

Voting: A Religious Act?

In the Roman era, Jewish sages opposed voluntary involvement in the corridors of non-Jewish power. As expressed in Shemayah's advice to avoid making ourselves known to authority,¹ and in Rabban Gamliel III's counsel to be careful of government and its self-serving ways,² we feared the attention that could come with political activism.

The most striking biblical precedent for this attitude may be in our ancestor Yosef's advice to his brothers. Although personally a model of civic engagement, Yosef nonetheless instructed his brothers to shun contact with Egyptian powers and to seek a life apart.³ Following this approach, Talmudic sages discouraged living arrangements which might bring a Jew into regular contact with non-Jews, lest he learn from their conduct,⁴ and they outright prohibited certain commercial activities that could do the same.⁵ The Talmud records rabbinic prohibitions against eating a variety of foods prepared or handled by non-Jews, due to concern that familiarity might lead us to devalue our differences. Even where there is no animus toward Judaism, Rambam — physician to the Sultan and scholar of foreign philosophies — warned that trust in human government is deleterious to faith in God.⁶

Our classic retreat from involvement with non-Jewish authorities may be best illustrated with Rabbi Yosef



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Dov Soloveitchik's observation: "We cooperate with the members of other faith communities in all fields of constructive human endeavor, but, simultaneously with our integration into the general social framework, we engage in a movement of recoil and retrace our steps. In a word, we belong to the human society and, at the same time, we feel as strangers and outsiders."⁷

Despite the above, the spectrum of modern American Orthodox rabbinic opinion, from Modern Orthodox to Chassidic, supports the civic engagement of voting. One might contend that voting does not invite entanglement with government — but in truth, democratically elected governments pander blatantly to minorities that are known to vote, and political parties expend great resources to identify and influence "super voters." Voting could call the Jewish community to the attention of government and society.

What is the religious benefit of modern voting, such that it escapes the rejection that has met other forms of civic engagement? Does voting have redeeming value within a Jewish

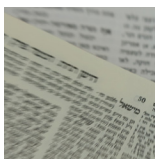
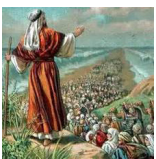
perspective? We might suggest three positive religious models of voting.⁸

Model 1: Utilitarian Transaction

A simple way to look at voting is as an exchange of currencies. Each voting citizen possesses a single unit of currency, and the candidate who collects sufficient currency, in sufficient districts, will win the election. Candidates bargain with citizens for their currency, by offering policies or products.

From this perspective, voting is a utilitarian act, supporting particular leaders in order to achieve particular goals. As twentieth-century political scientist Joseph Schumpeter wrote, "The democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions which realizes the common good by making the people itself decide issues through the election of individuals who are to assemble in order to carry out its will."⁹ In that light, a voter with religiously valuable goals will have a religiously valuable vote.

Jewish communities have long



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taken this transactional approach to supporting government, praying for the government's welfare as a means of maintaining a beneficial social order. As the prophet Yirmiyahu advised the exiled Jews of his time, "Seek the peace of the city to which I have exiled you, and pray to God on her behalf, for in its peace shall you find peace."¹⁰ During the period of the Second Beit haMikdash, Rabbi Chanina, Sgan haKohanim, advised, "Pray for the welfare of the government, for without fear of government one person would swallow the next, alive."¹¹ The Talmud¹² records that this was done in the time of Alexander the Great; in the sixteenth century, Rabbi Meir of Padua¹³ invoked that as precedent for having "the chazan hold the Torah and bless the king or governor and all of his nobles, holding the Torah in hand ... for the sake of peace."

In our own day, Rabbi Yitzchak Frankfurter describes voting along these same lines: a means of acquiring benefit, rather than expressing Jewish communal values. He writes,

I remember how in old times people were happy that they were able to go on the streets with a shtreimel and not be pelted with stones and eggs. I wasn't brought up in a community that was trying to impose Jewish values on others. Rather we were very happy to be able to preserve our Yiddishkeit and practice it in this medinah shel chessed . . . I spoke to Rav Reuven Feinstein . . . He told me that Rav Moshe did not believe that family values would outweigh a politician's support for yeshivos.¹⁴

Rabbi Jeremy Wieder, in a recent shiur delivered at Yeshiva University, presents a similar, transaction-focused approach as one reason why young people must vote.¹⁵ Rabbi Wieder advocates registering

and voting as a means of drawing the attention of candidates to one's personal demographic: "Politicians pay attention to who votes, and this is a very, very serious issue ... [I]t is important that everybody who can vote, vote, and especially younger people, because even if the politicians know that they are going to win the state, they will pay attention to the demographics that are voting." Rabbi Wieder contends that failure to take advantage of this opportunity is a rejection of the kindness afforded to us by God in enabling us to live in a democratic society.

A refined personality might find this self-interest distasteful, if well-pedigreed — but the Torah itself provides ample basis for this approach. Does Moshe not leave Pharaoh's palace to look after his own brethren? Does Judaism not believe in prioritizing the welfare of one's kin and neighbors above that of others?¹⁶ Is it not our duty to use the powers at our disposal to better the lot of those who are closest to us — and is this duty not a fundamental assumption of a democratic society, and certainly one that is also capitalist in nature?

