

There is a small town in northern New Hampshire called Dixville Notch. Dixville Notch sits in a mountain pass through the White Mountains, about a half an hour's drive from the Canadian border. It's population is a grand total of 12 people. It is, for all intents and purposes, in the middle of nowhere. But every four years the entire country turns its eyes to Dixville Notch. That is because during presidential elections, Dixville Notch's residents are the first in the nation to cast their ballots, and the results of their vote are the first to be publicized. Just after midnight, as election day begins, in the ballroom at the Balsams Grand Resort Hotel, all the residents gather. That ballroom has an individual voting booth for each of the town's registered voters. Within just a few minutes of polling being opened, all the votes have been cast and the totals tallied. In 2012, President Obama and Governor Romney tied in Dixville Notch. In 2016, Secretary Clinton defeated President Trump 4-2, with one vote for Gary Johnson. But each year, as the rest of the country wakes up on Election Day to head to the polls, the polls in Dixville Notch have already closed, and so the only election news that there is to report are the results of the vote in Dixville Notch.

The story of Dixville Notch is Americana at its finest. The residents of a small town, who presumably know each other well, gather to vote, to participate in this expression of our most patriotic values. It is Norman Rockwell meets *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. In 2016, nearly 137 million votes were cast in this country. But in Dixville Notch, 7 friends got together. For them, Election Day is a communal event, a celebration of their small town. As the votes were tallied and everyone headed off to bed, the citizens of Dixville Notch could rest comfortably knowing that they had done their part, once again bringing honor to their hometown.

Voting is the quintessential American act. Our Founding Fathers envisioned a nation in which We The People were ultimately at the helm, their chosen delegates entrusted to fulfill the will of the public. As James Madison wrote in The Federalist Papers, number 57, responding to the question of who, ultimately, should be the voting public: "Not the rich, more than the poor; not the learned, more than the ignorant; not the haughty heirs of distinguished names, more than the humble sons of obscurity and unpropitious fortune. The electors are to be the great body of the people of the United States."

When we vote, we bring our individual self into the communal conversation. Voting is at its core a personal right, but when we vote, we enhance our cities and towns, states, and our nation by adding our own

voice, our wisdom and our experience to the collective of those around us. Every citizen has the right to choose who they think is the best person for the job, and use any qualifications she or he deems necessary. Living in a republic, we don't actually get to make the laws for our country or make the decisions that will impact our future; we just get to choose the people who will do that for us. The opportunity for us to do that only comes about every few years, and the impact of that decision continues until the next election, and often even longer than that.

As election seasons come and go, we are greeted...no, bombarded with those commercials with ominous music, telling tales of a candidate's dark past. Flyers in the mail, ads on Facebook. Think for a moment about the billions of dollars, the hours and hours of research, the reams of data that campaigns produce. Candidates put all of that effort in to get each every single vote they can; they want each and every one of us to notice them, connect with their message, and come election day, check that box next to their name. They go through all of that effort because it's worth it to them- it ought to be worth it to us as well. Getting the chance to make our choice, cast our ballot, get that "I voted" sticker is our reward for putting up with all the meshugas of the election season, and it's our birthright as Americans.

This is particularly meaningful to us as Jews. We have not always had it this good. For most of the last two thousand years we were ignored, persecuted, if not outright threatened or worse. Our local governments only dained contact us is when they needed something, and usually just took it. But not in America. In America we have always been part of the voting public, as George Washington envisioned when he wrote: "May the children of the stock of Abraham who dwell in this land continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants – while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree and there shall be none to make him afraid." Our success as a people here in the US is what drew so many of our ancestors here when they were able to flee those other places; they sought the warm embrace of a nation that would not discriminate against them because of our religion.

Engaging in the political climate is something that is a part of who we are. Moses tasked the tribes to appoint chieftains and heads of households, creating an infrastructure and delegation so that the concerns of each individual had an ear that could hear them. The rabbis of the Talmud beseeched us with the instruction that "A ruler is not to be selected unless the community is first consulted" (Brachot 55a). The

rabbis of the Talmud might not have been able to imagine a robust representative democracy like modern America's, but even through the blinders of their own oppression they recognized the value in representative governance. As their spiritual descendants, who inherited not only their wisdom but the good fortune to be born in this country in our time, we ought to be deeply appreciative of our opportunities. As a minority in this community- a minority with the memories of oppression from ancient and more contemporary times- we ought to be even more celebratory of this opportunity to vote, and show our celebration by exercising that right as often as possible and ensuring it for others as well.

Others like Desmond Meade. Desmond Meade is a citizen of Florida who does not have the right to vote. Desmond served in our nation's armed forces, but after his service became addicted to drugs, a reality that affects too many of our women and men in uniform, and is on the rise.¹ He ultimately was convicted of a firearms charge, a felony, and sent to prison. After his release, while living in a homeless shelter, Desmond began his path towards his earning his bachelor's degree. Ultimately, not only did he receive his bachelor's, he went on to graduate from Florida International University's law school. He did what we wish everyone who finds themselves leaving prison would do; he turned his life around, went to school, and now finds himself with the opportunity to be a productive member of society, and then some. But, because of his felony conviction, he cannot sit for the bar and practice law, could not vote for his wife when she ran for public office, and he cannot be summonsed for jury service.

