

Is Voting a Jewish Issue?

Of Course It Is!!!

A Discussion Led by Rabbi Marc Disick

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Temple Rodeph Torah, Marlboro NJ

Justice, Justice Shall You Pursue – Deuteronomy

Lessons From the Past

by Steven Windmeuller, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion

In revisiting the contours of Jewish history, Jews over the centuries have been both the victims of political systems and in turn have been able to influence political and social ideas. In experiencing these counter forces, Jews came to understand the necessity of engaging political elites and monitoring the secular "state" regarding their physical, social, and economic well-being.

Jews were historically invested in their own governance. In crafting communal infrastructures, they were able to manage and govern their internal affairs while engaging the political establishment, often negotiating their physical and material security. This phenomenon of internal governance has been one of the Jewish community's abiding strengths in the course of its march through history.

Washington Good...Grant's General Order 11...Not So Much

Steve Windmeuller Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion 2002

When President George Washington was elected to his first term, a number of congregations sent the new president congratulatory letters. In the context of answering these messages, Washington responded to the Jewish community of Newport, Rhode Island, affirming the notion of religious liberty while guaranteeing the legal and physical well being of the community. This principle was challenged in 1862 when General Ulysses Grant issued Order No. 11, directing that all Jews conducting business as peddlers or merchants in the Tennessee River Valley be removed from that area. This order represented the first and only occasion where a specific government action was directed against the Jewish community. By the early part of January 1863, following the petition of Jews from across the Union, President Lincoln demanded that this order be rescinded, referencing it as an abomination against the United States. The White House understood that this proposed action was against the principles that the nation sought to represent, and it came to symbolize for Jews the value of political advocacy and communal vigilance.

Why We Care about Civil Rights & Voting Rights (from Reform Judaism's Religious Action Center Homepage 2020)

The Sage Hillel taught "Al tifros min hatzibur, Do not separate yourself from the community" (Pirke Avot 2:5). Moreover, it is our responsibility to play an active role in our community and choosing its leaders.

Rabbi Yitzhak taught that "A ruler is not to be appointed unless the community is first consulted" (Babylonian Talmud Berachot 55a). Rabbi Yitzhak further explained that in the Torah, Bezalel could be chosen to build the Tabernacle only with the community's approval. This deeply embedded ethic of political participation has guided Jews to enthusiastically participate in the American electoral process.

Jews played an active role in the dramatic civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s, a movement that ultimately granted citizens of color unfettered access to the franchise. Indeed, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was partially drafted in the conference room of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, under the aegis of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights. Given our longstanding commitment to the civil rights struggle, allegations of voter disenfranchisement and evidence of higher numbers of disqualified votes for citizens of color compel us to speak out. It is our duty to ensure that all citizens are afforded the opportunity to vote and have their votes counted.

As Reform Jews, we must heed the teachings of our tradition that speak to the dangers of mixing money and politics and recognize the distorting effect that money can have on a leader's ability to govern fairly. We are reminded of this teaching from Deuteronomy 16:19, "You shall not judge unfairly: you shall know no partiality; you shall not take gifts, for gifts blind the eyes of the discerning and upset the plea of the just." We are commanded to stand up for the widow, the poor, the orphan and the stranger. In a system that allows for disproportionate power of money, it is these groups who are ignored and who suffer the most.

The Good Danger of Literacy, Joshua Berman, Bar Ilan University, Israel

It is in the Torah that we see for the first time the realization that the identity of a people may be formed around an awareness of its past. Indeed, the Hebrew Bible is the first literature before the Hellenistic period that may be termed a national history.

Moreover, the Torah displays an attitude toward the dissemination of texts among the populace that is in sharp contrast to the relationship between texts and society that we find elsewhere in the ancient Near East. It is a contrast, further, that is a reflection of the egalitarian agenda that the Torah seeks to pursue, over against the entrenchment of class distinctions.

