QA with Irwin Kula

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By John Thumann

Who would you consider to be the biggest obstruction to your cause and what do you believe in, be it a person, a group, an ideology, anything?

Actually, what's really interesting is that I don't think there are any major obstacles. One of the things I've learned, especially in the last six or seven years of traveling around the country, is that the more important thing is not to engage in debates. It's not about trying to convince people who disagree. If something is working for someone, I have no interest in undermining that. If it's helping them, I'm all for it. If it's helping them flourish, I'm more concerned about that. I'm not trying to help better people, I'm all for it. I'm not interested in fighting with anybody. What I do is speak to people, offer my wisdom, and if people 'buy it,' so to speak, if it works for them, then that's wonderful. It's not about trying to imagine the things they disagree about and share what works for them with each other.

I have no major fights in the American Jewish community. The people with whom I work are deeply committed to whatever they're on the right, it doesn't matter. I have friendships everywhere. And the most important thing is to be able to understand the partial truth of the opinion with which you disagree. So with the people I disagree with the most, I can often argue their position better than they can argue their position.

There's a lot of different kinds of food; there is Italian food and Chinese food and French food — I live on the Upper West Side. There are a lot of really good food. My job is that everybody has to like every kind of food. What's amazing about the human experience is that we need 2,000 calories. What's amazing about the human experience is that all the different foods we create as human beings to satisfy our need to eat. And I don't need to diss someone else's food to be able to enjoy my food.

I've heard so many people, when discussing politics, say that the division has increased because this is in their lifetimes, and that taking the two sides just to get along in the trenches. Granted, it's an election year, but will anything change after November?

First of all, I do not believe it's the worst it's ever been. This country's been through worse. It's been through worse than this, and it has been through much more serious conflicts. We've had conventions where there were riots outside the streets. We don't have that right now.

And it so turns out, it's less polarized in many ways than it has been historically. But what's changed is that the center has decided to be entertained by the extremes rather than actually getting out the couch and getting involved politically. There's also a reason why the extremes are controlling the debate, and that has to do with cable TV, etc. So they're less polarized than at other times in history — there's no violence in the streets, but instead the volume seems a lot higher. The middle has decided to be entertained by Fox or MSNBC because it's very entertaining to watch crazy people. It's very entertaining to watch people do ideological gymnastics. But then they wind up controlling the debate.

Of course, it was a landmark breakthrough in 2008 when Barack Obama became the black president, and it would have been a breakthrough if Hillary Clinton had become the first female president. But I really hear any talk that we've never had a Jewish president in the history of this republic. Now, are you are your thoughts on this? And when do you think it will happen?

When Joseph Lieberman was a vice presidential candidate, there was a lot of talk, and there's always talk in the minority community, and we court Jewish politicians and the number of Jewish senators. My sense is that in the next 30 or 40 years, there will be a Jewish president. I think that the larger issue regarding that is how little anti-Semitism there is in this country. It's a very unique country in the Jewish history experience. There’s a lot of anti-Semitism in a country so open and so engaged with Jews as the United States of America.

I'm a little concerned about the possibility of Israel attacking Iran, or vice versa. Are you worried about these thoughts on these runners, is it saber-waving, or is there more to it?

I'm not privy to the inside communications between the United States and Israel. My sense is that it would be very bad if Iran had nuclear weapons, but that's not fundamentally on Israel-only story. This is a story for a lot of countries — it's not the U.S., it's not Saudi Arabia, you don't want Iran to have nuclear weapons. This is a global story. Israel's got an essential role in this, because the only country that the U.N. has been able to get to sign on and sanctioned by another country in the U.N., is Iran, by Israel. So that is a very serious thing. But it's not fundamentally an Israeli story.

I hope Israel does not attack. The leading military people in Israel are split on this. The previous head of the Mossad said that Israel shouldn't attack. So I think there's a lot of behind-the-scenes planning, and I think there is a lot of saber-waving.

You've been ranked in the top ten enormous times in Newsweek's list of the Most Influential Rabbis. Is there a competitiveness in your community? Like there is on awards shows, to see who will be nominated and who will win?

If I turn 100 percent honest about that, it's one of those things where, we all know it doesn't really mean that much, but it's always fun to be on the list. I don't think there's a healthy rivalry in the rabbinate. We're all by the rabbinic code, we all serve the rabbinic code, and we're all friends. That's how they're served by others. I think it's a healthy rivalry. But I'd be happy to have 100 more rabbis in the next year to join the list.

The Kleezer Concertos Orchestra and Irwin Kula's American Jewish New Year Celebration will be at 7:30 p.m. Sunday, Sept. 9 at the Cross Centre at Old School Square, 318 N. Arlington Ave., Delray Beach. Tickets are $50 or $56. Call 561-653-7002 or visit oldschool.org.

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