The authorities who praise voting in a more utilitarian way are aware of our historic reticence regarding involvement with government. Nonetheless, they seem to view the act of voting as too valuable an opportunity to miss.

Model 2: Citizenship

A second way to look at voting is as participation in building community, beyond the welfare of the individual and her demographic. The act of casting a ballot contributes to the health of society as a whole, and should

be carried out with the religious goal of serving that public good.

It is commonly understood that voting is a fundamental contribution to broad society. Russell J. Dalton, a widely published political scientist, has noted,

[P]ublic participation in politics is broadly considered to be a defining element of democratic citizenship (Dahl, 1998; Pateman, 1970; Verba et al., 1995) . . . Allegiance to the state and voting have been linked together in discussions of citizenship, at least since Tocqueville. For instance, the US Immigration and Naturalization Service's brochure for new citizens begins its description of the duties and responsibilities of citizens as follows: 'the right to vote is a duty as well as a privilege' (Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1987, p. 11). Similarly, research on voting turnout stresses the importance of citizen duty as a predictor of voting (Blais, 2000; Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980).¹⁷

This approach, which identifies each vote as an inherently valuable act of citizenship, seems to be what Rabbi Moshe Feinstein expressed in his much-publicized 1984 letter declaring voter registration a religious act. Rabbi Feinstein wrote:

A fundamental principle of Judaism is hakaras hatov — recognizing benefits afforded us and giving expression to our appreciation. Therefore, it is incumbent upon each Jewish citizen to participate in the democratic system which safeguards the freedoms we enjoy. The most fundamental responsibility incumbent on each individual is to register and to vote.¹⁸

On a simple level, then, voting is an act of membership in society. More, though, some political scientists

contend that what makes a vote truly valuable as citizenship is the degree of altruism involved — the extent to which one’s decision is an attempt to benefit society as a whole. This is what motivates people to vote, even when they are aware that their vote is exceedingly unlikely to sway the national result.¹⁹

The same emphasis upon altruistically aiding society may be found in Talmudic comments on Bereishit 33:18. The Torah states that Yaakov “camped before the face of the city [of Shechem].” On this verse, Rav explained that Yaakov established a currency for the population, Shemuel contended that Yaakov created marketplaces for them, and Rabbi Yochanan said that Yaakov prepared bathhouses for them. In other words: Yaakov sought to contribute to the welfare of society.²⁰

In our own era, the importance of aiding society was reiterated by Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, in the essay cited above. Summing up the complex role of the Jewish people within society, Rabbi Soloveitchik wrote:

First, as we have mentioned previously, we, created in the image of God, are charged with responsibility for the great confrontation of man and the cosmos. We stand with civilized society shoulder to shoulder over against an order which defies us all. Second, as a charismatic faith community, we have to meet the challenge of confronting the general non-Jewish faith community. We are called upon to tell this community not only the story it already knows — that we are human beings, committed to the general welfare and progress of mankind, that we are interested in combating disease, in alleviating human suffering, in protecting man’s rights, in helping the needy, et cetera — but also what is still

*unknown to it, namely, our otherness as a metaphysical covenantal community.*²¹

Within this school, voting is religiously valuable as a formal contribution to society. Despite the historic concern — loudly echoed by Rabbi Soloveitchik — for negative results from our close encounter with government, we find value in voting as a means of fulfilling our mission on earth.

Model 3: Public Expression and Kiddush Hashem

A third approach sees voting as more than selecting political representatives; the vote of an individual or community is a form of public expression. Indeed, the authors of a 2012 study of American voting behavior²² argued that:

*Instead of conceptualizing voting as a **self-interested decision** that is made at a single moment in time, we conceptualize voting as **self-expressive social behavior** that is influenced by events occurring before and after the actual moment of casting a vote.*²³

Taken in that light, we may understand that a Jew’s vote is religiously valuable as self-expression, for its potential Kiddush Hashem. Avraham was commanded, “Walk before Me,” and the sages understood this as a mission of trumpeting Divine ideal in the world.²⁴ The prophet Yechezkel envisioned a future in which G-d will be elevated and sanctified, and known before the eyes of many nations.²⁵ And what Jew could recite Aleinu thrice daily and not treasure the opportunity to proclaim the beliefs which are the province of the *Melech Malchei haMelachim!* Of course, the secret ballot renders a vote private, but

participating in opinion polls and actively supporting candidates can send a positive message about the values of the Jewish community. Not only should we vote, but we ought to vote loudly.

