

CONVENIENCE, CONVICTION AND THE ELECTION

By Rabbi Baruch Cohon

Why do you attend a certain house of worship? Belong to a certain club? Buy a subscription to a certain theater? Of all the possible alternatives, how do you choose?

Check it out. Ask yourself some questions. What moves most people into their community connections? Look around. Do your friends belong to this organization? Is this congregation close to your home? How about your boss? Your co-worker? Someone you'd like to get to know? Where do they belong? Will joining this group get you closer to them?

On the other hand, do you agree with this group's agenda? Are these people supporting a cause you admire? Do you believe in this congregation's viewpoint and practices?

The first group of questions deals with matters of convenience and of perceived personal advantage. The second group involves basic convictions. In general, we must admit that convenience trumps conviction when it comes to affiliations, whether social, political or religious.

You go to services at the local congregation and you send your children to classes there where the instruction is not great and the ritual customs are not what you grew up with or find meaningful, but hey, it's right down the street. You join the lodge that your boss belongs to, give money to its favorite charity and attend its black tie functions although they bore you silly and you could care less about that distant hospital, but you and your boss are on a first-name basis now. Opera is not your thing, but your wife's sister and family have season tickets and would love to make a regular theater party out of it with you, so you go.

Convenient choices, all. And possibly some positive results along the way. But none of these affiliations would pain you if they stopped.

And then comes an election year. Political arguments explode around the dinner table, around the water cooler, around the bus stop. Suddenly the people you felt close to at the opera, at the lodge or at the synagogue – or even at home -- find themselves opposing you. Maybe you even yell at each other.

“You’re voting for HIM? Are you crazy?”

“Yes on THAT proposition? What’s the matter with you?” Etc. Etc.

Does this kind of conflict ever make you stop and wonder about some of your other connections? If we can disagree so violently about politics, we must be giving it considerable thought and attention. Do our social, cultural and religious views deserve any less?

It’s all very fine to say we can agree to disagree. But isn’t it preferable to join with people who agree with us? Even if they aren’t related? Even if they can do nothing for us economically? Even if their meeting hall is a little further away?

Observing congregants for many years showed me that those who affiliate out of conviction are the most interested and ultimately the most valuable members. If they find that this congregation fits them spiritually and educationally, and they live far, they’ll move closer. They take on responsibility for programs that impress them as worthwhile. They are also able to accept the challenge posed by the ones who affiliate out of convenience – namely, to raise that standard from convenience to conviction. Not always possible, and never easy, yet it does sometimes happen.

Non-political policies are important, even though we don’t have campaign workers phoning us, or media pundits exhorting us about them.

Next year, hopefully, the political pot will stop boiling over. Let’s take some of the heat it generated and apply it to areas of our life that need it just as much.

Make your religion **yours**, selecting a congregation that expresses **your** convictions. Make your free time exhilarating, choosing sports or drama or whatever truly brings **you** joy. Make your social contacts valuable with people **you** love and causes that excite **you**.

Those choices need heat too, just as much as political ones.

If not more.