

PURIM 2012

Sports are about winning. To get there, you must show aggression. Religion is about honoring. To get there, you must be a servant of truth.

Tonight, I will attempt to apply a lesson from the realm of sports in order to further our religious mission. So I will honor you not merely by being truthful, but by being aggressively candid.

The inspiration for tonight's talk is the Stanford University football program. Privileged to have Andrew Luck, one of the best college quarterbacks of all time, it managed to deny him the Heisman trophy and a Fiesta Bowl championship by telling him not to throw the ball so much because, after all, throwing involves risks. Instead, he was told to place his team's fate at the hands of his running backs and at the feet of his kicker. That risk-averse strategy resulted in a fine season, but not a glorious one. When it counted the most, the kicker was wide left, which is ironic given that the decision to give him such power over Stanford's season was all about conservatism. Unfortunately, as the rookie head coach figured out, conservatism isn't always the preferred path. That applies whether you're talking about football, politics, or religion.

That is certainly the message that emerges from the website of the so-called "World Union for Progressive Judaism." If you are a dues-paying member of a Reform, Reconstructionist, or Jewish Renewal congregation, there's a good bet that you are at least indirectly affiliated with this group. But what that affiliation signifies is beyond me. In fact, what that organization accomplishes is beyond me. I assume it has meetings and collects dues. And I know it drafts statements in response to its nemesis -- the "Ultra-Orthodox" community. What I don't know is whether it has much impact on the world. Nor do I know if it has any contact with that vast reservoir of the Jewish mainstream known as Conservative Judaism.

We sorely need an organization that can unify progressive Jews. But we need to bite off a whole lot more than what the World Union is willing to chew. It's fine that there's a group in which rabbis and other big machas can jointly craft the occasional broadside against the forces of Jewish fundamentalism. Yet such a group only scratches the surface of our needs. My vision is of an altogether new organization, one that seeks to bring together all progressive Jews in an attempt to stake out positions on some of the most crucial issues involving our people. This organization would tap into the wellspring of free-thinkers in the Conservative movement. And it would reach out to the countless unaffiliated Jews, who care deeply about their heritage and perhaps even their faith, but are unfulfilled by synagogue life. Let's all come together -- as individuals, not just as synagogues -- and take our collective temperature. Let's truly put progressive Judaism on the map.

Just consider some of the critical issues Jews encounter today: According to our religion, can you be a Jew if you haven't formally converted and your mother is a gentile? Is there a compassionate God who intervenes in our world, and whose divine intervention gave us the Torah? Do we expect a Messiah to usher in an era of peace? Individual Jews are all over the map on these issues. Yet if you ask a Jewish scholar to identify what our *religion* has to say about them, you'll generally hear the same perspective. It isn't the progressive one.

I can't tell you how many times I've been involved in an interfaith meeting when a Jewish scholar is asked to give the stance that Judaism takes on those kinds of questions. Almost invariably, the scholar will answer by stating the views of the Orthodox community. Now some scholars may preface their response with the phrase "Traditionally, Jews believe" Or "According to Jewish law" Or even, "Observant Jews take the position that" Whichever way it's put, the import is the same: if you want to know what *real* Judaism says, consult the Orthodox perspective. Only as an afterthought, might you hear that different branches of Judaism take contrary positions. The impression that's left is that those Jews who aren't *really* Jewish may take a more secular position, but they don't reflect the teachings of the faith.

Personally, I've had enough with progressive Judaism's second-class status when it comes to defining our religion. There's no need for such a hierarchy. It would be one thing if the Jewish world were separated entirely into the categories of "traditional" and "secular." Then, whenever the great issues arise, we could say that religious Jews feel one way, but most Jews aren't religious, and they feel differently. In fact, though, those of us who are committed Reconstructionist or Reform Jews, members of the Renewal movement, or left-leaning Conservative Jews may *not* think of ourselves as secular. Rather, our self-concept might include words like spiritual, religious, or even devout. We simply want to ground our Judaism as much in modern, as in ancient, ideas. For me, it is the willingness to see Judaism evolve on fundamental issues that serves as the line separating a progressive and a traditionalist Jew.

