

Australia's ballot balagan

The outcry over Julia Gillard holding the election on Yom Kippur is a lot of fuss about nothing.

I'm not disappointed that Australia's 2013 federal election is scheduled for September 14, Yom Kippur 5774. Not even a little bit. In fact, I'm thrilled. But I'm also concerned, frankly, that this non-event, this utter beat-up, has made news around the Jewish world. Talk about making a whole lot of tsimmes about nothing.

Before I give my reasons for being simultaneously thrilled and concerned, I offer a layman's view of halachah, an old Jewish joke, and some history. So please don't stop me if you've heard all three before.

Re halachah: when I last checked, there's no difference in Jewish religious law between voting on Shabbat i.e. the Saturdays on which every Australian election has been held before, and voting on Yom Kippur. The practice is forbidden for the same reasons on both days. It is wrong, therefore, to argue, on religious grounds, on grounds of faith, that those many Jews who have no problem voting on a regular Shabbat, go to shul three times or maybe one time, suddenly face a problem doing so on Yom Kippur. Especially when they can cast their vote ahead of the day in all sorts of ways. Now for the joke.

Congregant: Rabbi, I don't know what to do. This year's grand final between St Kilda and Collingwood is on Yom Kippur.

Rabbi: You've never heard of videotape?

Congregant: But rabbi, I didn't know you taped the service.

That joke was no joke. St Kilda did play Collingwood on Yom Kippur in a famous VFL grand final. On September 24, 1966, Tishri 10, 5717, St Kilda defeated Collingwood by one point to win its only premiership in the 19th, 20th or 21st centuries. What's more, after struggling with the dilemma and talking to his rabbi, St Kilda's star Jewish player, Ian Synman, played on the Day of Atonement and helped his team to a famous victory.

The game aroused such excitement and distraction among the worshippers at the St Kilda synagogue – this was before the age of videotape – that as the afternoon shadows lengthened, the late Rabbi Ron Lubofsky announced the result from the pulpit. Just so the services could continue.

Which brings me to the reason why I am thrilled with the September 14 date.

Yom Kippur provides a perfect metaphor for a national election. It adds meaning to such prayers as Unetaneh Tokef, one of the more powerful expressions of faith on both Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. We acknowledge that on the Day of Judgement the Almighty will decide "Who shall pass through ... Who shall live, and

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who shall die. Who by the sword ... who will rest and who will wander, who will be downgraded and who will be exalted." And now we can add: "Who will benefit from the postal votes in Wentworth (for Malcolm Turnbull) and Melbourne Ports (for Michael Danby)."

But I also have reasons for being simultaneously thrilled and concerned. When Australian Jews gather to break the fast this year, I would urge them to add a short prayer of thanksgiving for Australia, before watching the ABC's Antony Green explain what happened. Not what happened in shul, but in the polling booths. In the succot, the tabernacles, of this democracy.

Which is why I'm thrilled that the whole storm in a glass teacup tells me yet again what a blessed and good country Australia is. Not perfect. But good. Because with countries, as with people and communities, the perfect is the enemy of the good.

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In 2013, i.e. 5773, we live in a country where, for the most part, its leaders and opinion-makers are mindful that there may be an issue for Jews, even when there isn't. That's why I'm thrilled. I welcome the sensitivity and decency. But I'm also concerned, because we are sometimes inclined to forget who we are: a small minority that should shun any sense of special entitlement, or even the perception of it.

Australian Jews need to constantly remind themselves that they make up less than half of a per cent of the population; that when it comes to elections we're a democracy of one person, one vote; and that Australia is a secular democracy that should show respect for all faiths and religious minorities, but should not be beholden, in any way, to any of them.

This means Jews have no special claim to have their holidays, even their holiest days, to be considered when elections are called and should not carry on, in the slightest, as if they do. In this respect, most, but not all, the Jewish leadership showed good sense in dismissing the suggestion that somehow Jewish voters would be disenfranchised. They won't be. Australia knows better.

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