Judaism is Pluralistic...Sort Of...by Daniel Elazar Bar Ilan University d.1999

In some respects the relationship between Judaism and democracy is least strong in connection with pluralism. Judaism is emphatically pluralistic when it comes to recognition of the separate identity of different nations. The biblical vision, regularly reaffirmed in the Jewish political tradition, is that the nations and peoples of the world have a right to exist and be autonomous under God. In this sense Judaism, unlike Christianity and Islam, is not ecumenical. It does not seek a single world state, an ecumene, in which all national and religious differences are obliterated. Quite to the contrary, the Jewish vision of the messianic world order is one in which all nations recognize the sovereignty of God but retain their separate national and perhaps even religious characteristics, if monotheistic. This is a view reiterated by the prophets of ancient Israel, canonized in the Bible. It is equally a tenet of modern Zionism, which offered a socialist or secularist variant for God's sovereignty, which while untraditional, follows the sense of the tradition in this respect.

Judaism is not pluralistic when it comes to recognizing paganism among the nations -- it does not believe that anything and everything goes in such matters -- and classical Judaism does not accept a pluralism that rejects the Torah. The question in both cases is one of interpretation. Jewish monotheism is very strict indeed on the religious level. Rejecting the one God is not acceptable human behavior.

In fact, Judaism recognizes that humans do have the freedom to choose, even in the matter of belief in one God, but are subject to God's response as He chooses if they choose incorrectly. At the same time Jews were not called upon by their religion to be God's policemen in this matter, except among themselves. With regard to the nations, that was God's business. This is a crucial distinction, one which Judaism is careful to draw. There are many things in this world which, according to Jewish tradition should be extirpated, but it is not our responsibility to do God's work in doing so.

Me vs. Us by Daniel Elazar Bar Ilan University d.1999

Federal liberty in this sense stands in contrast to natural liberty, that is to say, the right of every individual to do as he or she pleases, restrained only by nature. The latter is only possible outside of society. Otherwise it is both self and socially destructive to the highest degree. Governments, including and especially democratic governments, are instituted to overcome the deficiencies of natural liberty which lead to anarchy and the war of all against all, whereby the strongest win at the expense of all others. So, if the biblical teaching stands in opposition to unbridled individualism, that is a sign that it is among the best friends of true liberty which is based on restraining natural liberty through covenant.

So, too, with equality. The biblical teaching is concerned with maximizing the basic equality of all members of the polity through sabbatical and jubilee legislation and other equalization measures. On the other hand, Jewish tradition does not insist upon pure equality, only upon basic equality, understanding the difference.

Were all this simply a matter of biblical teachings, we might say that Judaism has a classic tradition in harmony with democracy but that it has long since disappeared. That is emphatically not the case. There is a Jewish political tradition which has persisted as an integral part of Jewish tradition in which all of these principles have found expression throughout Jewish history, while the Jews were in their land and in the diaspora, not without struggle and not perfectly by any means any more than can be said of any other people, but in real ways. We at the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs have been exploring that tradition since our founding and have compiled detailed evidence for its existence and influence, citing chapter and verse. We have published the results of our investigations under the best academic auspices and in more general form, making them available to a variety of audiences. Moreover, anticipating public concern with this issue by nearly a decade, we secured a commission from the Ministry of Education to prepare a course for high school students on the subject, emphasizing the importance of the Jewish political tradition in helping students to become better citizens of Israel. For us, the tradition offers standards of evaluation of Israel's political institutions and behavior in proper democratic fashion. That course is now being tested in the schools.

Both those on the right and those on the left who denigrate and deny the relationship between Judaism and democracy not only do both a great disservice but are simply wrong. Each is trying to manipulate one or the other for their own ends. Unlike them, I would submit that Israel would be well served to carefully consider the Jewish

political tradition. We can learn much from it in the matter of building a good polity and society.

Look Who Wants To Be A Nobody!!!

