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Judaism’s advice to the Democrats

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“Survey the course you take,” Proverbs urges, “and all your ways will prosper. Do not swerve to the right or the left.” (See Proverbs 4:26-27)

In Deuteronomy, we are told to “not turn aside to the right or to the left” (see, for example, Deuteronomy 5:19 and 28:13), and this even applies to the king (see Deuteronomy 17:20), and, by extension, to all leaders of the people.

Both political parties need to keep these and other Jewish teachings in mind as they go forward, but the Democrats need to pay special heed. The lesson in Election 2020 is that an overwhelming majority of voters want no part of the political extremes—right or left.

The Democrats should have swept a huge majority into the House of Representatives, but instead they lost seats in the one part of the federal government that was purposely designed to be the most sensitive to voter opinion. That voter opinion this year was that people did not like the direction they were told the Democrats were taking. That is true, as well, of the Senate. Democrats should have wrested control of the upper chamber from Sen. Mitch McConnell and his Trump-struck Republicans, but the best they can hope for now is a 50-50 split if the two undecided Georgia races break their way in January.

Joe Biden should have swept into the presidency in a historic landslide. While he did rack up a convincing win (well, everyone else is convinced, even if his opponent and Rudy Giuliani are not), for many who voted for him, it was more a vote of no-confidence in Donald Trump and his increasing tilt to the far right.

The Grand Old Party also leans to the far right. That should be enough to push it off to the political sidelines, but the GOP effectively sold many American voters on the notion that the greater threat was coming from the Democrats, who supposedly were shifting to a far-left, socialist agenda bordering on communism. Trump said as much when he told Fox Business host Maria Bartiromo during the campaign that Biden’s running-mate and now Vice President-elect Kamala Harris is “a communist. She's not a socialist. She's well beyond a socialist.”

Trump and the Republicans hammered away at this theme all through the campaign. The Democratic party, they said, had been taken over by the likes of Sen. Bernie Sanders (Ind.-Vt.), and “the Squad”—Reps. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (NY), Ilhan Omar (Minn.), Ayanna Pressley (Mass.), and Rashida Tlaib (Mich.). Sanders and “the Squad” are determined to turn this country into a neo-communist state, voters were told.

As for Biden, he “is a Trojan horse for socialism,” Trump said in accepting re-nomination. “If you give power to Joe Biden,” he said, “the radical left will defund police departments,” adding that “no one will be safe,” because Biden and the Democrats support “anarchists, agitators, rioters, looters, and flag-burners.”

Even if Biden does not agree with Sanders and “the Squad,” he does not have “the strength to stand up to wild-eye Marxists,” Trump said.

No less than the American way of life was at stake, he said. Voters had to decide whether to “allow a radical movement to completely dismantle and destroy” that way of life.

Nearly 6 million more voters chose Biden over Trump, but the voters bought Trump’s arguments sufficiently to narrow his party’s strength in the House and deny him safe passage in the Senate. Trump, for his part, actually increased the number of votes he received over 2016 among groups that common sense says should have voted against him—black men (women, too, although to a lesser extent), Mexican-Americans and Muslim-Americans.

The message is even clearer at the statewide level, where Republicans won a huge redistricting advantage (control over 43 percent of congressional seats for the GOP vs. 17 percent of seats for the Democrats) that could swing the House back to them in 2022.

The message to the Democrats is this: Either stick to the middle of the political road or get shoved onto the shoulder.

Sticking to the middle road will require both sides of the political divide to compromise. For the Democrats, it is the only thing that will keep them relevant judging by this year’s results.

Judaism has much to say about this. What we call a legislator today, Judaism traditionally calls “judge,” a term that includes leadership as well as judging and legislating.

The Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael, for example, is a commentary on the Book of Exodus. In Chapter 18, Moses’ father-in-law advises him to choose as judges men “who fear God,” and “who spurn ill-gotten gain.” Said the sage Rabbi Elazar of Modi-in, “men who fear God” refers to those who are willing to compromise. Those “who spurn ill-gotten gain” are those who look beyond their own self-interest in deciding issues. (See the Mekhilta on that verse.)

In Ecclesiastes 8:1, it states, “Who is like the wise man, and who knows the meaning [pesher] of the adage: ‘A man’s wisdom lights up his face, so that his deep discontent is avoided’?” The root of pesher can mean to interpret, but it also can mean to cool down, or to compromise. That led the sage Rav Hamnuna to explain the verse this way: It refers to God, “who knows how to effect compromise between two righteous individuals.” His point was that the wise man understands the benefits of compromise. (See the Babylonian Talmud tractate Berachot 10a.)

Further on, Ecclesiastes also says, “Wisdom is better than valor,” adding that it is even “more valuable than weapons of war….” (See Ecclesiastes 9:16-18.)

Maimonides, the Rambam, put it this way: “The right way is…that disposition which is equally distant from the two extremes…, not being nearer to the one than to the other….Whoever observes in his dispositions the mean is termed wise.” (See his Mishnah Torah, Laws relating to moral dispositions and ethical conduct, 1:4.)

There is a limit to compromise, of course. The sage Resh Lakish, for example, said that any decision reached must be righteous, equitable, kind, virtuous, pure, and pious. He reached this conclusion by examining two Torah verses. Leviticus 19:15 states, “In justice shall you judge your neighbor.” Deuteronomy 16:21, meanwhile, states, “Justice, justice, shall you pursue.” The word “justice” in that verse is tzedek. By repeating it—tzedek tzedek tirdof—said Resh Lakish, the verse is saying that “justice” that is not righteous, equitable, kind, virtuous, pure, and pious is not tzedek. Righteousness that is not just, equitable, kind, virtuous, pure, and pious is not tzedek. (See BT Sanhedrin 32b.)

It follows that compromise that is not just, equitable, kind, virtuous, pure, and pious is not tzedek. In its dealings with the Mitch McConnells who do not “spurn ill-gotten gain,” meaning they put party ahead of country, the Democrats will have to consider this, even if not compromising on some issues does lose them votes.

On the other hand, there is a heavy price to pay when compromise is altogether pushed aside, especially when a nation is as polarized as is the United States today. We see this most clearly in 1 Kings 12:1-21:

Solomon had died and his 40-year-old son Rehoboam was to succeed him, but he needed the agreement of “all Israel,” something Deuteronomy 17:15 appears to require. Solomon’s reign had been a harsh one. In essence, he enslaved his people. So “all the assembly of Israel” urged Rehoboam to be more moderate in his rule.

The elders who had served Solomon advised Rehoboam to accede to the people’s request so that “they will be your servants always.”

Rehoboam “ignored the advice [of] the elders” and listened instead to “the ‘children’ who had grown up with him and were serving him.” The “children,” all middle-aged men by then, advised him to “Speak thus to the people….’My father imposed a heavy yoke on you, and I will add to your yoke.’’’

Rehoboam took that advice. “When all Israel saw that the king had not listened to them…, [they] revolted ….”

A civil war could have ensued—Rehoboam in fact gathered an army of 180,000 “picked men” to quash the rebellion—but God dissuaded him. The kingdom, however, was split in two from then on.

Had the prophet Isaiah lived, he might have advised Rehoboam the way his words should today advise both parties, but the Democrats especially: “Whenever you deviate to the right or to the left, your ears [should] heed the command from behind you: ‘This is the [middle] road; follow it!’” (See Isaiah 30:21.)