It's notable that even the traditional scholars will say that the teachings of Judaism are supposed to be consistent with the truth. Modern progressive Jews simply reserve the right to consult the dictates of science, philosophy, history and other "secular" disciplines, as well as tradition, in shaping our sense of the truth. Does that really make us less religious or less Jewish?

Even our Orthodox brothers and sisters would admit that Judaism is a folk as well as a faith. For example, they acknowledge that you can be a Jew without observing all the Biblical commandments. So let's take this logic and run with it a bit. Just consider the Jewish community as a whole. Then ask yourselves whether the majority of this population takes the progressive or the Orthodox position on the big religious issues. I suspect that, like me, you'll conclude that the clear majority of Jews reside on the progressive side of the aisle. Unfortunately, there's no institution today that brings together progressive Jews as a group in an effort to put our views on the map – and both explain our perspective and reveal that ours is the voice of the *majority* of Jews.

Right now, an argument can be made that the Jewish world is splintered into, on the one hand, communities of authentically religious and highly traditional worshippers, and on the other, an amalgam of less observant, less devout, less involved, and less authentic Jews who may or may be affiliated with some shaky modern movement. As long as that argument prevails, the Orthodox and Conservadox Jews would continue to exert a disproportionate influence over the way we all view Judaism. They could point to thousands of years of tradition to bolster their legitimacy, whereas the progressives would come across as posers who always have one foot out the door when it comes to their faiths. Just look at Israel and you'll see how much power the traditionalists wield relative to their numbers.

I have no desire to disrespect the Orthodox. In fact, given my own religious development, which largely occurred in a yeshiva, I owe more to that branch of Judaism than I can ever repay. But Orthodox Jews are entitled to be treated only as equals, not as superiors. And if I am indeed correct that Jewish progressives comprise the majority of our people, it's time we played the majoritarian card and used it for what it's worth. In other words, the next time someone asks if Judaism teaches that the Torah came from God, the answer would be "Traditional Judaism has one view and Progressive Judaism another." They won't differ on every question, but when they do, both perspectives need to be honored.

The World Union of Progressive Judaism is an Israel-based organization that focuses on nations like Israel, where the traditionalists monopolize religious Jewish life. The institution I'm envisioning should be based here in America, where our non-Orthodox branches are at their most prominent. It could be called the Coalition of Progressive Jews and would be devoted to making progressive Judaism a major player in defining Judaism internally and in repairing the world at large. In order to achieve prominence, the group would need to begin with the backing of some affluent individuals who are tired of seeing the word "religious" equated with "traditional" or "Orthodox." And it would seek the participation of rabbis and lay leaders from different branches of Judaism, while stressing that nobody should cancel her affiliation with current Jewish movements. Branching adds diversity, and diversity is healthy. The problem isn't our diversity, it's our failure to accompany that diversity with the commitment to unification when necessary.

Among this organization's first orders of business would be determining what level of agreement is needed before it could take an official position. Some religious groups, like the Eastern Orthodox church, require all organizational decisions to be made by consensus. Clearly, though, that wouldn't work for us. Jews can barely reach a consensus within our own heads. We're never going to find one on any issue if we come together as a large group.

Clearly, when you're talking about Jewish decision making, the only choice is between majority rule, supermajority rule, and some combination of the two. The last approach is the way the U.S. Government makes decisions, and it sounds like the sanest approach for the Coalition.

Just as the decision-making issue must be decided early on, the group must also quickly decide how someone can become a member. Let's assume the non-progressives weed themselves out: trust me, they'll want no part of this organization. Let's also assume the Coalition, given its purpose, has the guts to exclude all non-Jews from membership. The real issue, then, is what does it mean to be a Jew?

An argument can be made that the "Who is a Jew?" question is a cancer eating at the core of our people. To a traditionalist, there are only two ways to be counted as Jewish: formal conversion and being born of a Jewish mother. That's the official position of both the Orthodox and the Conservative movements. Traditionalist Jews differ, though, as to what type of conversions are accepted. Should you accept conversion by the Reform movement? The Conservative movement? What if you were converted by Reform rabbis whose mothers weren't Jewish? Or by Conservative rabbis who were lesbians? Would that count?

