

Living in Two Civilizations

Jews in the
Political Process

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WE ARE HERE in Washington to engage in an age-old American activity: representing a group's interests to the government of the United States. In that context, I would like to refer to the thinking of my teacher, the great scholar/analyst of American Judaism, Mordccai Kaplan, who understood American Jews as having the unique opportunity to live in two civilizations, the American and the Jewish -- as in the name of our organization, the American Jewish Committee.

If we indeed live in two civilizations, and have an opportunity -- in fact a mandate -- to blend the best of both, how can we most appropriately and distinctively participate in American public life?

Although Rabbi Kaplan did not spell out the answer in depth, he did imply the value of energetic Jewish political activity. In *Judaism as a Civilization*, he sketched the context. I paraphrase: As a result of a peculiar conjunction of historic forces, the citizen of a modern state is not only permitted, but encouraged to give allegiance to two civilizations:

one, the secular civilization in which he or she lives, and the other, the religious civilization which he or she has inherited. From the national life arise those duties of civic allegiance which are the substance of patriotism.

What does that mean for us today? What, if any, are our distinctive duties of civic allegiance? How may we best express our Jewish and American public policy interests?

I believe that, in the face of warnings to recede from the public policy arena, American Jews should be more, rather than less, active in pursuit of our interests; and that, in the face of a strong rightward tide in American public opinion and governmental policies, American Jews should defy the undertow and stay rooted to the liberalism which will help ensure American pluralism and social fairness, for our good and for the good of all Americans.

Where to start the analysis? With historical precedent.

IT WAS WELL UNDERSTOOD by the American Founding Fathers, despite the fact that they were almost exclusively of English Protestant origin, that the very diversity of America -- political and religious -- would ensure the functioning of democracy. Not only would special interests be tolerated, but they would be necessary to prevent the dominance of any single majority group.

How would an interest group operate? The American system of government is a representative democracy. Keeping our government representative, however, is an ongoing process requiring constant vigilance. Voting is not enough. In our system of checks and balances, the most important check is the American people.

While American citizens can and do participate in this process as individuals, the size and intricacies of our government -- as well as the pluralistic nature of our society -- encourage public advocacy by groups of people sharing particular concerns. Indeed, effective advocacy requires the weight of numbers coupled with issue salience and finely-honed communication skills. This requires a great deal of organization.

In order to justify its activity, an interest group must demonstrate to both government officials and the public at large that its concerns are valid for the American people as a whole; that even though the group may be more highly sensitized to certain issues, it is acting in the best interests of the entire country. More often than not, the best means to champion a cause in a pluralistic society such as ours is through coalition-building.

These thoughts now seem so self-evident, so obviously full of apple-pie virtue -- why need we be reminded of them? Because they are correct, and they are under challenge.

The notion of the benefit of active special interest (in this case Jewish) involvement in the public policy arena is being attacked from two directions. From outside the Jewish community, we hear from those who disagree with us on the issues or oppose our methods, and others who are frightened by the very fact of diversity. And from inside, we hear from those Jews who would heed such critics, abjure involvement in public issues, and turn inward.

First to the outsiders.

NOT LONG AGO, former senator Charles Mathias of Maryland attacked ethnic interest group involvement in foreign policy. First he issued a disclaimer: "Lest these pages be read as a criticism of our country's ethnic groups," wrote

Mathias, knowing that that would not go over well with lots of voters, "the distinction must be drawn between ethnicity, which enriches American life and culture, and organized ethnic interest groups, which sometimes press causes that derogate the national interest." In Greek terms, that means enjoy baklava but be quiet about Cyprus. In Irish, have your parades but relax about Ulster.

Mathias reserved the longest section of his critique for the Jews. While conceding that he knows of "few members of either house of Congress who do not believe deeply and strongly that support of Israel is both a moral duty and a national interest of the United States," he went on to say in language not very different from Evans and Novak's regular portrayals of the power-hungry Jewish lobby that "as a result of the activities of that lobby, congressional conviction has been measurably reinforced by the knowledge that political sanctions will be applied to any who fail to deliver."

As it should be, in a democracy. The national interest is indeed the sum total of the special interests. And those interests make themselves heard through the political process. Mathias played down that point. Others simply ignore it, and attack Jewish political involvement more directly.

The recent "60 Minutes" treatment of AIPAC, the chief lobbying arm on behalf of American supporters of Israel, revealed intense suspicion of such Jewish political involvement. On occasion, such as in the debate over the AWACs sale to Saudi Arabia some years ago, wavering senators are told that an aggressive Jewish position or victory would be "bad for the Jews" -- i.e., could result in an anti-Semitic backlash. We are put on the defensive, our very right to work on behalf of what we believe to be in the national

interest questioned by those who think differently on the issue.

This suggests some general principles:

(1) We must not let ourselves be bullied or cowed. We have a right to be heard. Neither we nor others should question our patriotism. Like other Americans, we have multiple loyalties -- to country, to people, to religion, to community, to school and so forth.

