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Democracy and its Demons : Thoughts Upon Democracy and Religion

Democracy and its values have revolutionized human experience and terminated thousands of years of suffering, persecution and general inertia of the human condition. Democracy ousted unjust and suppressive totalitarian monarchies which had crushed the human spirit just as these empires stripped the general population of its wealth. The emergence of a more equitable political system and the advance of human welfare are ample reasons to celebrate. Torah isn't merely a prescription for ideal personal experience but also designs a model society of justice and prosperity. Though the world is not yet ready for the Torah's version of utopia, we are grateful for even gradual improvements, as society evolves ever closer to that vision. Democracy is a Divine gift to humanity.

As Jews, we are even more grateful, as democracy has granted us unprecedented freedom and self-expression. After centuries of religious persecution and social discrimination, Jews have been afforded religious autonomy and socio-economic equality.

Appreciation of democracy should be accompanied by eagerness to be ardent protectors and active participants of the democratic process, as we hope it both continues to safeguard our way of life as well as delivering welfare to humanity.

However, democracy poses many significant challenges to the religious imagination. For centuries, democracy has been enshrined and almost hallowed to the point that we seldom pause

and question its perils and challenges- particularly to a religious lifestyle. The very word “democracy” has become a conversation-killer; we cherish it so deeply that it tends to over tally any other value in a conversation or a moral dilemma. Our honest assessment of democracy demands inspection of its risks even as we embrace its values.

1.Rampant Individualism

Perhaps the greatest challenge which democracy poses is the emphasis upon the individual and his liberties. For centuries, basic human liberties were curtailed and human talent, potential and dreams were suppressed. The modern era has unleashed personal talent by protecting individual liberty. However, it has pivoted our identity upon the “individual” and individual liberties - at great cost to a more ‘networked’ lifestyle in which we are connected with various “orbits” of experience beyond our own narrow world of the individual. Ideally, we should attach our lives to at least three broader “orbits” – the communal orbit, the historical orbit and the Divine orbit. Firstly, we should connect with larger communities -for example family and society - which enrich our experiences. Secondly, as Jews we should live with constant historical awareness: how has the past shaped our mission and how will destiny be influenced by it. Thirdly, and most importantly, we should submit our lives to G-d, willing to sublimate personal pleasure on behalf of a larger calling. Theoretically, at its best, democracy can free us from oppression, ignite our imaginations and propel us toward these broader horizons and wider callings. However, in reality, democracy’s fixation upon the individual has shrunken our lives into small-minded “individual” spaces, detached from community, disinterested in our history and apathetic to religion. Democracy

can create a narrow prison of self-interest, locking us in the withered realm of individualism and liberty.

2. A Life of Rights of a Life of Duty

A second challenge of democracy stems from the emphasis upon our inalienable rights – life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. For centuries, these rights were denied as the human spirit was crushed. Indeed, protection of basic human augments human potential and unleashes human creativity. However, it also transforms us into creatures of “rights”. We aren’t placed on this planet to campaign for our rights or to fulfill our rights. We are born as creatures of duty- duty bound to fulfill the will of G-d and mission bound to reshape the world in His image. The famous sefer-“Mesilat Yesharim”- commences with a haunting challenge to identify chovat ha’adam ba’olamo- Man’s duty in his world. Instead, modern society has fixated our imagination upon our rights. In the legal arena this often leads to excessively litigious societies and endless legal battles over the presumed invasion or compromising of our basic human rights. In the religious arena the fixation upon rights nibbles away at our sense of “metzuveh v’oseh”- that we should live our lives as summoned individuals, submissive to Divine command and attuned to the nobility of duty.

3. The Tyranny of Moral Relativism

A third potential clash between democracy and religious values is the erasure of moral clarity. Democracy bestows universal equality and empowers each citizen with equal influence in the election process. Democracy is non-discriminatory and reinforces the uniform value of each citizen and their political opinion. However, this notion of equality has produced a dangerous

assumption: if everyone is equal in the ballot-box they are also equal in the moral conversation. This has created a confusing world without absolute moral opinions and clear divisions between “right” and “wrong” moral behavior. Suffering under the “spell” of moral relativism, it is impossible for society to assign morally absolute and fixed positions- every viewpoint must be acknowledged and accredited and every perspective respected. A terrorist is no longer a homicidal murder; from their perspective- and their’s is an equivalent perspective- they are merely freedom fighters restoring violated national pride. Perennially fixed values such as religious authority, family, and social etiquette, are no longer “fixed”, absolute or universal since every value can and should be questioned. The extreme and sometime cartoonish expression of this moral equivalency is extreme “PC” where any potentially opinioned comment is banned, and conversation becomes flattened into empty slogans and meaningless but ‘safe’ speech.

Democracy is the most elegant and equitable form of governance that human beings have crafted. The evolution of democracy came at great cost to human life and well-being. As Jews, we appreciate the opportunities which democracy has afforded us, while also celebrating the benefit it has delivered to humanity at large. However, Man’s greatest distortions aren’t his forgeries of truth; our greatest failures occur when we embrace a value which is ‘partial’ and convert it into an all-encompassing and exclusive value without fully examining its potential hazards. In the absence of formal gods, the modern secular city has deified “Democracy” without sufficient inspection of its inherent flaws. The week in which the modern world celebrates democracy is a perfect

opportunity for religious minded people to carefully gauge the challenges of democracy. It is also a perfect opportunity to remind ourselves that despite our unqualified support for democracy, we continue to pray for the ideal form of human governance – a Jewish monarchy seated upon a throne in Jerusalem.