

**SHABBAT SERMON**  
**JANUARY 26, 2008**  
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*Obama or Clinton or ...*

It is safe to assume that in our synagogue, as in most synagogues, a majority vote Democratic. Ever since the days of Franklin Delano Roosevelt there has been a love affair between American Jews and the Democratic Party. The old expression tells us that Jews believed in three “velts” in three “worlds”- “die velt” – this world, “der yenner velt” – the next world, and “Roosevelt.” This year, even before the election, Democrats have a choice to make with there being two viable candidates, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. And so for the Democrats in our midst I want to help you by telling who I think the Democrats should nominate for President. But before I do, I want to read to you the first eight verses of this morning’s Torah portion, and ask if you noticed what is missing in these verses.

Our Torah reading begins with the Jews preparing for that awesome moment in time, the revelation at Mt. Sinai. But before that first we are told of a personal matter that takes place within Moses’ family. Listen to what it says:

When Jethro, the priest of Midian, Moses' father in law, heard of all that God had done for Moses, and for Israel his people, and that the Lord had brought Israel out of Egypt; Then Jethro, Moses' father in law, took Zipporah, Moses' wife, after he had sent her back, And her two sons; of which the name of the one was Gershom; for he said, I have been an alien in a strange land. And the name of the other was Eliezer; for the God of my father, said he, was mine help, and delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh. And Jethro, Moses' father in law, came with his sons and his wife unto Moses into the wilderness, where he encamped at the mount of God. And he said unto Moses, I thy father in law Jethro am come unto thee, and thy wife, and her two sons with her. And Moses went out to meet his father in law, and did obeisance, and kissed him; and they asked each other of their welfare; and they came into the tent. And Moses told his father in law all that the Lord had done unto Pharaoh and to the Egyptians for Israel's sake, and all the travail that had come upon them by the way, and how the Lord delivered them.

That’s what it says. Now let me ask you: what is missing in these verses? Leave it to my friend, Rabbi Jack Riemer, to notice that while it says that Moses went out to greet his father-in-law, it fails to say that Moses went out to greet his wife, Tzipora, and their children. They had all come together from Midian. Moses hadn’t seen them in quite a while and when he does, who does he run to greet? His father-in-law, Yisro, who is described as being a “Kohen Midian” – a priest, a leader, in Midian. He, Moses shows respect to. He, Moses runs to greet. But Tzipora? Who was she? She was *just* a wife and mother. Imagine how she felt: ignored, neglected, invisible. She was *just* a wife and mother.

Tzipora may go down as being the first woman, the first wife and mother who was treated as a second class citizen, but she certainly wasn't the last. In a recent speech, Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg pointed out that despite the fact that she had graduated first in her class from Columbia Law School, she was unable to get a position at any prominent New York law firm. Why? Not because she was a Jew ... but moreso because she was a woman. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the heart of the civilized world, if you were a woman your chances of succeeding in a career were very limited. If a woman went to college they said it was in order to get a "MRS degree." In other words, in order to find a husband. You don't hear that phrase – "MRS degree" – anymore. Instead, this generation of women have learned from Bella Abzug, who said that "a woman's place is in the House – and in the Senate too." Let us remember that in this great country of ours the 20<sup>th</sup> century began with women having no vote. Now we usher in the 21<sup>st</sup> century with a woman being a strong candidate for President of the United States. Women have come a long way, thank God.

Tzipora was the first shunned aside because she was a woman. But, unfortunately, she has another "first" associated with her. She was the first Biblical character who was put down because of the color of her skin. In the Book of Numbers, we are told: "Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman he had married: he married a Cushite woman." There are lots of different explanations that Biblical commentators give to these words. But read on the simple most basic level, it seems clear that Moses' brother and sister were criticizing him for having married a black woman whom they considered to be beneath him.

Once again, Tzipora may be the first but she certainly wasn't the last to be considered a second-class citizen because of the color of her skin. I remember when I was a rabbi in Washington, a colleague of mine told a story of a conversation he had with one of his black neighbors. He was a proud man, a distinguished looking man who served in the Marine Corp. during the Korean War and who now held an important position at the Pentagon. They were speaking of family, and he spoke of his son who had died in an automobile accident while he was in Korea in the early '50's. His wife was living in a military base in a Southern town; they had moved often and had never bought a cemetery plot. The beautiful, green, well-kept cemetery in town had turned her down when she sought a burial plot for her son. The cemetery was for whites only. She took what was available – a cemetery without grass, without regular care and most graves without markers – little more than a potter's field. And as my colleague described it: there at the end of the fresh grave had stood this Marine, his shoes shining like glass, his uniform pressed, a purple and white ribbon on his chest ... speaking silently of his blood having been shed in defense of his country's soil, but neither his blood nor his money had been able to buy a plot of soil for his son's burial in the grassy cemetery of the town where he lived. And that's the way it was in this country; people couldn't be properly buried because of the color of their skin. Schools were separated, rest rooms were separated, drinking fountains were separated and people were forced to give up their seats because of the color of their skin. And as much as it contradicts our vision of the glory of America, that was the way it was in large parts of this nation.