(2) We must remember that the national interest is the composite of the varied interests of the American people, and *our* contribution to that collage is as worthy as others.

(3) We must not fear winning on the ground that others will dislike us for it -- if the issue we choose to press is in fact important and consistent with our conception of American interests.

(4) We must avoid branding as anti-Semites any and all who disagree with us on a particular issue. Indeed, there *are* real anti-Semites, but not all who differ with us fit that category.

(5) We must seek to work wherever possible with others who share our view; to build coalitions of support so we are not alone on an issue; to build and sustain our community relations, the art (if not science) of which has been at the heart of the American Jewish Committee.

(6) We must, as a corollary of working with others -- and as a concomitant to our real interest in the common weal -- work, within the constraints of our resources, on behalf of a variety of issues which we see as in the public good, not just those that are obviously "Jewish" issues.

THIS BRINGS US to the second set of voices calling for Jewish withdrawal from the broad public policy arena -- voices that can be heard within many Jewish organizations. Some would simply heed the warnings of our critics and lie low -- a scandalous suggestion, I think, in the wake of the Holocaust. Others would intensify efforts on behalf of Israel, claiming that to be our number one priority, and urging us not to "waste resources" on more universal international or domestic policy issues. Equally scandalous -- and doomed to failure as well.

We say we are committed to equitable distribution of society's goods, social justice, racial harmony, nondiscrimination, equal opportunity, universal suffrage. It sounds good. But how much of our resources do we put into ensuring such a society? Not enough. Why not? Because it's difficult to fight so many battles at once. Because we don't like the ingratitude of the poor and the black who stand to benefit the most from an extension of equitable programs. Because we feel isolated. Because we are tired. Because we are confused.

Despite cautions from some of my trusted colleagues, I, for one, want to enter into the fray of a changing American political process through more direct political activism, including traditional campaigns and even PACs. -Such Jewish PACs needn't be -- in fact shouldn't be -- just Israel-oriented, single-issue groups, but should address a broad array of our issues.

WHAT ARE OUR ISSUES? So far, I have discussed mostly process, the need for bold action rather than retreat. But there must be some specific substance for our lobbying and our resolutions and our articles, a program affirming a liberal approach to public policy.

Why liberal? Not because I think Judaism is

equivalent to liberalism, as many American Jews seemed to believe a decade or two ago. It isn't. Not because Jewish tradition dictates liberalism rather than conservatism. It doesn't. Not because we should adhere to a universalist policy, even if it be contrary to our own self-interest. We shouldn't. Not because, in the words of Ruth Wisse in *The New Republic*, the rise of Jewish liberalism in times of siege is an attempt to prove Jewish innocence. It isn't.

But rather because, while consistent with the teachings of our tradition, a liberal approach to public policy today is *also* consistent with our self-interest -- our interest in promoting a stable society made up of satisfied individuals and groups that is tolerant of diversity and provides the kind of fertile ground in which groups like ours may best flourish.

AS FOR TRADITION, it is clear that ours contains both conservative and liberal elements.

In its concern for continuity, order and law in society, its stress on the role of authority, its emphasis on family, its insistence on moral standards in personal behavior, the tradition contains strikingly conservative elements which have mostly to do with personal behavior and personal morality.

But on issues of public morality, the Jewish political tradition contains profoundly liberal strains. As I understand the classical liberal idea -- and I do *not* connect that idea to any one political party -- liberalism tends, in pursuit of society's goals, to tolerate a broad range of values, religious beliefs and individual differences. It recognizes a social obligation to defend a pluralistic society in which different groups can coexist without necessarily conforming to the standards of those in power or those who believe that they alone possess the

truth. It is rooted in the belief that both the individual and society as a whole are capable of improvement. Liberalism further posits the notion that equal rights and equal opportunities in the context of a fair society can provide the political and economic framework for progress in the human condition -- while rejecting the idea that there are inherent differences between people and peoples based on wealth, class, race or creed. Liberalism sees government as having a responsibility to intervene in the workings of the society to guarantee equal opportunity and a basic standard of living to which all its citizens have a right.

This thrust is found in -- is indeed fundamental to -- the Jewish concern for human equality, dignity, freedom of choice, and the capability to change which inheres in every individual. Traditionally, Judaism placed responsibilities on the individual, the legal system and the political structure, illustrated particularly in the overarching concern of the Jewish tradition for the poor, the weak, the orphan -- all those who were deprived of privileges accorded to the powerful and wealthy. This concern was embodied in the traditions of tithing, sabbatical and jubilee, and in the concept of *tzedakah*, which calls on the individual to contribute to a welfare system not just as a form of charity, but as an obligation, *mitzvah*.

OUR TRADITION, then, suggests the kind of broad activist political and social program we should advocate.

