

**SHABBAT SERMON**  
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*Negative Campaigning ... at the Seder*

Pesach is right around the corner, and so this morning I want to tell you something about Pesach. But first I want to tell you something about Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, John McCain and me! This past October 20<sup>th</sup> I delivered a sermon entitled, “Are Jews Too Powerful ... the Vanity Fair Perspective.” I pointed out that in that month’s issue of Vanity Fair magazine, with a risqu\_ picture of Nicole Kidman on its cover, had listed who it considered the 100 most powerful and influential people in American society. And it turns out that 51 out of the 100 listed were Jewish. I questioned whether this was good for the Jews, and I went on to explain why I thought it was *great* for the Jews! The sermon, for me, was typical ... brilliantly conceived, well thought out, highly intelligent ... in the category of the Gettysburg Address! Typical for me! What wasn’t typical was what happened with that sermon. Many of my sermons find a wide distribution on the Internet. I get on-going comments regarding my sermons from people across the world; many from Australia and South Africa, a nun in Italy. But something happened with this particular sermon. Someone placed it on a Google website, and the sermon spread, with several Jewish newspapers, ranging from Calgary to Melbourne, reprinting it! And comments – most all of them positive – have come my way ever since ... *most* all of them positive, but not all. The sermon appeared on the website of one ultra-Orthodox blog and it evoked the following comments on the blog:

- “Does anyone else have a problem with a prominent Rav standing up in shul saying that he has a subscription to Vanity Fair, and that he cannot show the cover because it is not tznus (modest)?”
- Which led to the second comment: “I thought it was weird.”
- Which led to a third comment: “The guy is a rabbi ... wouldn’t call him a ‘Rav’ ... being a rabbi these days means nada ... maybe he is a Conservative musmach ... anyone that read Vanity Fair has no business delivering droshot (sermons).”
- And then came the final blow: “The introduction of his sermon made me sick. In fact, I have been thinking about it since I read it. Who the hell is this quack? How can someone quote Vanity Fair and Rav Soleveitchik in the same article and go to sleep at night? Does he justify his immorality for teaching the public? I guarantee after his ‘sermon,’ 50% of that congregation went out and bought the magazine, and half of those were probably teenage boys! Take this man off the pulpit, he’s a quack.”

Now, what is wrong with these comments? After all, I have always advocated that people are entitled to their own opinions, and that intelligent people can disagree over vital, important issues. What’s wrong with these comments is that they didn’t discuss the issues or the

sermon ... they discussed ME! “Weird” ... “a quack” ... “not a Rav” ... they attacked ME! And believe me when I tell you that I can handle it ... but society shouldn’t! Just yesterday in the Wall Street Journal Bret Stephens, who writes on the editorial page, described the letters and emails he gets from readers that begin with the words, “Dear Idiot.” The last 20 years have marked a change in society’s behavior. Some refer to it in a phrase popularized by Bill Clinton during his impeachment; the phrase “The politics of personal destruction.” “The politics of personal destruction” means that you don’t simply disagree with your opponent, you demonize him. Some say it started when President Reagan nominated Robert Bork for the Supreme Court. For a long time there had been a spirit of bipartisanship in this country. Sure, Republicans disagreed with Democrats, liberals with conservative ... but it rarely became personal. Stories are told of the days when Lyndon Johnson led the Democrats in the Senate and Everett Dirksen led the Republicans and how they used to disagree on the Senate floor on matters of policy, and then get together for drinks afterward. But our country has gone through the Bork nomination and the Clarence Thomas hearings and the Clinton impeachment and the swift boating of John Kerry ... and these years with George Bush as President ... and now it’s no longer a matter of differences in policy. Now it’s a matter of personal attacks. This is not a matter of ideology. This is a matter of ‘gotcha!’ with attacks being hurled at – and by – the Presidential contenders and their supporters on everything from race and gender to a candidate’s grandmother. In recent months we have seen attacks on Sen. Clinton’s first name, to Sen. Obama’s middle name, to Gen. Petraeus being called “Gen. Betray Us!” During this political campaign we had one candidate claiming that the other once praised Ronald Reagan. We’ve had another candidate accuse his opponent of plagiarism. We’ve had both candidates attack the contributors of others. We’ve had one candidate’s aide refer to the other as “a monster.” We’ve had another candidate’s supporter refer to a non-supporter as “Judas.” Still another has called one candidate a “war monger.” All this at a time when our country faces issues ranging from a mortgage crisis at home to Islamic Jihadism abroad; issues ranging from juvenile crime to illegal immigration, from drugs to health insurance. Aren’t these the issues that should define the candidates? Instead, these days each contender’s camp define each other by throwing mud at each other! And the situation will only get worse after the political conventions when the Presidential race, which promises to be a close one ... may very well bring out the worst in everyone, with the Swiftboaters and MoveON.org just waiting to attack! Indeed, the situation has gotten so bad that a recent popular book on the subject by journalist Ron Brownstein is titled, “The Second Civil War.” We no longer have political campaigns, we have political wars, with an attitude of slash and burn, take no prisoners, demonize the opposition.

Of course, some will say that this is only natural; politics has always been dirty. And it *is* only natural for candidates and their staffs to charge and accuse and try and catch their opponent. And this brings us to our Pesach lessons. Let me ask you a question. What animal plays an important role on Pesach? I think most of you, if you thought about it, would say a sheep. After all, it was a sheep that was slaughtered and had its blood sprinkled on the doorpost protecting the Jews. And until the destruction of the Temple, it was a lamb which was sacrificed and eaten by every Jew at the Pesach Seder.