We paid – and continue to pay – a bitter price for this gross violation of the American Dream. Miriam paid a price for what she said about Tzipora. The Torah tells us that God punished her by afflicting her with leprosy. A Chasidic master pointed out: What happens when one becomes a leper? Their skin turns white. It was as if God was saying to Miriam: If you think white is so beautiful, try this on for size. Fifty years ago there were blacks in our country who were still denied their right to vote because of the color of their skin. And now, there is a black man who is a serious contender for President of the United States ... and thank God for that.

These are historic times we as Americans are living in. And we as Jews have much to learn from this. For the manner in which Tzipora was treated is still very much alive in the hearts of many Jews. You all know of the divide that takes place in Israel between Ashkenazim – those who are descended from East European countries, and Sephardim – those who come from North African and Middle East countries. The divide is a serious one. Many consider a marriage between an Ashkenazi and a Sephardi to be an intermarriage! But you should know that this division, I'm sorry to say, is not simply based on where you come from. It is also based on the color of one's skin. Sephardim have a darker skin and many Ashkenazim consider them to be inferior because of it. Indeed, there are many ultra-Orthodox schools in Israel which will not admit Sephardi children.

And we don't have to look to Israel to see that discrimination based on color is still alive in Jewish society. Despite the rightful pride we have in the active roles Jews took in the Civil Rights movement, you and I know that to this day many Jews differentiate between blacks and whites and allow ugly racial epithets to come from their mouths.

Similarly, the approach that was taken with Tzipora because she was a woman is still alive and well in the hearts of many Jews. In Israel there are Jews who still insist that women "move to the back of the bus..." literally! And here in America many Jewish women are turned off because they feel their religion discriminates against them. In the same lecture where Ruth Bader Ginsburg spoke about her treatment as a woman, she also made mention of the fact that despite her Orthodox upbringing, she was turned off to Judaism when her mother died and she was told that she would not count for the minyan to say kaddish because she was a woman.

We don't count woman for a minyan in our synagogue, but I can't be blind to the fact that some women are put off by it. There are aspects of Jewish law that very much define the role of women. But there are aspects of ritual law from which women traditionally were restricted, not on the basis of Biblical law, but very much on the basis of how women were perceived by men. Women were not educated. Women played no public role. Women were not involved in the marketplace. Women were in the background. Rarely were they independently wealthy, held a job, had sleep-in help. They were the sleep-in help! That role in the background became part of Jewish observance and Jewish society. But it really wasn't Jewish law. It's just that's the way things were done. But today things for women are done very differently in every other area of life. Can the Jewish community, can the Orthodox community, turn a blind eye to this? Many would! The ultra-Orthodox maintain that we must keep the most stringent position, pay no attention to changing times and leave things just the way they are. But the Modern Orthodox – and here at Beth Tfiloh – recognize that the changing role of women must be addressed. Yes, the law is the law and must be maintained, but much of what we have initiated in recent years here at Beth Tfiloh is our way of saying to women in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that Orthodox Judaism speaks to you, understands you and is sensitive to your changing role.

So we are left with the question: In these historic times, who should the Democrats nominate? Well, those who are conflicted whether they should back Obama or Clinton, civil rights or women's rights, would be best off nominating Tzipora. For she represents both! But the reality is – and here many are mistaken in their approach – Hillary Clinton should not be voted for because she's a woman ... Barack Obama should not be voted for because he is black. What is important is that Obama *not* be voted against because he's black. And Clinton *not* be voted against because she's a woman. A person's gender or color of their skin should not be a reason to vote *for* a person. And even more important, it should not be a reason to vote *against* a person! Sure, under every circumstance I would like to vote for Joseph Lieberman and Ben Cardin ... but

the reality is, the person's religion, gender or color, should not be a deciding factor. It is what they stand for that counts!

And you know what? This election shows what America really stands for, because amongst the candidates you have a black man in Barack Obama, a white woman in Hillary Clinton, a Mormon in Mitt Romney and the first candidate of Italian descent in Rudy Giuliani. I know of no other country on earth that has such diversity.

For us as Americans, for us as Jews, we should applaud the diversity and never differentiate between male and female, Christians and Jews, Muslims or Mormons, blacks or whites. Yes, we're all different but let us remember that there is one thing we all share in common: we were all created in the image of God. Boruch Elokeinu sh'brono lichvodo – Blessed is God who created us for His glory. Amen.

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