No special status before God...Mostly Deuteronomy 29

אתם נצבים היום כלכם לפני יהוה אלהיכם ראשיכם שבטיכם זקניכם ושטריתכם כל איש ישראל:

You stand this day, all of you, before the LORD your God—your tribal heads, your elders and your officials, all the men of Israel,

טפכם נשיכם וגרף אשר בקרב מתגיד מחטב עצים עד שגב מימיה:

your children, your wives, even the stranger within your camp, from woodchopper to water drawer—

לעברך בבחית יהוה אלהיך ובאלתו אשר יהוה אלהיך פרת עמה היום:

to enter into the covenant of the LORD your God, which the LORD your God is concluding with you this day, with its sanctions;

למען הקים אתך היום | לו לעם והוא יהיה לך לאלהים כאשר דבר-לך וכאשר נשבע לאבותיך לאברהם ליצחק וליעקב:

to the end that He may establish you this day as His people and be your God, as He promised you and as He swore to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Delegation of Power: Judges Deuteronomy 16

18"ח

יתרו Yitro

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And Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, brought a burnt offering and sacrifices for God; and Aaron came with all the elders of Israel to partake of the meal before God with Moses' father-in-law.

ויהי ממחרת וישוב משה לשפט את העם ויעמד העם על־משה מן־בקר עד־הערב:

13: Next day, Moses sat as magistrate among the people, while the people stood about Moses from morning until evening.

וירא חתן משה את כל־אשר־הוא עשה לעם ויאמר מה־הדבר הזה אשר אתה עשה לעם מדוע אתה יושב לבדך וכל־העם נצב עליך מן־בקר עד־הערב:

But when Moses' father-in-law saw how much he had to do for the people, he said, "What is this thing that you are doing to the people? Why do you act alone, while all the people stand about you from morning until evening?"

ויאמר משה לחתנו כי־יבא אלי העם לדרש אלהים:

Moses replied to his father-in-law, "It is because the people come to me to inquire of God.

כי־יהיה להם דבר בא אלי ושפטתי בין איש ובין רעהו והודעתי את־חקי האלהים ואת־תורתיו:

When they have a dispute, it comes before me, and I decide between one person and another, and I make known the laws and teachings of God."

ויאמר חתן משה אליו לא־טוב הדבר אשר אתה עשה:

But Moses' father-in-law said to him, "The thing you are doing is not right;

נבל תבל גם־אתה גם־העם הנה אשר עמך כי־כבד ממך הדבר לא־תוכל עשהו לבדך:

you will surely wear yourself out, and these people as well. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone.

עתה שמע בקלי איניניך ויהי אלהים עמך הנה אתה לעם מול האלהים והבאת אתה את־הדברים אליהם:

Now listen to me. I will give you counsel, and God be with you! You represent the people before God: you bring the disputes before God,

והזהרתה אתהם את החקים ואת התורות והודעת להם את הדבר וכלו כה ואת המעשה אשר יעשו:

and enjoin upon them the laws and the teachings, and make known to them the way they are to go and the practices they are to follow.

ואתה תחיה מפלגה עם אנשי-חיל יראי אלהים אנשי אמת שגאי בצע ושמת עליהם שרי אלפים שרי מאות שרי חמשים ושרי עשרת:

You shall also seek out from among all the people capable men who fear God, trustworthy men who spurn ill-gotten gain. Set these over them as chiefs of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens,

ושפטו את העם בכלי-עת והיה כל-הדבר הגדל יביאו אליה וכל-הדבר הקטן ישפטוהם והקל מעליה ונשא אתה:

and let them judge the people at all times. Have them bring every major dispute to you, but let them decide every minor dispute themselves. Make it easier for yourself by letting them share the burden with you.

אם אתה-הדבר הזה תעשה וצוה אלהים ויכלת עמך וגם כל-העם הזה על-מקמו יבא בשלום:

If you do this—and God so commands you—you will be able to bear up; and all these people too will go home unwearied.”

וישמע משה לקול חתנו ויעש כל אשר אמר:

Moses heeded his father-in-law and did just as he had said.