If I were asked to opine on what standard the Progressive Coalition would use in identifying Jews, I'd assume it would be the standard adopted by the Reform, Reconstructionist, and Renewal movements. But the Coalition would have to consider and debate the issue carefully. The key is that the majority or supermajority should decide.

It's a personal dream that in my lifetime, the Conservative movement will accept as Jews the children of Jewish fathers and gentile mothers. Given that the movement now allows for female and even some gay rabbis, I don't think its acceptance of patrilineal descent is out of the question. But whether or not that happens, it remains the case that many Conservative Jews are far from Orthodox, and I would view them as every bit as important to the Progressive Coalition as the Reform and Reconstructionist members. After all, for many progressive Jews, the choice of movements is one of convenience, aesthetics, or family tradition; it has little to do with one's commitment level or beliefs.

So, let's say a Coalition of Progressive Jews gets funded, generates a cross-denominational buzz, chooses a decision-making method, and finds an approach to defining Jewishness on which a supermajority can agree. What other goals can it hope to set? For starters, it can seek to make a difference in the fight for Middle East peace.

Stated simply, the Coalition can pay enormous dividends in transforming our national conversation on issues concerning Israel. Right now, this conversation couldn't be more polarized. In fact, that even applies within the American Jewish community. This must change if America is going to play a constructive role in the peace process.

I don't expect much agreement on Israel between the progressive Jewish community and those of our Orthodox brothers and sisters who believe that God gave to our people *all* of Judea and Samaria. I honor their right to hold that opinion, but it's still a minority opinion both here and in Israel. Let's try to figure out the views of the majority who don't believe that the Middle Eastern borders are divinely ordained. I suspect that progressive American Jews could form a supermajority right now on the critical issues involving Israel, assuming we're motivated to sit down together and try. Right now, though, we're too busy getting more and more polarized, thanks to the existing organizational framework.

In one corner, we have AIPAC – the American Israel Public Affairs Committee. It's the one with all the money and the historical influence. When Virgil Sollozzo said in a certain movie that “I need, Don Corleone, those politicians you carry in your pocket, like so many nickels and dimes,” he could have been talking about the power AIPAC has wielded for decades. In the other corner, we have J-Street, the upstart, which has recently become the darling of many Jews who are fed up with Israel's treatment of the Palestinians. If you talk to individual supporters of these two organizations, you really will find common ground. But the organizations themselves appear to stand for diametrically opposite things. One defends Israel policy no matter what. Regardless of how much Israel is capable of ignoring the path to peace, AIPAC is there to defend it. As for J-Street, this self-proclaimed “Zionist” group not only devotes 90 percent of its energies to criticizing Israel but routinely ignores the unwillingness of the Arab world to accept Israel's existence as a Jewish state. Not surprisingly, these two groups neither respect nor learn

from each other. Taken together, all they generate is a cacophony of passion that sends no constructive message to either the American Government or the Middle East.

Imagine, instead, a Progressive Coalition that was determined to confront the issue, find the sweet spot that the critical mass of AIPAC and J-Street members can agree with, trumpet that position across the airwaves, and use it as the basis of their efforts to lobby the government. I'm less sure what that sweet spot is than I am optimistic that we can find one. My guess is that progressive Jews can rally around the support of a two-state solution. And that they would insist upon both sides showing signs right away that they not only are willing to pay lip service to two states but are willing to show support with strong rhetoric and conciliatory actions.

