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One God, One Vote



By Marty Kaplan

I wonder if Tavis Smiley got the same Happy Passover mailer from Amy Howorth that I did.

Mr. Smiley and I are neighbors in California's 26th State Senate District, which includes coastal Los Angeles County, Beverly Hills and Hollywood. Amy Howorth, the mayor of Manhattan Beach, is running in an eight-candidate field in the June 3 primary.

If Mayor Howorth sent the mailer to all registered voters in my district, precinct or ZIP code, then Mr. Smiley, a well-known African-American broadcaster, would, like me, have received a lovely photo of her family and dogs at the beach under a *Chag Pesach Same'ach* banner, and on the reverse a shot of their son Ari and his parents at his bar mitzvah.

But I have a hunch that this was instead a targeted mailer addressed just to Jewish voters.

I don't know which creeps me out more — the easy commercial availability of Jewish voter mailing lists, or the tribal pitch for my support.

A few years ago, when Target figured out that it could determine which of their customers were pregnant from the prenatal vitamins and other baby supplies showing up on their loyalty cards, they mailed coupons to them for cribs, strollers and other items likely to be on their shopping lists. But there was a backlash. Moms-to-be didn't like the idea of a big company prying into their private lives. So the company, in an inspired marketing move, threw in some lawn mower coupons along with the onesie discounts in order to camouflage Target's targeting.

Mayor Howorth could have done something like that. Even if she'd used the same Jewish mailing list, adding a red herring — throwing in an ecumenical Easter greeting, say, or some pictures from Ari's recent service trip to an orphanage in Ghana — might have thrown me off the scent of the ethnic play. Instead, her warm Passover wishes left me wondering what list her campaign had bought, and what other information tied to me and my address is out there for purchase.

The ethnic appeal makes sense. In a field this large, candidates above all need name recognition. On June 3, when I see her name on the ballot, Mayor Howorth wants me to think, "Oh, yeah, the Jewish candidate," not "Who?" I have no doubt that Mayor Howorth holds thoughtful positions on many issues and has experience relevant to being a state senator, but what I know about her so far is, "Jew like you."

Why am I so ambivalent about that?

On one hand, candidates have always appealed to voters on the basis of what they have in common — religion, race, sex, political party, union membership, you name it. These identity markers serve as proxies for values. If there's a tribe we both belong to, I can trust you to protect my interests. I may forget, or simply not know, where you stand on Governor Jerry Brown's plan to build a bullet train, but if I know that you're "one of us," I'll assume you're likely to think it's a cockamamie bazillion-dollar rathole, or a jobs-creating leap into the future, depending on which "us" you're one of.

On the other hand, I don't like my Jewishness being part of politics, and I don't like other people's religions being part of it, either. I realize that American politics is rife with dog whistling; there is plenty of code available to indicate which tribe is your enemy, and words like "urban" and "Christian" have long been acceptable ways to mobilize one side to put down another. But the American

motto is *e pluribus unum* — out of many, one. When we use campaigns to exaggerate differences among us, it becomes harder to use the time between them to bind us together.

Of course there isn't any time between campaigns any more. Perpetual polarization is the hallmark of public life. Our tribal affiliations are more than team memberships; they affect how we reason and what we think reality is. This is what research is now finding. Former *Washington Post* writer Ezra Klein launched his new website, Vox, with an account of Yale Law School professor Dan Kahan's disturbing empirical finding: People count something as evidence not based on its being factual, objective, scientific — you know, *true* — but on whether it's something that people in our tribe believe or not. The tribalization of facts, Kahan told Klein, is “terrifying.... That's what threatens the possibility of having democratic politics enlightened by evidence.” Which leads Klein to add, “Washington is a bitter war between two well-funded, sharply defined tribes that have their own machines for generating evidence and their own enforces of orthodoxy. It's a perfect story for making smart people very stupid.”

I have no reason to think that Mayor Howarth is anything but an ethical, public-spirited candidate. So, surely, are the other candidates on the ballot. (Disclosure: I know one of them, have met another and know a fair amount about a third, but I'm not giving money to anyone.) I just wish that my reaction to getting her mailer had been, “Happy Passover to you, too,” and not wanting to hold my nose.

This is a cross-post of my column in the Jewish Journal. You can reach me there at martyk@jewishjournal.com

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