It starts with securing the needs of our people. In recent decades, surely since the Holocaust and the establishment of an independent Israel, that has meant doing whatever we can -- politically, financially, morally -- to help ensure Israel's vitality and security as a democratic state. We have to redouble our efforts to make Israel's

case known and understood in America. The Zionist enterprise -- and Israel's continuous striving to fulfill its ideal -- make a compelling case. Whatever our doubts as to the wisdom of this or that Israeli policy -- and if we have doubts, as I do, we can express them, too -- we need to work harder to build the basic case for continued American support for Israel.

But even as we do that, we can also work on behalf of our broad public policy commitments, foreign and domestic. In times of confusion, it may be understandable and appealing to hear a politician's call to get government off our backs so good old-fashioned American ingenuity and productivity can prevail and bring us back to the good old days. And it is undoubtedly true that government has spent funds ineffectively and unwisely.

But curtailing public responsibility for social and economic equity, protection of the environment, fostering of education, and so forth, will not alone solve the problem. It may hurt, as those who need the most will suffer the most. In fact, the very notion of curtailing public responsibility may serve to endorse a public selfishness.

I think we need, for our own interest, to reendorse the idea of the caring (not meddling) state. As Michael Walzer put it in a brilliant *New Republic* essay, the caring state "expresses a certain civic spirit, a sense of mutuality, a commitment to justice. Without that sense, no society can survive for long as a decent place to live -- not for the needy, and not for anyone else."

Walzer further explains the implication of calls for curtailing government activism:

Public life is less attractive these days, and selfishness more compelling. As the welfare state

contracts, so does the active citizenry. Under contemporary conditions, these two go together; the costs of our common life are connected. Only an upsurge in political participation can revitalize the welfare state. Only a revitalized welfare state can sustain a strong democracy. People willing to spend their time are also willing to spend their money; people willing to spend their money are also willing to spend their time. And the higher the levels of commitment in both these areas, the less the welfare state will look like some distant, impersonal, and intrusive force.

Taking the climate for less overbearing government into consideration, we can adjust our program goals to encourage job creation, whether through free enterprise zones, home industry, or certain kinds of labor deregulation. We can work for affordable housing. We can recognize the difficulties of forced racial school integration, and focus more on providing better quality education, partly through new financial approaches including public/private mixes. We can redouble our efforts to fight youth bigotry, which may exacerbate crime, especially in our urban centers. We can advocate affordable child care, so as to strengthen families. We can take a cue from Peter Berger and Richard John Neuhaus, with whom we have worked closely, who would "empower people" through the strengthening of nongovernmental intermediate institutions -- such as neighborhood organizations, ethnic groups, and families.

AND WE CAN ALSO TAKE a cue from our adversaries on the far-Right, by putting morality back into public policy -- thereby denying them a monopoly over ethical stances, or over positions taken from moral or religious perspectives. We can better apply our Jewish values to public policy issues. Jewish tradition and Jewish law stand for most of us today as voluntary guides for individual Jews and for the Jewish communi-

ty. While our law, our tradition, is not binding on the general society -- and we resent when others, such as the religious Right, try to impose their morality on us -- it may provide a useful model to help determine what constitutes a decent, just and moral society. It can help us Jews, and to the extent that it is accepted by others, may help all Americans.

In an article calling for political renewal based, in part, on a concern over the current bankruptcy in public morality, Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, daughter of Robert Kennedy, cites some Washington reportage:

"The hogs are really feeding. The greed level, the level of opportunism just got out of control." The speaker is the director of the Office of Management and Budget, describing the final negotiations among the leaders of our nation, liberals and conservatives alike, that led to the tax bill.

"I hate to say this, but I don't like to work with poor people. They are the kind of people who don't interest me. I can't help it; I'm not a nice guy; I don't like poor people." The speaker, more candid than most but not unrepresentative of his colleagues, is a leading Washington psychiatrist quoted recently in The Washington Post.

"Why worry about the details?" The speaker is a law professor, who boasts that he is pleased to be paid cash for his next consultation because that means he won't have to report it to the IRS as required by law. The only relevant factors in the professor's calculation are the odds of his being caught.

All of this is another way of saying that maybe the moral majority, with its call to return to old-fashioned values, is on to something. It's on to it narrowly and offensively. But what should we do? Give up? Stay smug in an *old* liberalism,

or smug in a neoconservatism? I suggest that here is a particular opportunity for an explicitly Jewish approach to public policy.

The American Jewish Committee has pioneered such an approach, living creatively in two civilizations since its founding in 1906. Sometimes we falter, but now we are on course to act with determination, self-interest, and caring.

So let's do it. The adage goes that there are three groups of people in the world -- those who make things happen, those who watch things happen, and those who wonder what happened. The Jewish people, through history, have been mostly relegated to the latter two categories by virtue of their powerlessness. We have the strength now to enter the first category -- which, I think, has been the original and continuous aim of the AJC. Together, we can make it happen.

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**The American Jewish
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