Currently, Florida is one of only 4 states that does not automatically restore voting rights to people who have been convicted of a felony. Of the 46 states that do allow felons to restore their voting rights, some do so after the term of their sentence, some do so after the sentence, parole, probation, and a waiting period. A few states never revoke voting rights at all; in Maine and New Hampshire, people are allowed to vote while they are in prison. In Florida, someone with a felony on their record has complete their sentence, including incarceration, fines or restitution, parole, and probation, and then wait seven years before they can petition the state clemency board to restore their civil rights. This ,4-person panel made up of the governor, attorney general, CFO, and Agriculture commissioner has no criteria for who should or should not have their rights restored; the decision rests with those four individuals and they are accountable to

¹ <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2014/07/10/329904066/veterans-face-another-battle-fighting-prescription-drug-addiction>

nobody. Today there are 1.4 million Floridians who cannot vote. In the past seven and a half years, only 3,000 have had their rights restored. Tens of thousands are on the waiting list to be heard, and many others see their chance of success as so slim that they do not apply.

On the ballot this November is Amendment 4, a change to the Florida Constitution which would automatically restore voting rights for felons in this state once they have completed the entirety of their sentence: incarceration, restitution, parole, probation- whatever the court system judges is the appropriate punishment for their crimes. It would address the needs of those 1.4 million Floridians, and include them in the voting public once again.

This issue of public concern rests at the heart of what Rosh HaShanah and our High Holy Day period represents, transgression and repentance. On this day, we are told, our past deeds are recalled by the Holy One, and our fate is decided. During this season, we are asked to do teshuva, that serious introspection where we evaluate ourselves and resolve for self-improvement in the year to come. We also challenge ourselves to accept the apology, regret, and the repentance of those around us. From the Talmud and later writings (Yoma 87b; Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuva 2:9) we learn to ask forgiveness of the people we have wronged, and to do so repeatedly until it is given.. If, after three requests, forgiveness is not granted, then the responsibility for that sin transfers to he or she who would not grant forgiveness. If we wish to have our pleas accepted, if we wish for the opportunity to right the wrongs we have done and make amends with those around us, we must make room for others to do the same. If we ask the Holy One for a second chance, to be renewed for life in the year to come, we owe it to our fellow citizens to be willing to offer the same.

Our tradition speaks time and time of sin and repentance, of transgression and forgiveness, and ultimately of the welcoming back into the community of the one who has gone astray. In our Torah, as the Israelites were making their way from Egypt to Israel, Miriam and Aaron, Moses' siblings, committed a sin. They offended their brother and his wife by questioning her fitness to be his wife, an account of her Cushite heritage. As punishment, Miriam was stricken with a skin affliction. Moses, a man of great humility, saw past the offense, and called out: El na r'fa na la, O God, please heal her! And God did so. Moses forgave his sister and brother for their transgression. God required that Miriam be cut off from the community for a period of days. But while she was healing and serving her time of separation, the community did not move forward

without her (Numbers 12:1-15). As this episode demonstrates, even when a transgression is so grave as to warrant physical separation from the community, not unlike incarceration, we do not cast aside indefinitely those who have committed transgressions. Instead, we encourage ourselves and our communities to engage with those who have sinned, to bring them back into the fold.

How to treat the person who has completed their repentance was something our rabbis taught us as well. The Talmud instructs us:

אם היה בעל תשובה, לא יאמר לו זכר מעשיך הראשונים. (B. Baba Metzia 58b).

“He who has done teshuva, one should not say to him, ‘Remember your earlier deeds.’”

The one who has gone to the lengths of making amends, of making apology, of resolving to do better in the future and who stays away from further transgression, we ought not remind him of his previous misdeeds.

Felony disenfranchisement serves as just such a reminder. That reminder comes when everyone else goes to vote in November. It comes in the weeks and months of each election season. It comes every time an elected official is on TV, every time one confronts a law or policy that one might want to see changed. We have the opportunity to remove that reminder, and to expand the depth of civic engagement by our fellow Floridians. We have the chance to make our state better- better for all of its citizens and better as a society. Our tradition teaches that it is not fair that we withhold civil rights from those who have committed a felony. They are our neighbors and friends. Members of our families. They are sitting in the congregation today. Once they have fulfilled their debt to society, they are square with us. We are not square with them, and we can fix that. It is our act of teshuva.

When you came into the Sanctuary today, you received a postcard, made by our friends at the RAC, the Religion Action Center of Reform Judaism just for us. Reform congregations across Florida have been talking about Amendment 4 for the last several months, as part of the RAC’s Civil Engagement and voting rights work. The card is here to remind us of our right, or opportunity, and our responsibility to vote on election day, and of the Reform movement’s support of Amendment 4. Please, take the card home with you. If you would like to be included in the RAC’s voter engagement efforts or the local efforts to pass Amendment 4, please fill it out and bring it back to me at the synagogue. If not, maybe put in on your refrigerator, or in your car, somewhere where you will see it time and time again. Let it call out to you to

Second Chances

Sermon for Rosh HaShanah – Day 1 - 5779

Rabbi Greg Weisman – Temple Beth El of Boca Raton

remind you to vote. If you haven't registered to vote yet, please do so. Registration ends on October 9. If you aren't available to vote on Election Day, register to vote by mail, or vote early.

In a moment, we will hear the sounding of the shofar. We hear the shofar on Rosh HaShanah, that its blasts might awaken us, or awaken something inside of us, in this new year. It calls us to teshuva, tefilah, and tzedakah, to repentance, prayer, and charity, that we might improve the world in the year to come. Let the calls of the shofar inspire us to seek the right and the good, for ourselves, our families, our neighbors, and our communities, in this new year.