

Who Will Save Democracy?

We should be thrilled as citizens to hear the political parties tout their credentials in terms of their promises to save America from totalitarianism and to safeguard or even strengthen fundamental principles of democracy. The Democrats, for their part, apparently concerned about the performance of President Biden and his Administration, have promised to save America from imminent totalitarian rule. The Democratic focus groups have indicated that the base of the party is concerned about Donald Trump coming back into the White House as Joseph Stalin or worse.

Republicans are promising that their candidates will safeguard the country for the democracy and constitutional rights which have been robbed from the masses by Democratic attempts to institute vaccine mandates, school closures and masking requirements. The true guardians of this country's future, we are told, are the Republicans who stand up for those who demand the right to go unmasked, unvaccinated and unprotected.

Utilizing fear and promising freedom is not an unusual strategy. In neuropsychological circles, this is often referred to as the "Reptile Brain." The theory is that the reptile brain operates out of fear, and avoidance of danger, not out of a reasoned or rational evaluation of risks and rewards.

The political parties in this country are not interested in a thoughtful debate, but rather are trying to reach that part of our brain which is controlled by the reptile instinct of fear and avoidance. Avoid the demonic instincts of the other political party, which seeks to control us and rob us of our God given rights, is the conceptual basis for seeking support.

In giving the matter additional thought, I came across a very interesting argument by the great, and recently deceased, Jonathan Sacks. This remarkable thinker and philosopher noted that true freedom, "is the ability to control one's self without having to be controlled by others." Sacks goes on to note that: "Without accepting voluntarily a code of moral and ethical restraints, liberty becomes license and society itself a battleground of warring instincts and desires." Sound familiar? That is exactly what has happened in society today. "Liberty" has become a license for people to do what they want, and our legislative halls, the courts and streets have all become a place to exercise our propensity for violent disagreement.

Sacks go on to point out that great empires eventually declined and disappeared. He noted that "freedom becomes individualism." The desperate struggle for individualism "becomes chaos, chaos becomes the search for order, and the search for order becomes the new tyranny imposing its will by the use of force."

Sacks' provocative and thoughtful analysis in his book, *Covenant and Conversation*, is not wholly new, and certainly builds upon the concern of our Founders. Those who wrote our Constitution were concerned about an out of control rabble, not knowing how to utilize their freedom, and thinking that freedom was all about simply the individual urge to control.

Thinkers like Sacks have pointed out that if freedom is about each person doing whatever they feel, without any moral compass to guide them, then we will wind up in, well, exactly the situation that we find ourselves today.

Examples of the Sacks' philosophy abound. Should there be freedom to infect others, in order for one to exercise their individual freedom? How about guns? If we are going to be permissive about gun ownership, how do we take guns away from criminals? All of these questions are not easily answered, but no one can reasonably argue with the proposition that a citizenry intent on individual self-control, thoughtfulness and morality is much less likely to think of freedoms as an excuse to exercise their own power over the will of others.

The philosophers ask where does morality come from? Should it come from religion, as most of our Founders thought, or can it come from other sources? People like Jonathan Sacks primarily see ethics as religiously provided, but he is a broad enough thinker to appreciate and endorse good citizenship as coming from a variety of sources beyond his own religious commitment.

When we hear the politicians holler about our freedoms that they are going to either protect or restore, let us think about whether the right to do as we please needs to be tempered by an ethical understanding of how our conduct affects others and how our neighbor's behavior threatens or supports us. There is more to the argument as to whether democracy is in danger than is explicitly set forth in our antique, but still generally viable, constitutional structure.

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