

**SHABBOS SERMON**  
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*A Mixture of Religion and Politics*

We Jews are supposed to be smart people. And it would seem to be true! In the past century 20% of all Nobel laureates have been Jews. We're only ¼ of one percent of the world's population, but 20% of the Nobel Prize winners. In this year, 2011, five of the eleven Nobel Prize winners that have been named are Jews. That is 45% who are Jews! So, yes, it would seem as if we are smart. But between you and me ... I'm not so sure! This morning I want to test you and see just how smart you are. I'm going to ask you a series of questions and let's see if you know the answers:

1. What religious group in America is most liked?
2. What religious group in America do we Jews most dislike?
3. What American religious group is most knowledgeable about other religions?
4. Are Mormons really Christians?
5. Who was the first convert we Jews rejected?
6. Why do Evangelicals like the Jewish people?
7. What are the names of the people who first said the words, "*Boruch Hashem?*"
8. Who was Maimonides?

Now, why do I raise these questions today? Because of two books. The first book I recently read is entitled: American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us. It was written by Robert Putnam, who is the author of the national bestseller, Bowling Alone. The book American Grace was written last year, and examines religion in America and how different religious communities relate to each other ... for better or for worse. And some of the facts I read about the Jewish people, I have to tell you, absolutely astounded me!

The second is the good book – our Torah – which last week and this week focused on the life of our first patriarch – the first Jew, Avrohom Avinu – Abraham, our father. When we think of Abraham, we think of his story of coming to Israel, of he and his wife finally having a son that will carry on the tradition, and of how Abraham was tested by God when asked to sacrifice that son. But the fact of the matter is, this is just a small part of the Abraham story told in the Torah. A good part of his story had to do with his dealings with other people, with other faith communities. We have stories of Abraham's dealings with Pharaoh in Egypt, with kings and their armies from the Babylonian region, with Malkizedek, ruler of Sodom, with Avimelach from the Philistines. The details of these incidents are given in the Torah, not simply as historic fact, but as lessons for us to learn from. What can we learn today in dealing with people of other faith communities?

So, let's get down to *tachlas*. What religious groups do we Jews feel close to? And which do we feel distant from? Abraham had to deal with this question on an on-going basis; with one king he created a deception and with another he signed a peace treaty ... with a member of his own family, he drew distant and with a king of another people he drew close. It is important to know who your friends are, and who your enemies are. And it would seem that Jews in America would be best qualified to know the difference, because according to American Grace and its surveys, we Jews are the most knowledgeable of all faith communities about other people's religion. We're smart, right? So how do you explain that according to the book, the religious group we like the least are Evangelical Christians? And we like them even less than Muslims! Now you tell me: what makes us uncomfortable about Evangelical Christians; people who Prime Minister Netanyahu refers to as being the Jewish people's best friend in the whole world. Most all of us have, for all practical purposes, never met one. But we have heard all sorts of things about them, especially the belief that the only reason why Evangelicals like Jews is because they want to convert us ... and they believe that only with the Jews controlling Israel can there be the second

coming of the Messiah. So, we Jews – who are supposed to be smart – feel more comfortable about Muslims who want to kill us – than about Christians who want to convert us! Is that smart?

And speaking of converts, you know it is Abraham who is considered the father of all converts. When a person converts and takes on a Hebrew name, they are called “so and so ben Avrohom avinu” – the son of Abraham, our father. It was Abraham who converted many of the people of his day to a true belief in God. And yet, we are told of a person that Abraham rejected and would not accept a person as a convert. Who was the person? A woman named Timnah. According to tradition, Timnah was a product of a royal family. And she sought to convert to Judaism and in the words of the Talmud: “She came to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob for that purpose .... *V’lo kibluha* – but they refused to accept her. She thereupon went and became a concubine of Eliphaz, the son of Esau, saying, “It is better to be a maid servant to this nation than to be a princess to any other nation.” You know what happened from her being Eliphaz’s concubine? They had a child. What was the child’s name? Amalek – the arch enemy of the Jewish people. And the Talmud concludes this story by telling us that Amalek became our eternal enemy as a punishment to us for having rejected their ancestor. The rabbis of old understood that this teaches us a most important lesson in regard to Evangelicals and others: Be careful when you reject someone. It might come back to haunt you!

