

SHABBAT SERMON
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Chanukah with a Bush

There is no way of knowing for sure, and I wasn't present to be able to testify to it, but I have reason to believe that I know exactly what George and Laura Bush said to each other when they woke up on Monday, Dec. 10th. One, I'm sure, turned to the other and said, "Oh God, what are we going to wear? What are we going to serve? The Wohlberg's are coming to dinner tonight!"

On Dec. 10th – the seventh night of Chanukah – Sherry and I were invited to the White House for the President's annual Chanukah party. Abe Foxman, from the ADL was there, syndicated columnist and media personality Dennis Prager was there, Malcolm Honlein from the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations was there, Senator and Mrs. Joseph Lieberman were there ... and the Wohlberg's ... and our own Julie and Gary Applebaum as well! It was quite an evening being in the White House with the President and his wife present when the Chanukah menorah was lit by the parents of Daniel Pearl. And then a massive buffet dinner – strictly kosher – was served to the hundreds of invited guests ... lamb chops, roast beef, chicken and of course, jelly doughnuts! And as I was roaming through the historic rooms of the White House, I couldn't help but think of the two or three people who had told me that they wouldn't have accepted the invitation because of the disaster George Bush has been as President. And I thought back to when I entered the rabbinate and I was a rabbi in New Bedford, MA. It was a small congregation which met in a renovated house, and there was a huge Conservative synagogue in the community. I used to deliver sermons about the "edifice complex" – how unimportant size was when it came to synagogues and how obsessed American Jews had become with the money they put into their synagogue buildings. Of course, as soon as I became rabbi of Beth Tfiloh, I started singing a different tune! And so, yes, I understood that those who told me they wouldn't have accepted the invitation had, in fact, not received an invitation. But I did receive one ... and I had accepted. And you know why I accepted the invitation? Not simply because I have not seen George Bush in the negative light that many others have. I accepted the invitation because I had *received* the invitation! You see, for centuries when a Jew had been asked to appear before the leader of the town, or village, or city, or the government, the Jew immediately had to make sure all of his affairs were in order because he knew he had no choice but to go. And he didn't know if he ever would return. Here we live in such a great country that when the President of the United States invited me to his Chanukah party – just imagine the President has a Chanukah party! – the only choice I confronted was what tie to wear!

And what does the President of the United States do at a Chanukah party in his home? You're going to find this hard to believe, but he stands in line for what had to be at least two hours to pose for a picture with each and every person that was invited to the party! And to make matters even more surprising, his wife, Laura, stands with him for all the pictures. And to make matters even worse, we were told that during this holiday season President and Mrs. Bush did that on 24 different occasions for parties that took place at the White House. That's some job he has! Under those circumstances, would you want to be President of the United States? Would you want to be married to the President of the United States? In fact, when Sherry and I were introduced to the Bush's the first thing I said to Mrs. Bush was, "I'm sure you're going to miss

doing this when your husband is out of office.” She laughed! And what did I say to the President? First, I told him he had a pretty nice house! Then, I told the President that I believed that he would always have a special place in the annals of our people for the support he has provided to the state of Israel. And then I recited a blessing. The blessing was: Boruch attah Hashem Elokeinu melech ha-olam sh’chalek mikvodo l’vasar v’dam – Blessed art Thou, O Lord, our God, King of the Universe, who has given a portion of His honor to human beings.” That’s the blessing Jewish tradition has one recite when they meet a ruler. I had recited it once before when I met the Pope. Jewish tradition expects, indeed commands, that we extend respect to a leader, irrespective of what kind of leader he may be. This is the basis for the Prayer for the Government we recite every Sabbath in the synagogue. The Jews of Austria prayed for the welfare of Franz Joseph, the Jews in Russia prayed for the sake of the Czar, just as we pray for the welfare of the President of our country. And the prayer is always recited standing as a sign of respect; not so much for the *person* as much as for his *position*. The moment one becomes a leader, he is no longer a private person. He now represents an entire nation and his honor is the nation’s honor.

And this tradition finds one of its roots in this morning’s Torah portion where we have that famous confrontation between Aaron and Moses, and Pharaoh, King of Egypt. Aaron and Moses tell Pharaoh, “Let me people go.” Pharaoh then asks, “Who is this God that I have to listen to?” And they respond, “The God of the Hebrews appeared to us. Let us please now go for a three day journey in the wilderness and we shall sacrifice to the Lord our God, lest He encounter us with the plague or the sword.” What does this mean, “lest He encounter us with the plague or the sword?” If you don’t let us go, Pharaoh, God is going to encounter the *Jews* with a plague or a sword? And the Biblical commentator, Rashi, points out that, no, it was not the Jews who were going to be afflicted, it was Pharaoh. In Rashi’s words, “They should have said to him, ‘lest he encounter YOU - God is going to afflict YOU - elah sh’cholku kavod l’malchut’ – they accorded honor to royalty.” You don’t go around threatening royalty; you don’t go around being disrespectful to the leader of a country ... even if he is as wicked as Pharaoh.