But there is another animal that plays an important role on Pesach. And that animal is the dog! In Chapter 11 of the Book of Exodus, we have that memorable scene: its midnight and the first born of all the Egyptians are about to be slain, a great outcry is about to take place. But God

tells the Jewish people, “U’lchol b’nai Yisroel lo yecheratz kelev l’shono – but against the children of Israel no dog shall snarl.” The dogs didn’t bark then, they kept their mouths shut. This was considered so significant that the dogs were rewarded for it ... a reward they are entitled to to this very day.

It’s in Chapter 32, Verse 30 where we are told, “V’anshei kodesh t’hiun li, u’vasar b’sadeh treifah lo tochailu – you shall be holy people to me, you must not eat flesh torn by beasts in the field.” This is one of the basics of the Jewish dietary laws; every animal we eat must be slaughtered in a prescribed manner. We are prohibited from eating an animal which either died a natural death or was killed or torn apart by another animal. And what should we do with a dead animal that wasn’t slaughtered properly? The verse goes on to tell us, “La-kelev tashlichun oto – you shall cast it to the dogs.” Meat which hasn’t been slaughtered in the manner prescribed by Jewish law should be given to the dogs.

Now our sages were quick to note that only Jews are required to eat meat that has been slaughtered in the prescribed manner of Shechitah. Non-Jews may certainly eat it. And yet the Torah specifies that such meat should be given to a dog. Why is the dog given this special attention? Explains the Biblical commentator Rashi: this meat is given to the dog as a reward for keeping its mouth shut and not barking at the time of the exodus from Egypt.

Cute concept, but a sage asks: “Why reward the dogs for this – for not barking, for keeping their mouths shut. They were simply fulfilling the will of God. What merited a reward?” Answered one of the great sages of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Chafetz Chaim, the reason dogs were rewarded was because their nature is to yelp and bark when lots of action is going on. And despite their instinct, they went against their nature and held back. Sure they were doing the will of God, but it wasn’t something that came natural to them. It wasn’t something they were used to – that wasn’t the way they were raised. And yet they did it! And this merits praise and reward!

Yes, God made a human being unique when He provided us with the power of speech. So it’s only natural for our tongues to wag at each other. It’s only natural . . . but remember what the Talmud tells us: “Whoever speaks or accepts gossip, is worthy to be thrown to the dogs.” It was only natural for the dogs to have barked when the Jews left Egypt, but they were able to control themselves. And our political parties and candidates must learn to do the same.

And so must we ... each and every one of us. Which leads us to the second Pesach lesson. Every year on the night preceding the festival of Pesach, we have the ritual of B’dikat Chometz, the search for the chometz...that last ditch effort to make sure that there is no chometz in the house before Pesach arrives. Tradition has us go from room to room with a feather to sweep up any chometz we may find, a wooden spoon to sweep the chometz into, and a candle ... a candle to provide illumination for the search. Now although this search is supposed to be performed on the eve of Pesach, this year, because the eve of Pesach is Shabbos, the search takes place on Thursday night. Why don’t we search on Friday night? Because on Friday night, once Shabbos begins, we can’t light that candle. So why don’t we search Friday during the day? Again, it’s that candle. It was felt that the candle illuminates the nooks and crannies much better when it’s dark. So we see this is a very important candle. This candle is crucial to the mitzvah.

And so now we're left with this question: What do we do with the chometz we find in our search? We burn it. We burn the chometz and what else do we burn? We burn the spoon. We burn the feather. And we burn...the candle. Now, of course, I can understand why we burn the chometz. We've got to get rid of it. And I can understand why we burn the spoon and feather. They had come in contact with the chometz. But the poor little candle. It was a good boy. It didn't touch any chometz. It only helped us perform a mitzvah. Why do we dispose of it as well?

I asked this question to my father when I was a child. And I'll never forget his answer. My father said to me: "That candle served only one purpose in life. To look for chometz. Something that was used just to look for faults, to look for imperfections, something whose sole purpose in life is to look for something wrong in every nook and cranny...that you have to get rid of before you can celebrate Pesach." I like that thought, and I hope you do, too. That candle is only used for "gotcha!" That shouldn't be around when our family gathers at the Seder table.

So at this season of spring housecleaning, let us clean house inside us as well. Let us burn out the evil impulse that makes us derive some kind of psychic satisfaction from pulling down people. Let's look for other people's virtues and not their flaws. For after all, this game of "gotcha" is one played not only with the high and mighty. So many play it with their husbands and wives, parents and children...just looking for a chance to say "gotcha." A game with devastating effects!

Indeed, at the Pesach Seder, we'll be sitting with family and friends -- some we haven't seen for a while. Are we going to be positive or negative? Are we going to use this family experience to "tell it like it is" or "to set the record straight?" That might seem to be the most "natural" thing to do, but the lesson of the dog teaches us that sometimes it is best to control our nature. Instead of criticizing "for their own good," how about praising "for their own good?" Instead of "gotcha" how about "love to have you." Think about it. This week, let's work on building ourselves up, not on pulling other people down. Then, indeed, we will be blessed with a "Chag kasher v'sameach - A truly kosher and beautiful festival" and society as well.