ויבחר משה אנשי-חיל מפלגה ישראל ויתן אתם ראשים על-העם שרי אלפים שרי מאות שרי חמשים ושרי עשרת:

Moses chose capable men out of all Israel, and appointed them heads over the people—chiefs of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens;

ושפטו את העם בכלי-עת את-הדבר הקשה וביאון אל-משה וכל-הדבר הקטן ישפטוהם:

and they judged the people at all times: the difficult matters they would bring to Moses, and all the minor matters they would decide themselves.

וישלח משה את-חתנו בילד לו אל-ארצו: (פ)

Then Moses bade his father-in-law farewell, and he went his way to his own land.

Deuteronomy 17 It's Good To Be The King...But Be Careful What You Wish For

כִּי־תבא אל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לָךְ וַיִּרְשָׁתָהּ וַיֵּשְׁבָתָהּ בָּהּ וְאַמְרָתָּ אֲשִׁימָה עָלַי מֶלֶךְ כְּכָל־הַגּוֹיִם אֲשֶׁר סְבִיבֹתַי:

If, after you have entered the land that the LORD your God has assigned to you, and taken possession of it and settled in it, you decide, “I will set a king over me, as do all the nations about me,”

שׁוּם תִּשִׂים עָלֶיךָ מֶלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר יִבְתֵּר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בּוֹ מִקְרֵב אֶחָיִךְ תִּשִׂים עָלֶיךָ מֶלֶךְ לֹא תוּכַל לָתֵת עָלֶיךָ אִישׁ נָכְרִי אֲשֶׁר לֹא־אֶחָיִךְ הוּא:

you shall be free to set a king over yourself, one chosen by the LORD your God. Be sure to set as king over yourself one of your own people; you must not set a foreigner over you, one who is not your kinsman.

רַק לֹא־יִרְבֶּה־לּוֹ סוּסִים וְלֹא־יֵשֵׁב אֶת־הָעָם מִצְרַיִמָּה לְמַעַן הַרְבוֹת סוּס וַיַּהֲנֶה אֶמְרָ לָכֶם לֹא תִסְפוּן לָשׁוּב בְּצִדְדוֹ הַזֶּה עוֹד:

Moreover, he shall not keep many horses or send people back to Egypt to add to his horses, since the LORD has warned you, “You must not go back that way again.”

וְלֹא יִרְבֶּה־לּוֹ נָשִׁים וְלֹא יִסוּר לְבָבוֹ וַיִּסָּפֵר וְזָהָב לֹא יִרְבֶּה־לּוֹ מְאֹד:

And he shall not have many wives, lest his heart go astray; nor shall he amass silver and gold to excess.

וְהָיָה כְּשִׁבְתּוֹ עַל פֶּסֶא מִמְּלַכְתּוֹ וְכָתַב לּוֹ אֶת־מִשְׁנֵה הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת עַל־סֵפֶר מִלְּפָנֵי הַכֹּהֲנִים הַלְוִיִּים:

When he is seated on his royal throne, he shall have a copy of this Teaching written for him on a scroll by the levitical priests.

וְהָיְתָה עִמּוֹ וְקָרָא בּוֹ כָּל־יְמֵי חַיָּיו לְמַעַן יִלְמַד לִירְאֵה אֶת־יְהוָה אֱלֹהָיו לְשִׁמֵּר אֶת־כָּל־דְּבָרֵי הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת וְאֶת־הַחֻקִּים הָאֵלֶּה לַעֲשׂוֹתָם:

Let it remain with him and let him read in it all his life, so that he may learn to revere the LORD his God, to observe faithfully every word of this Teaching as well as these laws.

לְבַלְתִּי רוּם־לְבָבוֹ מֵאֲחָיו וּלְבַלְתִּי סוּר מִן־הַמִּצְוָה יְמִינוֹ וּשְׂמָאוֹל לְמַעַן יֵאָרִיךְ יְמֵים עַל־מְמַלְכְּתוֹ הוּא וּבָנָיו בְּקִרְבֵּי יִשְׂרָאֵל:
(ס)

Thus he will not act haughtily toward his fellows or deviate from the Instruction to the right or to the left, to the end that he and his descendants may reign long in the midst of Israel.