To begin with the Palestinian side, I suspect that the Coalition would demand that the Palestinians recognize Israel as a Jewish State and ensure that such recognition is reflected in their textbooks. As for the nature of the "Jewish State" they'd be expected to recognize, it would begin with the notion of a Jewish majority but would hardly end there. I expect that most Progressive Jews would want to see the Palestinians do more than grudgingly recognize a state called "Israel." We'd want to see them demonstrate a commitment to living beside a truly "Jewish" state adjacent to their own. What I'm about to read is part of the description of the term "Jewish State" that I've obtained from my friend, Ira Weiss. I think you'll agree that the Arab world has a ways to go before it can accept Israel as a state:

- whose lingua franca is Hebrew,
- whose national anthem expresses the longing of the Jewish nation and whose flag bears its shield,
- whose national holidays are the historical national holidays of the Jewish people,
- where most people take off work on Saturday as opposed to Sunday or Friday,
- where the Passover Seder is as ubiquitous as the Thanksgiving Turkey is in America, and on Purim, the streets are filled with people in costume, the way they are here on Halloween,
- where it is no easier to find a restaurant open on Yom Kippur than it is to find one in America open on Christmas,
- where the folk songs express aspects of Jewish history in the same way that cowboy songs express part of American history, and
- where the culture is as Jewish as the culture in France is French.

A Progressive Coalition would likely call for Palestinian leaders to express their support for such a state, and publicly recognize that it will be located in a portion of the land formally known as Palestine.

However, a Progressive Coalition would also likely call for the Israeli leaders to carve out a second state within Palestine that does not belong to the Jews and that is large enough to allow the Palestinian people to prosper in their own autonomous country. That means that we must return more or less to the borders that were in place prior to the '67 war.

I suspect most progressives would agree that the flip side of Palestinian recognition of Israel as a Jewish state is for Israel to cease building new settlements, begin pulling back from existing ones, roll back the wall so as to avoid any trappings of imperialism, and demonstrate with *actions* that it is committed to the idea of a viable Palestinian state. But maybe I'm wrong that the progressive community would accept such a vision. I still think it would be worth it to see what would happen if the Coalition were to seek a supermajority on the best way to work for Middle East peace. Wouldn't it be worth seizing the opportunity to make peace on this point with ourselves – to work through the AIPAC/J-Street divide and seek some fundamental points of agreement? We progressive Jews have the ball in our hands, and we shouldn't let any organization distract us from finding our own supermajority, our own sweet spot. Otherwise, we're just like Stanford, taking the ball out of our superstar quarterback's hands.

Hopefully, I've given you a taste for what the formation of a Progressive Coalition can offer our society on an important issue. The fact is, though, that this idea could play dividends in nearly every walk of Jewish life. Wherever there is a need in our community that isn't being met, there's a benefit to coming together and staking our ground. Given the number of Jewish progressives, as I have defined that term, just imagine how much impact our voices can have once they are unified.

If you want another example of where we could stand to meet and confer, consider the following challenge: Judaism is being threatened by the forces of modernity that marginalize the importance of both religion and ethnicity. How do we progressive Jews respond to that challenge, not just as individuals but as a community?

I doubt seriously that progressive Jews could find a supermajority in support of a particular conception of God. Hopefully, the Coalition would be smart enough never to seek one. But what it could do is declare that the Sea-Splitting, Bush-Burning, Laws of Nature-Tampering, People-Judging, Law-Giving Lord of the Torah is *not* our God.

What would be gained by taking such a position? Perhaps not much, if it is coupled with no affirmative message whatsoever about God. But assuming that we can find one, it would send a salutary message to all of our children who read the Torah and find themselves skeptical about the entire religious project. It would teach that their skepticism is well in line with the views of most progressive Jewish adults. When it comes to the question of God, some of us view ourselves as skeptics, and others as believers, but surely, most progressive Jews would agree that it makes little sense to believe in the portrait of the Lord that emerges from a literal reading of the Torah. Personally, I'd love to see what ideas would flow from a sustained effort to study the topic of God, freed from the shackles of Biblical literalism.