I tell you all this because I find disturbing the trend in our country to ridicule and belittle not only the President of the United States, but all those who are running for office as well. There is a way to express one’s disagreement. There is a way to point out the flaws in others. But it should be done in a respectful manner. We are talking about leaders of our country. I find disturbing the way our leaders are referred to. And I’m not simply talking about the Rush Limbaughs. They’re making a living out of being disrespectful. I am talking about a person like Maureen Dowd. Maureen Dowd writes a column on the op-ed page of the New York Times. The New York Times prides itself on being what its motto proclaims: “All the news that’s fit to print.” But I’m not sure Maureen Dowd’s habit of referring to leaders of our country by nicknames is really fit to print. Rumsfeld becomes “Rummy.” Gingrich becomes “Newt.” Wolfowitz is called “Wolfie.” The former President Bush is referred to as “Poppy.” And this one is “W.” I’ve been reading the New York Times for a long time. I remember when they had giants writing on their editorial pages; people like James Reston and Abe Rosenthal and William Safire and Arthur Sulzburger. They took the leaders of our country to task, but it was always done with a certain respect for the office.

And believe me, this has nothing to do with defending the honor of President Bush. The same is true in speaking of Hillary Clinton. What did this woman ever do that evokes such spiteful, hateful comments, references and innuendoes. She has served as a Senator of the United States, while being a devoted mother and daughter and having to live with quite a ‘tzatzka’ for a husband! One doesn’t have to agree with any of her policies to respect her as a person. If we

were commanded to show respect to the leader of a country that enslaved us, then what should we say in regard to the leaders of this great country of ours? And great it is!

Let me tell you a little something about the country in which we live. What is the one thing that we Jews have always been accused of? It was put into writing in the fraudulent Protocols of the Elders of Zion, but it has been part of the belief of anti-Semites since time immemorial. It is the accusation that Jews are trying to control the world's economy, that Jews control the banks, that Jews only care about money. Well, let me tell you about the country in which we live. Who did George Bush appoint to head the World Bank? A man by the name of Robert Zoellick ... a Jew. And who did he replace? Paul Wolfowitz ... a Jew. And who did the President of the United States appoint to head the Federal Reserve? Ben Bernanke ... a Jew. And who did he replace? Alan Greenspan ... a Jew. The four most significant and important appointments in regard to money and finances have been made to Jews. In some ways major control of the American economy and the world's economy have been put into the hands of Jews. Did you know that? Did you hear any complaints in our country regarding these appointments? Were there any editorials or outcries or protests that Jews are taking over the world? Did the President have to stop and pause for a second and say: I better not appoint another Jew? Or, didn't he, in fact, go ahead and appoint as the new Attorney General another Jew? And except for some lunatic fringe websites, nobody seems to see anything unusual about this. That's America ... the land of the free and the home of the brave!

Jeff Jacoby, the syndicated columnist for the Boston Globe, was one of those who had been invited, and was present, at the White House Chanukah party. And these are some of the words he used in a column to describe his feelings: "On the night of Hanukkah in 1944 my father was in Auschwitz. He had been deported with his family to the Nazi extermination camp eight months earlier; by Hanukkah, only my father was still alive. That year, he kindled no Hanukkah lights. In Auschwitz, where anything and everything was punishable by death, any Jew caught practicing his religion could expect to be sent to the gas chambers or shot on the spot. So, I strolled about the White House last week gazing at the portraits of past presidents and first ladies and listening to the Marine Band play "I Have a Little Dreidel." By the light of the White House menorah, I thought about my father and about the unimaginable distance from the hell he knew in 1944 to the place of joy and warmth where I found myself standing in 2007. I was overcome with a feeling of gratitude so intense that for a moment I was too choked up to speak. To be an American and a Jew is truly to be doubly blessed."

And so while most everyone in our country is still in a Christmas mood, I'm still in a Chanukah mood! It really was a special Chanukah this year. And because of it, it is with a special feeling that every Shabbos I recite the Prayer for the Government which includes the words, "Bless thou the constituted officers of government in this land. Set in their hearts a spirit of wisdom and understanding to uphold peace and freedom." Amen.