

## Citizenship

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Over the summer I gave a sermon about shame. I thought it was pretty timeless, but a Bar Mitzvah guest teased me afterward about the separation of Church and State. I guess he thought it was about you-know-who.

His comments may prove that right now our sensibilities are so heightened that there is nothing that is not political, but it also raises an interesting question about what has been the synagogue's relationship to government and what it should be.

At Shir Hadash we have an American flag in our sanctuary both at our own building and here over the holidays. It's a custom that goes back to the First World War, when many congregations adopted this practice as an expression of patriotism. Dr. Gary Zola, director of the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati, believes that it may have started with service flags. Families with someone in the armed services, or with a family member who had given their life for this country, received a special flag. At first these were flown in the synagogues, perhaps to combat accusations that Jews were not making sacrifices for their country, but eventually they switched to the American flag.

Flags had been flown in synagogue in earlier times but usually for special occasions, as along the route of President Lincoln's body from Washington, DC, to Illinois for burial, the Stars and Stripes having emerged as a symbol of the Union.

Flying a flag was not the only way love of country has been expressed. Special prayers for the president, vice president, and members of Congress have been said in American synagogues since the early days of the Republic.

The root of this practice goes way back. If you recall, Jeremiah admonished the Jews in Exile in Babylonia to pray for the welfare of the community in which they lived (Jeremiah 29:7). Later we find Ezra, leader of the Jews who were given permission by Cyrus the Great to return to Israel, as a Persian protectorate, including the Persian ruler in his prayer (Ezra 6:10).

Prayers for the government didn't necessarily imply love of the government. When Pirke Avot tells us to pray for the welfare of the government, they are referring to the hated Roman Empire, which had fairly recently martyred a generation of rabbis, but still, the rabbis felt, no government at all would be worse. "Pray for the welfare of the government," they taught, "for without the fear of it, man would swallow his fellow alive."

We have records of Jews praying for the government in Medieval Spain, in Great Britain, and with a certain furtive cleverness in Czarist Russia. Luckily the Russian censors didn't look up the final sections of the Biblical verses quoted in that prayer, as they had a subversive meaning. A tiny footnote also reminded the Jewish community that along with the Czar they had been required to pray for King Nebuchadnezzar, the man who destroyed Jerusalem.

After the American revolution, the Republicans, i.e., those who were not monarchists, removed the king's name from their prayers and changed them to prayers for the president, but without his name, signifying that it was not the

person but the position. Similarly, they only prayed for Congress when it was in session; when it wasn't in session, members of Congress were to return to their civilian status. The prayers were standardized, but special events, like the United States stepping up to combat a blood libel accusation in Damascus, led to the creation of a special prayer.

What about today? The prayer for the government is nonpartisan in that we pray that our leaders find wisdom and embody the vision of our founders, "to form a more perfect union, establish justice, ensure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare and secure the blessing of liberty to ourselves and our posterity."

Is that our sole responsibility as a religious community—to pray for the government?

Citizenship for Jews is a relatively recent phenomenon. For European Jews it followed the French Revolution, and raised many issues. When the Paris Sanhedrin considered the issue of Jewish citizenship, they were skeptical about whether Jews could integrate into society, and not remain the separate community they had been for centuries. It was not so different from the attitude toward the Muslim community in Europe today whose religious practices seem to many equally foreign.

Being a citizen was seen as a special blessing for those Jews who experienced the Emancipation. That appreciation has lingered in the waves of Jewish immigrants to the United States as well. On the grounds that kindness should be repaid, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, a leading 20th century American Orthodox rabbi, argued that it

was incumbent on every American Jew to vote, as the least we could do was to fulfill this basic duty of citizenship. In 1984 he wrote a strong endorsement of voting. Lest I be accused of using sources selectively, I will read it in its entirety without editing:

On reaching the shores of the United States, Jews found a safe haven. The rights guaranteed by the United States Constitution and the Bill of Rights have allowed us the freedom to practice our religion without interference and to live in this republic in safety.

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.

Therefore, I urge all members of the Jewish community to fulfill their obligations by registering as soon as possible, and by voting. By this, we can express our appreciation and contribute to the continued security of our community.

Our Reform movement accepts Rabbi Feinstein's ruling and urges us to have 100% voting among the members in all 800 of our URJ congregations. We appreciate the help of our Temple volunteers at Shir Hadash who are reminding those who are not registered, perhaps because they have recently moved or because this will be their first chance to participate in the ballot, to be sure to

register. If you'd like to help with that effort, just let me know and I would be glad to introduce you to Mike, David, and Debbie, who are leading that project.

Historically Jews vote; even in off-year elections our percentages are high. But suppose it is 85%, more than twice the general turnout; across one million Reform voters, 15% is still a lot of votes in close elections.

Since the Jewish community has a good reputation for coming out to vote, we are also working to encourage other communities with more less-likely voters to register and vote. We welcome your help, working either through our congregation and its local alliances, or through Bend the Arc, a national Jewish organization that responds to domestic issues. We are registering voters here in San Jose and also working with Bend the Arc in the Modesto and Tracy areas.

Displaying the flag, registering and voting—what else is incumbent upon us as patriots? Patriotism is often associated with believing that your country is the best in the world. Can one hold this belief without feeling the need to impose its ideas forcibly on others? I would argue that one can, that loving one's own heritage need not mean the disparaging of someone else's.

But what are the ideals that are the source of our patriotism? Rather than taking them for granted, it is important that we review them for ourselves and for others.

Recent events have reminded us that democracy is about more than holding elections. Voting is only meaningful when elections are free, when opponents of the government are allowed to run, and when access to the ballot is unimpeded

for every voter. In recent years we have seen voters in the United States denied their rights through concerted campaigns of voter disenfranchisement.

Further, elections are democratic only in the context of rule of law, which is a necessary condition for democracy. Certainly, for the founders of our country, it was important that our leaders, even our supreme leader, the president, understand himself to be under the law. These principles, basic though they seem, are under attack here in the United States and around the world. The true patriots are those who stand up for these core principles of our country.

Finally, for us as Jews, there is another element of American democracy which is vital to our continued flourishing in this country, and that is the separation of church and state. Attempts to establish religion in our governmental system are a danger to the generations that will come after us. This too is a right that must be guarded continually.

President John F. Kennedy would often quote a famous aphorism attributed both to the British Conservative Edmund Burke and to the liberal John Stuart Mill: The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing.

Actually they each said it slightly differently.

Burke wrote: When bad men combine, the good must associate; else they will fall, one by one, an unpitied sacrifice in a contemptible struggle.

He reminds us that this is not the time to go it alone, but to work in coalition with others both within and beyond the Jewish community.

John Stuart Mill said: Bad men need nothing more to compass their ends, than that good men should look on and do nothing.

This is taught in our tradition as well—that we cannot just mind our own business, for when we separate ourselves from the community, we are violating Jewish law and failing in our religious duties.

Whichever side of the aisle you usually occupy, the task of preserving our democracy is ours and the responsibility for action is now. We cannot sit this one out, or continue as consumers of news who do not act on what we have learned.

The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is that good people do nothing.