Rabbi Avigdor Miller is said to have taken this view of voting. His grandson, Rabbi Yisrael Brog, cites Rabbi Miller as saying in the latter half of the twentieth century, “I’m not afraid of Russia personally. The President, who is against Russia, is against them for his own reasons, because they are the Big Bad Wolf and they are having an arms race with nuclear ballistic missiles. Our interest has nothing to do with that. We’re not afraid of them; we just have to stand against them because they are *kofrim* [deniers] in Hakadosh Baruch Hu.” Rabbi Brog continues to say, “He held that everybody should vote. The point that he made was that the voting was not to manipulate things; it was that I have to do what Hakadosh Baruch Hu expects of me.”²⁶

Similarly, Rabbi Myer Schwab claimed that his father, Rabbi Shimon Schwab, was very concerned that the Jewish community’s voting record could disgrace the Name of God. He declared in the 1990’s, “If it would come out that the frum Jews voted for and put into office someone whose behavior was despicable by



all standards of humanity — that decent people everywhere consider abominable — if it became known that the frum Jews of Boro Park or Monsey or New York voted for him, it would be a *chillul Hashem*, and *chillul Hashem* trumps everything.”²⁷

The historic concern for fallout when Jews come to the attention of government remains. Nonetheless, the act of voting and political engagement may be too valuable an opportunity for Kiddush Hashem to miss.

Today

The current American presidential election has challenged the willingness of many people to vote; published polls claim that the two major party candidates have the highest “unfavorable” ratings in the history of polling.²⁸ Nonetheless, the three values we have identified here should factor seriously in our decision of whether to enter the booth on Election Day. As a transaction benefiting our personal and communal causes, as a demonstration of citizenship and altruism, and as an act of Kiddush Hashem, the power to vote should be taken seriously by every Jew.

To echo the wish of Rabbi Yochanan,²⁹ may we soon merit to see the difference between the kings of the present, and our anointed Mashiach.

Endnotes

- 1 *Pirkei Avot* 1:10.
- 2 *Ibid.* 2:3.

3 Bereishit 46:34.

4 *Eruvin* 62a.

5 *Bava Metzia* 71a.

6 Commentary to Avot 1:10. Note, of course, that many sages have adopted a positive approach toward communal involvement, and some of this will be visible in the sources cited below regarding voting. The point is not to depict the issue as one-sided, but rather to show the weight of the sources opposing engagement with non-Jewish political leadership.

7 Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Confrontation*, Tradition 6:2 (1964). <http://traditionarchive.org/news/originals/Volume%206/No.%202/Confrontation.pdf>

8 A possible fourth model would be establishment of a proper government meeting halachic criteria as enforcers of Noachide law or a fulfillment of the mitzvah of placing judges and officers upon our communities, but that is beyond the scope of this article. It may be worth seeing Ramban to Vayikra 27:29, *Derashot haRan* 11, *Chatam Sofer Orach Chaim* 208, *Mishpat Kohen* 144:15a, *HaChukah l'Yisrael al pi haTorah* 1, *Amud haYemini* 7 and *Tzitz Eliezer, Hilchot Medinah* 1 3:1.

9 *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, Chapter 21, pg. 250.

10 *Yirmiyahu* 29:7.

11 *Pirkei Avot* 3:2.

12 *Yoma* 69a.

13 In his *Responsa* #87.

14 R. Yitzchok Frankfurter, “The Values vote—How important are moral issues when we get into the voting booth?” *Ami Magazine* (Feb. 2012), available at: <http://amimagazine.org/the-values-vote.html>.

15 “Voting and Hakarat ha-Tov,” www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/853470/.

16 *Bava Metzia* 71a.

17 Russell J. Dalton, *Citizenship Norms and the Expansion of Political Participation*, *Political Studies* 56 (2008).

18 <http://torahbyemail.blogspot.ca/2008/11/voting-per-rabbi-moshe-feinstein.html>.

19 For more on voting as a form of altruistic community service, see James H. Fowler, *Altruism and Turnout*, *Journal of Politics* 68:3 (2006).

20 *Shabbat* 33b-34a.

21 Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Confrontation*, Tradition 6:2 (1964) available at: <http://traditionarchive.org/news/originals/Volume%206/No.%202/Confrontation.pdf>.

22 Emphasis added. Rogers, T., Gerber, A. S., & Fox, C. R. (2012). *Rethinking Why People Vote: Voting as Dynamic Social Expression*. In *Behavioral Foundations of Policy* (Princeton University Press, 2012). http://scholar.harvard.edu/files/todd_rogers/files/rethinking.pdf.

23 Along the same lines, in 2011, the United States Supreme Court heard a case in which it was argued that limiting a legislator’s right to vote on law is a violation of freedom of expression. The judicial opinions, while ruling against the legislator, recognized that a citizen’s vote is an expression of his personal thoughts. As Justice Samuel Alito wrote, “If an ordinary citizen casts a vote in a straw poll on an important proposal pending before a legislative body, that act indisputably constitutes a form of speech.” (NEVADA COMMISSION ON ETHICS v. CARRIGAN, (2011) No. 10-568, <http://caselaw.findlaw.com/us-supreme-court/10-568.html>).

24 *Bereishit Rabbah* 30:10.

25 *Yechezkel* 38:23.

26 Rabbi Yitzchak Frankfurter, op.cit.

27 *Ibid.*

28 <https://ropercenter.cornell.edu/two-thumbs-down-2016-presidential-candidates-favorability/>, <http://fivethirtyeight.com/features/americans-distaste-for-both-trump-and-clinton-is-record-breaking/>, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/03/22/politics/2016-election-poll-donald-trump-hillary-clinton/>

29 *Berachot* 58a.



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