You know who feels a bit rejected these days? Mormons! Because two of the candidates for the Republican presidential nomination are Mormons - Mitt Romney and Jon Huntsman - there is a lot of talk about who Mormons are and what they actually believe, with some considering them to be a dangerous cult. You know which group in America has the most positive feelings about Mormons? It’s us – the Jews! That’s what statistics show! This, despite the fact that Jews and Mormons have almost nothing in common. How many of us even know a Mormon? And the fact is, 2/3 of the Jews are registered as Democrats

and 2/3 of the Mormons are registered as Republicans. So you could say that the one thing we have in common is that we're both small minorities in America who feel besieged by the Christian majority ... a Christian majority which questions whether, in fact, Mormons are Christians. Are they? A recent Mormon statement proclaims that, "Christ is at the center of our worship, study, service and faith." That sounds pretty Christian to me! But what do I know? The truth is, I don't know! And much more important, I don't care ... anymore than Abraham cared about the religious beliefs of all of the foreigners he had to deal with. Perhaps that is why we Jews feel a kinship with the Mormons; very few voices were raised in our country when Sen. Joseph Lieberman was placed on the Democratic ticket questioning the fact that he was a Jew. Why should Jews care about any candidate's religious beliefs? Of course, one's religious beliefs play a role in their ethical and moral compass. One's religious heritage may very well influence one's political platform. But I want to know what their political platform is – not their pulpit's preachings!

And yet, you might say that we should care about a candidate's religious background because of all the anti-semitism in our country ... we have to be careful about the religious beliefs of our leaders. Well, let me tell you about the anti-semitism in our country. According to the surveys in American Grace, you know which religious community is held in the highest esteem by Americans? We Jews! Higher than Christians and Muslims and Atheists ... we Jews are held in the highest esteem by our neighbors! Did you know that? Well, you would never know it from the literature we get from the ADL and the Simon Wiesenthal Foundation and the Holocaust Museum. It shows you how smart we are.

The fact of the matter is, America is a religious country where many people believe that the Bible is the word of God. And they take seriously – very seriously – the words of God's promise to Abraham when He said, "*V'avorcha m'vorechacha u'mkalelcha oar* – and I will

bless them that bless thee and him that curseth thee I will curse.” Those are very important words that God promised to Abraham; that those who will support the Jews will be blessed and those who curse us will be cursed. You should know that it is this promise which forms the basis of much of the Evangelical Christian support for the State of Israel. Type in the words of this promise on an Internet search engine; type in Genesis 12:3 and you’ll see how many Christian websites pop up. If you are our friend, you’ll be blessed ... if you are against us you’ll be cursed. Christians take that literally, *boruch Hashem*.

These two words, “*boruch Hashem* – blessed is God,” which traditional Jews use to respond to all questions of “how they are doing,” and “how they are feeling” ... you know where these two words come from? If you look in the Bible and you will see that the words were used by Noah, by Eliezer – Abraham’s servant, by Yisro, and by Hiram – the king of Tyre. What do all these people have in common? They were all non-Jews! But they took belief in God seriously.

Do we? I’d like to think that we are smart enough to do just that, but I have to wonder ... I have to wonder because of my last question: Who was Maimonides? This is a seemingly simple question but one which, according to the religious survey, 43% of the Jews polled could not answer. It shows you how smart we are.

We Jews are a blessed people ... we have given the monotheistic belief in God to the world. But sometimes I wonder if we haven’t given it away. Others appreciate who and what we are. Let us learn to do the same, for then – and only then – will we be fulfilling the promise God made to Abraham: “*V’eesecha l’goy gadol v’avorecha v’agadalah shemecha v’heya berocho* – and I will make of thee a great nation and I will bless thee and make thy name great and thou shall be for a blessing.” Amen.

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