

HOW MUCH IS TOO MUCH RELIGION IN POLITICS?

Last month the fashionable political item was black/Jewish relations. This month, it is the relationship between politics and religion. The media love it. "What do you think about the attempts to Christianize America?" they ask, word processors poised.

But why do they leave us out? In one sense, we are interested in Judaizing America. There are some Jewish values that we would like to press on the American society -- and, make no mistake, they are religious values, as Rosh Hashanah strongly reminds us.

Some Jewish educators like to point out that Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are HOLY days, while Pesach, for example, is only a HOLI-day. Their point, if a little cute, is that Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are not related to specific Jewish historical events. These are the ten days of spiritual contemplation and repair, the days of "forgiveness, pardon and atonement." As the beginning and center of the Jewish year, these Holy Days remind us that the essence of Judaism is religion, faith, relationship with God. Everything else -- ethnicity, nationality, Jewish history, Jewish values -- flow from that religious and, if you will, mystic core.

Of course, a great deal does flow from that religious core, as the prophets pointed out. The prophets said that it is a Jewish value, a religious mandate for all Jews, to do everything possible to provide a "safety net" for the poor. It is a religious responsibility for every Jew to do everything possible to relieve all the oppressed, and all the afflicted. When we support these values in our political society, we are supporting religious values. Our prophets never believed in the separation of religion and politics.

In that sense, when we are promoting those values in the American society, we are attempting to Judaize the American society. And why not? Where else should we get the basic social values which we want to see pursued in the American society? Why shouldn't we quote our religious prophets when we promote these values? And why shouldn't Jerry Falwell speak out for the application of his religious values to society, as our rabbis do, or as Martin Luther King did?

The crunch comes not in the need to separate religion or religious leaders from politics -- but in the need to separate church from state. That is a different matter. It is a matter of religion trying to take over rather than just enter the political process. Religious leaders should speak and fight hard for their religious values, whether it is a question of black voting rights, abortion or poverty. There is nothing wrong with that, as long as they recognize that there are other religious and philosophical viewpoints with which they may disagree.

At that point the political process, pure and simple, must take over. All votes are equally legitimate, and the most votes count. Or else we are in trouble. Moses Mendelssohn pointed out two centuries ago: "When church and state are in the field against each other, mankind is the victim of their discord; and when they agree, the brightest jewel of human happiness is gone for they seldom agree but for the purpose of banishing from this realm a third moral entity: liberty of conscience."

That kind of church-state merger is not around the corner for America. All of our presidential candidates and leading public figures agreed vehemently last week that we cannot have an official religion or compulsory prayer or anything of the sort in this country. Although there are setbacks, and there is the constant need for vigilance, we have much more solid church-state separation today than we had thirty years ago -- and much more than we had fifty years ago. And if we keep our guard up, the advances we have made are not so easily reversible -- especially since there are over 60 different major and jealously independent religious groups in this country.

It never makes sense to be complacent and this local Jewish community is about to review the whole church-state scene, to see where the most vigilance needs to be applied right now. But it will not be done in a climate of media-inspired hysteria. And certainly as we enter our religious Holy Days, we should not get too excited about the absurd pseudo-debate on whether we should keep any mention of religious values out of political discussion.