. To recognize this fact, as well as the extent to which basic values and metaphysical views understandably differ among people, inevitably leads to a heightened respect for all people of integrity regardless of their positions on any ideological spectrum.

As I have said, it is beyond the scope of this talk to set forth all the reasons to embark on this search. For those adults who are deeply apathetic about religious truth, there is surely nothing that can be said tonight to spark any more than a passing interest in such a challenging journey. But more interesting than that group are those adults who refuse an invitation to the journey in large part because of a sense of loyalty to their own religious faiths. Because it is never clear where the journey leads, many who cling to their current religions do not dare risk even one open-minded step into the abyss. I am suggesting, tonight, that they must try.

Again, let us take Judaism as an example of a faith to which many non-searchers are currently loyal. When I was at an Orthodox Yeshiva, I constantly heard the expression: "if you open your mind too much your brains will fall out." Yet, despite this statement, I do not view it to be within the spirit of Judaism to fear the search for religious truth. Quite the contrary, the tradition is in large part amenable to it.

Judaism places the concern for religious truth at or near the top of all vital human concerns. The study of Torah is, together with prayer and good works, one of the three pillars of Jewish life. But does not tradition teach that a synonym of "Torah" is, indeed, "truth"? Reflecting the importance of the search for truth, the Talmud teaches that every Jew should wake up each morning questioning G-d's existence. Naturally, it is assumed that Jews will answer this question in the affirmative. Yet the fact that the question must be asked illustrates the value in the tradition of a lifelong, open-minded search for truth on *all* religious issues, even the most sensitive.

Jews, they say, are a "people of priests." What does this mean, if the Jew is not also a

searcher for truth? Isn't what separates the priests from the parishioners that the former has the time, motivation and wisdom to think deeply for themselves about religious topics, rather than to ask experts what they should be thinking? Similarly, Jews supposedly are lovers of education. Or in Einstein's words, lovers of learning for its own sake. Does this not mean that Jews should be willing to follow the truth wherever it leads, rather than be afraid to take the chance that the truth might not be in harmony with some of their pet customs and attitudes?

Consider also that Jews are taught to be a "light unto the nations." How is this possible unless they share their ideas in a climate conducive to sharing, a fraternal environment that accepts non Jews as brothers and sisters and not as alien ships passing in the night? The fundamental religious issues do not vary much among cultures and faiths. Only by embracing a multi-cultural dialogue on these issues can the Jew help truly to enlighten. Otherwise, the Jew is incapable of communicating a spiritual message to others. The "light" that they shed will at best be merely an economic one. And this is pathetic, considering how spiritual a species we are capable of being.

The shibboleth of organized Judaism today is the beauty of community. "Let us join together as a loving community and celebrate the holidays." Or, if you prefer, "let us stop dwelling on the tragedies of yesteryear, and emphasize instead the joys of a communal Jewish life." Perhaps if this is *all* there is to Judaism, a lifelong search for religious truth would be a mere annoyance, a fruitless endeavor that misses the point of the faith. But there is another strand of Judaism that sees the Jew not merely as a bourgeois community member but rather as a lonely figure, an exile who awaits the Messiah, a person who is above all an honest intellectual in a corrupt world that s/he hopes to help redeem. The search I am advocating falls squarely within that tradition of Judaism.

Judaism has historically been associated with open-minded thinkers who at times reach heretical views. I've mentioned Spinoza. One could also mention Freud or Marx. But perhaps the best example is that precursor of Spinoza, Jesus of Nazareth. Like the philosophy of the God-intoxicated Spinoza, Jesus's philosophy was indelibly shaped by his Judaism. And yet he dared to vary from tradition in his thinking, preferring to emphasize certain Jewish values but less so others. Jesus should serve as an example to Christians to approach their own religion the same way he approached Judaism: with a willingness to reform the faith, even radically if necessary, to conform to their own personal views of the truth. But alas, some of the most rigid dogmatists are Christian. And, of course, they are not alone. Whenever one finds an organized religion, one finds dogmatism. It is precisely such dogmatism that gives atheists the right to crow about their own relative open-mindedness, when many of them are every bit as dogmatic and disrespectful to those with whom they disagree.

How can we as citizens promote these types of open-minded, lifelong, communal searches for religious truth? Most importantly, of course, we can engage in such a search ourselves. It is never too late to do so. But there is something else we can do. And it involves the sphere of public policy.

Consider for a moment what it means to be a Jewish liberal or, if you prefer, a liberal

Jew, in our society. The word “liberal,” is supposed to mean advocating change, presumably substantial change. This advocacy requires courage, for all changes have the capacity of making things worse, as well as better. Strangely enough, when it comes to matters of religion and public policy, Jewish liberals, when taken in the aggregate, have become the most conservative advocacy group imaginable. They shudder at the thought of Joseph Lieberman raising the issue of how religion has inspired him to become public spirited. They discuss Jefferson’s “wall of separation” between church and state, which many suggest requires that religion stay the heck out of public life. And Lord knows the place where they least would like to find religion is in the public schools. Even a moment of silence, many suggest, would threaten to risk the establishment of Christianity as the national faith.

Personally, I fear an America where religion is absent more than the establishment of a national faith. I’m willing to bet that our citizens have enough respect for the Constitution not to let the latter occur. And I view the public schools not as a place to inculcate a particular religion but rather as a place where children can be encouraged to embark on the type of search that I have been advocating tonight. If this isn’t encouraged in the schools, where will it be?

By increasing training in comparative religion and philosophy, public schools can become breeding grounds for young intellectuals; i.e., for people who do not let the limitations of their church or synagogue interfere with their religious education. This can be accomplished in part by requiring classes in comparative religion or philosophy. Even more importantly, teachers must be encouraged and equipped to discuss religious issues, neutrally of course, whenever they arise in social studies and literature classes. Children can be taught competing views on basic religious and philosophical issues, just as they are now taught different ways to solve a math problem. For this type of change to take place, liberals must have the courage to reach out to conservatives and ask them if they truly are interested in developing religiosity in this nation, though in a way that is consistent with the Constitution. The First Amendment demands that religion be presented neutrally insofar as it is addressed by the public schools. These schools can Constitutionally be reformed to embrace religion, rather than avoid it, and to cultivate students who think for themselves as to how to resolve profound religious and philosophical issues. This is the hallmark of a liberal education. If we liberals are afraid to provide one in the public schools, perhaps we should consider advocating vouchers and tearing up the public schools root and branch.