

Voting as Civic Duty & Sacred Responsibility

Every people has a story. The Jewish story begins in the Torah: “In the beginning,” the creation of the Universe. God forms the world and all that lives upon it, and as a final, crowning act, creates human beings. Significantly, God fashions people in the Divine image, which means that every person is born with three intrinsic dignities: each of us is of infinite worth (the Mishnah teaches that whosoever saves one life has saved an entire world); each of us is co-equal with every other person (as we share the same parents, Adam and Eve) and each of us is an utterly unique individual (so much so that even identical twins have different fingerprints).

In addition to these three intrinsic human dignities, God created us with free will. Judaism introduced this revolutionary idea into a world where time was thought to move in immutable cycles, repeating the same patterns without variation, over and over. The introduction of the concept of free will meant that people were capable of changing the world around them. It gave birth to the idea of ‘progress.’ No longer locked into the patterns of the past, we were presented with choices and an awesome responsibility: if we can change the world, then we are obligated to work together to perfect the world, to fix what is broken and heal what is sick.

From the very beginning, God gave us a vote. Adam and Eve freely choose to eat the forbidden fruit and leave the Garden; God contemplates destroying Sodom and Gemorrah, but first asks for Abraham’s vote. In later Jewish history, recorded in the Talmud, “Rabbi Yitzhak taught that ‘A ruler is not to be appointed unless the community is first consulted’” (Babylonian Talmud Berachot 55a). He further explained that in the Torah, God’s appointed construction manager, Bezalel could oversee the building of the Mishkan, or portable desert sanctuary, only with the community’s approval. This deeply embedded ethic of political participation has meant that Jews have participated enthusiastically in the American electoral process.

This participation was fueled as well by two millenia of the Jewish story when we were guests in lands governed by authoritarian rulers. Whether under the Church, the Czar, or more parochial potentates, or in modern times under totalitarian regimes, prior Jewish experience made the arrival of democracy a time to celebrate.

Yes, every people has a story and that was a partial, truncated, summary of the Jewish story. In addition to a story, every people also has a set of memories, a curated subset of recollections from the larger story. If you survey peak moments of Jewish memory, you’ll see our holy days and rituals do not celebrate our people’s victories or grand accomplishments. We have no feasts celebrating King David and King Solomon; no celebration of the conquest of Canaan. Instead, we consistently choose to remember the most challenging and degrading moments of our past.

The Passover Seder is a good example: The ritual instructs us: “in every generation, each person is to see him or herself as if she too had come out of Egypt”. The message is: you have to remember you were once a slave. No less than 36 times does the Torah tell us to take care of the poor, the weak, the stranger, those who are powerless and have no one to watch out for them. The imperative is: you have the capacity, based on our people’s experiences, to have empathy for the downtrodden in your midst. You know that feeling in your bones. Convert those memories into acts of empathy and compassion towards those who need our help.

Given our story, our memories, and the imperatives they suggest, it’s no wonder Jews have ascribed to government a role in helping those who need help the most. Judaism considers a core responsibility of government to be creating a just and compassionate society. And it is our privilege and responsibility to exercise our right to vote and to ensure that opportunity for others.

This understanding of the role of government and the importance of every person’s right to vote, motivated Jews to play an active role in the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s. Indeed, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, I am proud to say, was partially drafted in the conference room of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, my denominational home.

Jewish memories and a sense of mission sensitize us to the current allegations of voter disenfranchisement. Judaism’s values compel us to speak out to ensure all citizens are afforded the opportunity to vote and have their votes counted. If we don’t, we have contributed to taking away the agency of others, depriving them of their

fundamental right to control their lives, and collectively squandering our God given right as human beings to fix this broken world and heal our brothers' and sisters' wounds.

It was with these thoughts on my mind that I joined a letter to Senators Mitch McConnell and Chuck Schumer from the Jew Council for Public Affairs and the Anti-Defamation League and urged them to pass the HEROES act, the Health and Economic Recovery Omnibus Emergency Solutions act. The bill passed in the U.S. House of Representatives on May 15th and now languishes in the Senate.

Here is part of that letter, which I've edited for clarity and length:

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to surge, the HEROES act would provide important voting rights protections and \$3.6 billion in emergency federal funding to help states increase ballot access, which is critical to making sure the November elections are fair and safe, during the COVID-19 public health crisis.

Combined with the \$400 million for state election assistance the CARES Act allocated in March, the \$3.6 billion and voter protection provisions in the HEROES Act would help states avoid many of the issues that arose during the primary season: unfulfilled absentee ballot requests, long lines, too few trained poll workers, unsanitary voting machines, among other problems.

The HEROES Act would also ensure that voters have more and safer voting options, including no-excuse absentee ballots with prepaid postage and expanded early voting in federal elections. The Act would also help states expand voter registration opportunities and defray the costs of public education campaigns.

Unless Congress provides emergency election assistance and additional voter protections, the decision voters will face about whether or not to wait in crowded lines and rooms to vote may literally be a matter of life or death... We in Wisconsin are well aware that voters should not have to choose between their right to vote and their health and safety. Since states do not currently have the resources they need to assure that all voters have access to safe voting, it is incumbent upon Congress to provide those resources.

In the Jewish tradition, one of the most basic principles is that human life comes first. Saving a life, in Hebrew, Pikuach Nefesh, is the principle that the preservation of life overrides virtually any other religious rule. In that spirit, we urge you to support legislation that – to the maximum extent possible – enables Americans to vote without exposing themselves to unnecessary risks to their health or their lives.

Had I had sole editorial control of the letter, I would have added the following, for religious emphasis.

“From a Jewish perspective voting is a holy act and a sacred responsibility. It's what enables us, in the words of the prophet Micah: to do justice, love mercy and to walk humbly with our God.”

Rabbi David B. Cohen
Congregation Sinai | Fox Point, Wisconsin
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