

Sen. Obama ... Wright or Wrong

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In light of recent events, I don't think it is unreasonable of me to expect that all of you who are members of Beth Tfiloh to wake up every morning and after saying the Modeh Ani prayer, thanking God for keeping you alive, you add a little prayer thanking God for bringing Rabbi Mitchell Wohlberg into your lives. I know that for some of you who are not members that might sound a little smug and self-centered on my part. But in light of recent events, the members of Beth Tfiloh *should* express gratitude to God for my being their rabbi. After all, it's a lot better than having the Rev. Jeremiah Wright as your pastor ... as did the congregants at Chicago's Trinity United Church of Christ ... where Sen. Barack Obama is an active member!

The controversy that erupted over Rev. Wright's hate-filled, anti-American sermons not only put Sen. Obama in an awkward position, it put every member of a church or synagogue in an awkward position as well. Are you to be held responsible for what I say from the pulpit? And what happens if you disagree? And what are you to do? And is it possible, after being a member of a congregation for twenty years, you really don't know your rabbi, pastor or priest's position on some of the most challenging subjects of the day?

Sen. Obama knew that he had to respond to these questions, and he did it in an eloquent address. His speech on the subject - one which I stayed home to watch on television; something I hardly ever do - was truly thought provoking, something rare for a political speech. The talk covered a lot of territory and it answered many questions ... but it raised a few others.

What did Sen. Obama learn from his relationship with his pastor? Did he learn to refer to the United States as the "U.S. of KKK-A" as Rev. Wright did? Did he learn to refer to our country with the words, "God damn America" as Rev. Wright did? Did he learn to believe that the AIDS virus is part of a government plot to get rid of black people, as Rev. Wright claimed? The answer is: No, no no! Anyone who questions Sen. Obama's patriotism is wrong, wrong, wrong! Those sending around emails claiming that Sen. Obama is really a Muslim are wrong, wrong, wrong! Those who take some sort of perverted pleasure in underscoring that his middle name is Hussein should remember how we felt when Rev. Jesse Jackson referred to New York as "Hymie town." To hold Sen. Obama accountable for everything his pastor said, to think that he believes everything his pastor says, would mean that you have to be held accountable for everything *I* say! And even I do not always feel comfortable doing that!

Unfortunately, Sen. Obama's otherwise eloquent speech did indicate that there is a certain 'something' that he did learn from his pastor. And that's a dangerous 'something' ... and the 'something' is: the concept of moral equivalence.

The phrase "moral equivalence" is not a new one. Some attribute it to William James who wrote an essay in 1910 entitled, "The Moral Equivalent of War." Others attribute its

popularity to Jean Kilpatrick, who served as the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations during the Reagan administration. “Moral equivalence” has become a popular phrase in our time. What it means is: a blurring of differences, a blurring of all distinctions. It’s like saying there is no difference between an ice cube and boiling water ... it’s just a matter of degrees! It means that in every conflict, there is no real right and wrong ... it’s just two sides of the same coin. Rev. Jeremiah Wright showed this way of thinking when, in a sermon he delivered on Sept. 16, 2001; he said the United States had brought the death and destruction of 9/11 on itself. In his words, “It was chickens coming home to roost.” And he went on to say, “We nuked far more than the thousands in New York and the Pentagon and we never batted an eye ... we have supported state terrorism against the Palestinians and black South Africans and now we are indignant because the stuff we have done overseas is now brought right back to our own front yards.” Do you understand what that means? That what Osama bin Laden did on 9/11 was no different than what the U.S. did to Japan. That what bin Laden did on 9/11 was no different than what Israel is doing to the Palestinians. And he said this while the bodies were still being pulled out of the wreckage of the Twin Towers.

That people in his church didn’t find this offensive perhaps is not surprising, because others were saying much the same thing. Noam Chomsky and many other so-called ‘enlightened thinkers’ in America were saying the same things. We got what we deserve! *They* may be guilty but so are we! Leave it to the great thinker Woody Allen to express it best. In an interview in *Der Spiegel*, Germany’s most important magazine, Mr. Allen dismissed the events of 9/11 in the following manner: “The history of the world is like: he kills me, I kill him ... only with different cosmetics and different castings. So in 2001, some fanatics killed some Americans and now some Americans are killing some Iraqis. And in my childhood, some Nazis killed Jews and now some Jewish people and some Palestinians are killing each other.”