Just as we must respond to the challenge of religious marginalization, so must we deal with similar challenges to the importance of Jewish ethnicity. Centuries back, our people could count on the fact that their ethnic background was 100 percent Jewish, and this was reflected in profound cultural differences with the mainstream of society. Gradually, though, this ethnic and cultural distinction has faded. With each generation, the progressive Jewish population becomes more assimilated culturally. As for the ethnic uniqueness of our people, consider the current rate of intermarriage and adoption within our community. For Reform and secular Jews, the

intermarriage rate is nearly 50 percent. Even the Conservative movement, which won't recognize patrilineal descent, has a 32 percent intermarriage rate. With numbers like these, it is doubtful that ethnic and cultural ties will have the same meaning they once did in forging a sense of strong Jewish identity.

How, then, can a Coalition of Progressive Jews respond to this challenge? By calling for a re-examination of what it means to be a progressive Jew. What is it that we find so compelling about our Jewishness that would cause us to join such an organization? What needs does the Jewish faith or culture satisfy that a completely assimilated, secular society cannot?

I suspect that one of the issues the Coalition would address would be the ephemerality of H2O – or “two holidays only” – Judaism. This refers to an all-too-familiar pattern in which Jews are basically absent from shul from the time they leave school until the time they have school-age children. At that point, their visits to shul consist primarily of dropping the kids off and picking them up. Yet somehow, they feel that this will inculcate a “sense of Jewish identity” in the kids. Good luck with that.

While most of us can relate to what I just described, at least to a point, it is clearly not a formula for success. But how do we break the chain? That's for the Coalition to decide. One idea would be for Jewish religious schools to set expectations for parents, no less than children. I recently noticed at my shul, for example, that the fifth graders were expected to write down their idea of God and then display their work product for the congregation at a Shabbat dinner. Yet what good will that do, I wondered, if the parents aren't expected to do the same? By requiring the parents to weigh in on the issue just as publicly as the kids, you'd surely spark an ongoing dialogue about the topic at home. As it stands now, the kids' project will resemble a beautiful painted rock that is dropped in a lake. If there is nothing to prop it up, it will simply sink and never be heard from again.

In calling for a Coalition of Progressive Jews, I do recognize the fundamental disconnect in my proposal. The whole idea for the Coalition is to galvanize the power of coming together and identifying our center of gravity as a community. However, here in the United States, the group of people who would be involved in this exercise are steeped in an ethos of individuality. We reject Orthodoxy not merely because we may reject the literal truth of its organizing myths, but also because we want to choose for ourselves what to believe and how to live, rather than to take direction from others. So to the extent we have time to devote to Judaism, we tend to prefer activities that offer us inspiration as individuals – not an opportunity to make an investment in the community.

That's a real problem. Because what I'm proposing is less a spiritual search than a call for political action, and the last I checked, political action can be tedious and often results in failure.

The bigger problem, though, is that if we do *not* come together to start this type of organization, we may witness a gradual drift toward the dissolution of progressive Judaism as a relevant social force. Our largest movement today, Reform, recently had a successful Biennial conference attended by 6,000 people. But as a general matter, when it comes to Reform demographics, the trend is not encouraging. By contrast, Reconstructionism is growing ... but it still has well under

100,000 adherents in this country. Such a small number can hardly make much of an impact on social issues; just ask the Unitarian-Universalists. As for the Conservative movement, it has become such a melting pot of progressives and traditionalists that it can rarely speak with one voice on any issue of controversy. When, for example, the movement recently addressed whether gays can serve as rabbis, it ended up with conflicting legal opinions and decided that each congregation should choose for itself. Given the fundamentally divergent theologies within that movement, that was probably the most enlightened decision we progressives could have hoped for.

Each of us as individuals must decide if our collective house needs fixing. For me, the more I take stock in the situation, the more I'm struck by the amount of work that needs to be done. Not only can't we solve these problems as individuals, but neither can our existing movements working alone; we need to work together. In proposing a Coalition of Progressive Jews, I don't mean to exclude traditionalist Jews from having a say, but right now, they're the only ones talking with a coherent voice. If we progressives want a seat at the Jewish table, we had better find a coherent voice of our own.

So let's identify those wealthy benefactors, and those willing rabbis and rabbinical schools ... and get to work. And if we locate any brilliant scholars or orators whose wisdom matches Andrew Luck's accuracy with a football, let's please give 'em the damn microphone.