

Democracy is a Jewish Value

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In our daily morning minyan that meets on Zoom, it has become something of a tradition during the Misheberach for participants to say that, in addition to loved ones who are sick, they are also praying for “our democracy.”

The idea that American democracy is at risk has gained currency in recent years—particularly, I think, since the events of January 6, 2021. Before that, my recollection is that we just kind of took it for granted.

So, since democracy is on our minds, I thought it might make for an interesting sermon topic this week.

Democracy, when you break down the word into its constituent parts, “dem-” and “-ocracy,” means “rule by the people.”

You probably know that it was invented by the Greeks of ancient Athens. And, although we Jews tend to value it so highly, democracy doesn’t seem to be part of our Jewish tradition at all—at least, not obviously.

The ancient Hebrews, in their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land, were governed by one man, Moses. Not that he was a bad guy, of course, but Moses’s regime wasn’t exactly democratic.

When they got to the Land of Israel, they were ruled first by Joshua, then by charismatic figures called “judges,” who were really more like warlords, and then eventually by kings appointed by God.

In exile after the destruction of the Temple, the Jewish community was led by a hereditary ruler called the “*nasi*” (or “prince”) and by the elite class of scholars we know as “rabbis.”

Even to this day, traditional Jewish liturgy longs for the restoration of the Davidic monarchy someday when the Messiah comes. Anyone who went to a Jewish summer camp as a kid probably remembers singing “*David melekh Yisrael, chai, chai v’kayam*”—meaning: “David, king of Israel, lives and endures.”

So, while people like Louis XIV might have been able to claim that the Bible endorsed the divine right of kings, it feels like a stretch to argue that democracy is a Jewish value.

But, actually, there’s more to the story.

Lenn Goodman, a Philosophy and Jewish Studies professor at Vanderbilt University, makes a strong case that, although ancient Israel was never quite a democracy, the seeds of what would become modern Western democracy do, in fact, come from the Torah.

He finds these seeds in the Hebrew Bible’s emphases on the uniqueness of every individual and on the innate dignity of every human life and, most importantly, in the foundational concept of Judaism—namely, the covenant between God and the Jewish people.

This week's parashah, Nitzavim, begins with Moses setting the scene: "You stand here today, all of you, before Adonai your God—your tribal heads, your elders, and your officials, every householder in Israel, your children, your wives, even the stranger in your camp, from woodchopper to water drawer—to enter into the covenant of Adonai your God." (*Deut.* 29:9-11).

Though Moses, and later the kings, held the top governmental posts, they were not the ultimate authority in ancient Israel; *God* was. And the covenant God made with the people was and is the driving force in Judaism—the *constitution*, as it were, of Jewish religion and society.

As Professor Goodman explains, understanding the supremacy of the covenant is critical to understanding the Torah's theory of governance because the covenant, by definition, "requires free consent"¹ of both parties to the agreement.

While God made the rules of the covenant, "Israel's adherence was the final test. For the Torah was not given to slaves. It presumed the freedom of those who embraced it."²

In short, Goodman argues that the whole Torah is based on the consent of the governed.

(Now, you might recall the famous story about how God held a mountain over our heads to force us to accept the Torah. But the sages who told that midrash also recognize that a contract agreed to under duress cannot be valid, which is why they pointed out that Jewish people accepted the Torah again of their own free will after Esther and Mordechai saved them from Haman.³)

Israeli scholar Baruch Alster goes further, arguing that the *Book of Deuteronomy* (the book of the Torah that we're reading right now) is skeptical of monarchy, even though it seems to take kingship for granted as ancient Israel's form of governance. Alster suggests that the author was concerned that a human king might eclipse the role of God in the Israelite consciousness.

He also points out that *Deuteronomy* charges the *people* with appointing various governmental officials and, ultimately, leaves it up to the *people* whether or not to choose monarchy as their form of government in the first place.

Although the Jewish people of the time *did* choose monarchy—because, after all, in the Ancient Near East, having a king was the hallmark of a legitimate country—Alster explains that, in the Torah's view, "No leader is inherently superior to the average citizen."⁴

In addition, he says: "Lineage is of no concern [either], because the only lineage that counts is that the candidate [for king] be one who stands in covenant with the Almighty—that is to say, everybody. ... Potentially any citizen may serve as king."⁵

In sum, these scholars demonstrate that the Torah and the society it envisions are rooted in the principles of consent of the governed and the will of the people.

Ancient Israel may not have been a democracy, but it is on these principles that future democracies, including our own, would be founded.

It seems reasonable, then, to say that democracy—or, at least, government in which the people have a say—is a Jewish value after all.

Now, I know I went through this whole history to get there, but a couple of our congregants came to me the other day to make that very same point.

Susan Weiss-Horowitz and Jane Cohen are active volunteers in Temple Beth-El's Social Justice Advocacy Group. This group meets on the second Wednesday of every month to do one thing that is critically important to democracy: They write letters to citizens around the country encouraging them to go out and vote.

Susan and Jane explained to me that in each letter they write, they explain why voting is important to them personally, and they ask their recipients—who, for some reason or another, have chosen to sit it out in recent years—to consider participating in whatever election is coming up in their area.

Susan, Jane, Sharon Ross, Lea Caplan, and the other TBE congregants in their group do this as part of a nationwide effort by an organization called Vote Forward. You can Google the group when you get home and read about what it does.

With more than 250,000 volunteers across the country, Vote Forward says that sending these letters to prospective voters has been shown to “boost voter turnout by as much as 34 percentage points.”⁶

If that's the case, that's a big deal, and it means you can make a major difference in our society by helping out.

1 Lenn E. Goodman, “Judaism and Democracy,” In: Leonard J. Greenspon, ed., *Is Judaism Democratic?*, 159

2 Ibid.

3 b. Shabbat 88a

4 Baruch Alster, “The ‘Will of the People’ in Antimonarchic Biblical Texts,” In: Greenspon, 39

5 Ibid.

6 <https://votefwd.org/>