You see? It’s all the same! A bestseller in Germany claims the actions of the Allies was no different than the atrocities of the Nazis. It’s all morally equivalent! And you know what? There are some Jewish religious leaders who have fallen into this same trap of moral equivalence.

The Reconstructionist movement in Judaism is the smallest Jewish movement in America, but it has always been at the forefront of change. It was the first to have a Bat Mitzvah, the first to have women rabbis, the first to sanctify gay marriages. And here is another first: a few years back the Reconstructionist movement printed a new Haggadah which includes a reading on behalf of the “dispossessed” Palestinian people, a reading that was written by Raymonda Tawil, who had been arrested several times by Israeli authorities. She also happens to be the mother-in-law of Yassir Arafat. The editors of the Haggadah felt the reading was appropriate in the Haggadah because the plight of the Palestinians today is comparable to the plight of the Jews in Egypt in ancient times. That’s like saying that what Churchill did and what Hitler did is the same. Indeed, that’s exactly what Mahatma Gandhi said! It’s a moral equivalency that is dangerous and downright wrong. The plight of the Palestinians is a sad and tragic one. But let it be remembered that the plight of the Palestinians took place because in 1947 the Arabs refused a two state solution that would have given both the Jews and the Palestinians a homeland. And let’s keep in mind that it is Palestinians who are responsible for the most despicable terrorist attacks. They are the ones who blow up the buses and stores and

schools, killing countless innocent Israeli citizens. And while Israel's treatment of the Palestinians has at times been harsh, it's been much more benevolent than any other occupied nation has ever exhibited and it is disgraceful to cast it as equivalent to how the Egyptians treated the Jews. And to this day, while Israel seeks to make peace with the Palestinians, 86% of the Palestinian people were in favor of the recent terrorist attack that killed eight Yeshiva students in Jerusalem ... 86%! Don't put them in my Haggadah! Their story is not the moral equivalent to our people's story.

Moral equivalency is wrong, and it is dangerous. And that is why we have the Jewish dietary laws found in this morning's Torah portion. There are few things that underscore the uniqueness of the Jewish people than our laws of kashrut ... certain animals you can eat, and certain animals you can't eat. But the truth of the matter is, according to many commentators, when God created the world He intended that no animals should be eaten. If you look in the story of Creation you will see that Adam was told to eat from the herbs of the fields, from the vegetation. There is no mention of eating animals. It's only after the flood that God tells Noah that animals can be killed and eaten. What happened? Why the change? The rabbis explain that when mankind was told that both man should not be killed and the animals should not be killed, mankind made the mistake of thinking: well, if that's the case they are morally equivalent. There is no difference between a man and an animal. And indeed, there are some people who feel that way today. And what is so terrible about that? Well, to early mankind if both man and animal were equivalent - if you could not kill one, then you couldn't kill the other - then you know what? If you could make love to one ... you could make love to the other! And that's just what humanity started to do! Only then did God say "No!" ... man and animal are different ... one can be killed and one cannot. They are not morally equivalent.

Sen. Barack Obama fell into the trap of his pastor and mentor in expressing a moral equivalence in his speech when he said, "I can no more disown [Rev. Wright] than I can my white grandmother." That's a moral equivalency that holds no water! His grandmother expressed a fear of black men who passed by her on the street; something that Jesse Jackson has said he understands. Rev. Wright accused the U.S. of being guilty of, amongst other things, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and giving drugs to blacks, and spreading AIDS through the black community. That's morally equivalent? Is it morally equivalent to compare what your grandmother says in private to what a religious leader says in public ... to a cheering crowd?

And you know what else Sen. Obama? Your pastor and your grandmother are not morally equivalent! How does it go ... you can pick your friends, but you can't pick your family! Well, that's very true. We don't get too many grandmothers during the course of a lifetime. We don't get too many members of a family during the course of a lifetime. When it comes to family, "It is what it is!" You can't throw a member of your family out with the trash, even if their *talk* is trash! But when it comes to your rabbi, pastor, minister or priest ... you can vote with your feet. In fact, according to a recent survey, 45% of the American people have switched their religious affiliation. I know of no one who has switched their grandmother! It's not the same!

