

Abraham Lincoln once said when he listened to preaching, he preferred preachers who looked like they were fighting off bees. I understand what he meant. There is a style of preaching that I enjoy listening to. It is not my own style, nor do any rabbis I know speak in this manner. But I will share a little secret with you—in my younger years, I spent time not only in synagogue, but in a UAME church.

UAME stands for United African Methodist Episcopalian. It is what it sounds like—an all black church. My family was the only white people in the church, let alone the only Jews. We did not go a lot. We went when they were having dinners after services—fried chicken, baked macaroni and cheese, collard greens, and sweet potato pie. Amazing food.

Why were we there at all? We were invited guests. A dear family friend who could have been the twin sister of Pearl Bailey married a UAME minister. She later became a minister as well, and her husband became a bishop. But at first, he was the preacher of this little church in Lawnside,

New Jersey. His name was Reverend Gene Rodriguez, and his wife was Liz, but she nicknamed him Pappy, and that was what we called him.

Pappy had what vocalists call pipes. He had the deepest, richest voice you can imagine, and he preached in that voice with great passion. I could listen to him preach all day and love everything about except for one significant thing. His preaching was, of course, Christological in nature. I loved the power, the rhythm, the voice, but I did not connect with the theology.

I thought of Pappy and Liz this past Wednesday night. Rachel and I were the guests of Bob and Jeri Shuckit at the AIPAC event. The keynote speaker was the Reverend DeeDee Coleman, a black baptist minister. Her appearance reminded me of Liz, and her preaching reminded me of Pappy. She did not have the deep, resonant voice, of course, but the power and the rhythm and the passion of black preachers were there. And this

time, I connected with the theme of her preaching one hundred percent.

Before I get into her theme, let's take a minute and talk about politics and the pulpit. It is easy to say that politics do not belong on the pulpit, and that is essentially true. There are even tax related consequences for religious institutions that cross the line and bring politics to the pulpit. But sometimes there is more to politics than politics.

Rabbi David Einhorn was one of America's most famous rabbis. He was a Reform rabbi who was chased from his pulpit in Baltimore in the nineteenth century for being an abolitionist. Should rabbis in the 1800's not have spoken out against slavery in America?

The Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. spoke against segregation from the pulpit of the Ebenezer Baptist Church. Was he wrong to do so? Were the rabbis who did the same from their pulpits wrong? Perhaps you have seen the famous photo of the great Rabbi Abraham

Joshua Heschel marching in Selma, Alabama, arm in arm with Martin Luther King. He said that day that he felt like he was praying with his feet. Was he wrong?

To me, these are rhetorical questions. Of course they were not wrong, but they were not speaking out on strictly political issues. They were speaking out on moral issues that were being addressed through a political process.

So it is with Israel. I will have much more to say on this topic at another time, but for now let us recognize that although this is an issue addressed primarily through political channels, it is a moral issue first and foremost. Rabbis must speak about Israel from our pulpits, just as Reverend Coleman does from hers.

I wish every Jew in America had heard her speak, addressing us as her “AIPAC bothers and sisters.” I wish every Jew in America had heard her call for African Americans to stand together in support of Israel. I wish every Jew in America had heard her proclaim herself a

supporter of President Obama but still have the moral integrity to say to him that sanctions against Iran cannot be mere words on a piece of paper, but must be followed up and meticulously implemented. She spoke about Israel's right to defend herself. She called Israel God's Holy Land, and she called us, the Jewish community, God's chosen people. She spoke of her first trip to Israel and how it opened her eyes. She explained why she and so many other Christians support Israel and the Jewish people. Not because we are needed to go there and die in Armageddon, which I have never heard any Christian say, but for the same reason I have heard from other Christian clergy: because God said of Israel, those who bless you I will bless, and those who curse you I will curse. She spoke with such love and passion that she literally moved me to tears. How I wish there was a recording of that talk. I mean it when I say I wish every Jew in America could hear her.

There was one small thing that saddened me that night. There I sat, listening to a black woman preach one of the

most moving sermons about Israel that I have ever heard, and I could not help but ask why she understands these issues better than some of our fellow Jews, including some of our Jewish community leaders. I know rabbis who love Israel and consider themselves to be very supportive of Israel, but they sincerely believe that the best way to support Israel is to appease the Palestinians. As we know all too well, appeasement is how Neville Chamberlain secured peace in Europe. There is no reason to believe it would work better in the Middle East.

My friends, אויב תבהא, love of Israel, is an important Jewish value. At a time when so much of the world is on the wrong side of the Israeli-Palestinian issue, Israel needs much from us, including our vocal support. Let us raise our voices in proud support of one of the most decent nations on the face of the earth. And God bless Reverend DeeDee Coleman—may her light continue to shine, and may her voice continue to proclaim her love and support for the Holy Land of Israel and the State of Israel. I don't usually conclude my sermons in this fashion, but regarding my

Friday, August 20, 2010

After AIPAC

Rabbi Benjamin Sendrow

prayer for Reverend Coleman, would you please give me
an Omayn?