

Rabbi Lewis' message for December 2004

The story may be apocryphal, but I heard that the Dean of Harvard Medical School once welcomed the incoming class by saying, “Half of what you learn here will be true – the problem is, we don’t know which half.” I have felt that way recently about the post-election spin in the media. How do we know what to believe? When I used to write newspaper articles years ago, I was taught to write an interesting lead paragraph so that people would want to read further. The idea was to not to create the story but to engage people in the story. In the immediate aftermath of the election, we were told that the country was sharply divided over something called “moral values.” We have since been told that that conclusion was greatly exaggerated, but it made a good story in the moment. We saw maps on television where half the country was colored blue and the other half red; we live in a divided nation, we were told, with the red states on one side of that divide and the blue on the other. Yet shortly after the election, bloggers were already pointing out that that image did not reflect the reality of the election; there were blue pockets in red states and red pockets in blue states.

I am not usually one to jump on the media for distortion. I have great sympathy and respect for journalists; after all, they have to quickly sort out a great deal of information, much of it provided them by politically-biased sources. They have a hard job. That is why we can’t accept anything at face value; after all, how do we know which half of what they say is true? In my classroom at the Center, I try and teach my students to analyze current events intelligently. I want them to learn that, as Jews, we have experienced the danger of propaganda gone wild and have a responsibility to be diligent in guarding our American freedoms. We of all people have to make sure that we don’t let anyone in any newsroom or political party hijack the issues of “moral values” and “faith” for political purposes. No one party has a monopoly on moral values, nor does any one religion. If anything, we should be prouder than ever that our country guarantees a separation of church and state so that we never have to make one national choice of faith. And we should be grateful that we can speak freely and loudly about our choices without fear of repercussion.

The coming years promise to be full of the question of public faith and private morality. If we allow those questions to be coopted by the political establishment, shame on us. We have fought too hard to let that happen. If the message of Chanukah teaches us anything in our day, it is to remind us that we are heirs to those who risked their lives for religious freedom.

Our legacy is never to take those freedoms for granted, but to protect them, not just for us and but for all Americans.

May the lights of Chanukah brighten your lives and enlighten your souls.

Rabbi Ellen J. Lewis
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