And it's not the same to claim, as Sen. Obama has done, that Rev. Wright is like "An old uncle who says things I don't always agree with." That's a moral equivalency that has no basis

in reality. We all may have had a crazy uncle who said the most outrageous things, but everyone in the family knew he was crazy and no one took him seriously. No one is saying that Rev. Wright is crazy ... he was the minister of 8000 members, and people took very seriously his hate-filled words that were being passed on to a new generation that should know better, that must know better. Rev. Wright is not a crazy man. Rev. Wright is a dangerous man; because he is not just someone's crazy uncle ... he is thousands of peoples Reverend.

In our Torah portion this morning we read of the tragic sudden death of Nadav and Avihu, the two sons of Aaron the High Priest. They were killed while performing the Temple service. They were reverent, serving the Lord, and yet what they did found disfavor in the eyes of God. And what was it that they did? From the Torah it doesn't seem as if they did much ... they brought an "eish zarah" – a strange fire – to the altar. What was so strange about the fire they brought? Not much ... according to some sages the only thing that made it strange was the fact that it was not from the altar. According to other sages the only thing that made it strange was the fact that they hadn't been commanded to do it. Okay! But what's so terrible about this? What was so terrible was that they were leaders in the Temple, and everyone was watching what they were doing. And even the slightest incorrect step could not be allowed ... could not go unpunished, because everyone else would feel free to do the same. A religious leader has a special responsibility, a religious leader has to be held to a higher standard, because his behavior influences others and he must answer to a higher authority.

And here is another place where Barack Obama fell into the trap of moral equivalency. In speaking of Rev. Wright, he said, "Did I strongly disagree with many of his political views? Absolutely – just as I'm sure many of you have heard remarks from your pastors, priests or rabbis with which you strongly disagreed." Sure, religious leaders of every persuasion have said foolish things, stupid things, controversial things, with which their congregants have disagreed. And I'm sure that is true of the members of Beth Tfiloh! I know some of you have disagreed with my positions on President Bush and Christian evangelicals and intermarriage and many other things. It is impossible for an entire congregation to agree with everything their spiritual leader says. Indeed, truth to tell, I've disagreed with some of the things I've said! But let me tell you something ... nothing I – or any other religious leader I know - said is comparable to what Rev. Wright has said! It's one thing to disagree with the positions of your spiritual leader. It is quite another to have a spiritual leader like Rev. Wright who preaches hatred, racism and disloyalty. It is Rev. Wright who calls Louis Farrakhan "a 20th and 21st century giant." That's the Farrakhan who has called Jews "bloodsuckers" and Judaism a "gutter religion." It is Rev. Wright who traveled with Farrakhan to Libya in 1985 to visit Col Qadahfi; this at a time when Qadahfi was considered the chief financier of international terrorism, including the Munich Olympics massacre ... this at a time when America had banned Libyan oil imports and branded Libya a "rogue state." It is Rev. Wright who used his church bulletin to reproduce articles from Hamas, a sworn enemy of Israel and the U.S. I can't speak for priests or pastors, but I can tell you that I don't know of a single rabbi who ever stood in the pulpit and delivered a sermon proclaiming: "God damn America!" as Rev. Wright did. No rabbi would say it, and no congregation, no synagogue would tolerate it! We Jews have known from persecution! No ... our American experience cannot be compared to the slavery and lynching, the pain and degradation of the black experience. But nothing was handed to us on a silver platter. Many of us American Jews share an experience no different than that of the man Mark Steyn wrote of in

the New York Sun. He was born and raised in Siberia until the Cossacks came and ravaged his village. His family came to the U.S. and he grew up in the poverty of New York's Lower East Side. He made it big, but he still suffered slights as a Jew. When he married a Park Avenue heiress, she was expelled from the Social Register. And in the '30's her sister moved in with a Nazi diplomat and proudly flaunted a diamond swastika to him. But that didn't stop Irving Berlin from proudly and unashamedly writing, "God bless America, land that I love ..."

I am sure Barack Obama, who spent his childhood in Indonesia and ended up a graduate of Harvard, shares those sentiments as well. Is it not asking too much to not only expect every political leader in our country to feel the same, but every religious leader as well.

Barack Obama represents the American experience at its best ... Rev. Wright at its worst. Barack Obama should be worshipping at a religious institution like ours. When members from the Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago are asked what their pastor preached that morning, they have to say, "God damn America." If anyone asks you what Rabbi Wohlberg preached this morning, you can tell them, "Oh, just ... God bless America!"

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