

## Voting in the WZO Covenant of Israel: *Naaseh v'Nishma*

Rabbi Matthew Soffer

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Parashat Mishpatim begins, *v'eila hamishpatim tasim lifneihem*, “these are the rules you shall – *tasim* – set before them.” There are many ways that our text introduces rules and laws. Usually it’s a *vay’daber Adonai El Moshe*, God spoke to Moses saying; or *Vayomer Moshe el b’nai Yisrael*, Moses spoke to the Israelites... here we get a simple, “set before them the rules”—as if that’s ever worked. Well, in chapter 24:3 it appears as if it might:

“*Vay’saper la’am et kol divrei Adonai v’et kol mishpatim—*

[Moses] repeats to the people all of God’s commandments and all the rules.” (Exod. 24:3)

After this, the people reply with a simple word: “*Naaseh*”- *we’ll do it.*”

*Just tell us what to do, and we’ll do it.* In a sense, they are still in the slave mentality, following orders, plain and simple. However, this barely last a few verses, and moments later Moses continues the dialogue with the People, implying their response was inadequate: “Moses took the record of the Covenant and read it aloud to the people.” After this the relationship changes and becomes 2-way, covenantal. And how do the Israelites respond this time? They still utter the word “*naaseh*,” but they add one more word—*v’nishma*—and we will *listen*. We will understand.

The Israelites understand something here; so does Moses; so does God. They realize that *if we’re going to get this right we have to be engaged*. This notion of a dynamic bond, an engaged relationship, is part and parcel of what some call in Exodus God’s “election” of Israel. But it’s not really an election. Israel has a voice, too. And they use it.

Speaking of elections.... Has anyone noticed that here in the United States election season is well-underway? Good, let’s talk about another election: that of *Am Yisrael*, the People of Israel. Specifically, I’d like to speak about the World Zionist Congress, which runs the World Zionist Organization or the WZO.

First, a bit of context for the many of us who don’t know what the WZO is. The WZO was founded by Theodore Hertzl and others in 1897, a period of tremendous powerlessness and vulnerability. Of course, most of our history as a people takes place in periods of tremendous powerlessness and vulnerability. For Hertzl, it was this deep recognition that the Jewish people needed a homeland, which eventually gave birth to the State of Israel. The World Zionist Congress, however, did not sunset with the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948.

It *remained* the “global arm” of the Jewish people but *embedded* in Israel, a part of Israeli democracy, essentially giving some “votes” to the Jews worldwide. Now it functions as the only legitimate lever for Jews worldwide to participate in the democratic process that influences the State of Israel.

What that means on a practical level: The World Zionist Organization wields significant influence in Israeli society. The WZO directs hundreds of millions of dollars and appoints leaders to critical positions of governance. The WZO can invest in Civil and Human Rights, in Pluralism and Diversity, and its construction activities beyond the Green Line.

You can learn about details on the webpage we made on our [JudeaReform.org](http://JudeaReform.org) site, but in a nutshell here is what I believe we, as congregants, ought to know:

1. The election of the World Zionist Congress takes place every 5 years. Voting is open now through March 11th. The United States has 145 of the 500 delegates. Our Reform Movement, thanks to a strong turnout in the last 2015 election, landed 56 of those delegates— just under 40% of the American delegation. Those 56 Delegates are representing ARZA, the Association of Reform Zionists in America, which is a part of our Movement. I am, personally, one of the many delegates on the slate of ARZA.
2. ARZA—because of our congregants’ votes, resulting in 56 delegates—has been able to direct \$20 million over 5 years toward the growth of the Reform Movement in Israel, including the Israel Religious Action Center, which is a powerhouse for Civil and Human Rights.
3. ARZA also can fill leadership positions in some of Israel’s national institutions, including the Jewish National Fund, which controls public spending over the Green Line, including land purchases.
4. Anyone Jew who is over the age 18 in our congregation can vote. We have made it easy on our site. The more votes we get, the more delegates we get, the more power we have within this one and only instrument of ours to democratically effect the State of Israel.

If I may, I’d like to speak for a moment regarding what I have learned about this community. I understand that when it comes to the State of Israel, our community has so many different views. I have heard such a range of passionate voices over the last 7 months here.

- I’ve heard from congregants with deep love and attachment to Israel.
- Almost everyone I’ve listened to in this community dreams of an Israel that is a Jewish and Democratic State, with equal rights to all, and living side by side, in peace, with its neighbors.
- I have heard so many in our community who are pained, even tormented over the disregard for the human rights of Palestinians, the great majority of whom are peace-loving and yearning to breathe free.
- I’ve heard many in our community who are pained and tormented by the disregard for Israel’s right to defend itself.

What is most alarming of all is the prevalent and fallacious belief that one cannot adhere to all of these truths at once; or, the gut-sense that if one does buy into these truths, you *have to* put them “in order” before you speak a single word aloud. And then, whatever is at the top of the order, *that* will determine whether the person sitting next to you thinks you belong here. As if:

- ...if you speak about the corruption and pernicious policies of Israel’s corrupt Prime Minister, or if you criticize Israel’s military in cases of unnecessary deadly force, then you are immediately condoning or minimizing the terrorism of Al Aqsa and Hamas.
- ...if you seek to understand the tactic of Boycott-Divestment-Sanctions—which, by the way, I am emphatically opposed to—but if you want even ask about it, then you *must be* not just anti-Israel but a self-hating Jew and an antisemite, with a one-way ticket to the-hell-we-don’t-even-believe-in.
- Alternately, and personally (I’ll use myself): if you visit Israel during the Gaza War in 2014—as I did, visiting our Congregations there to send our love—and meet only with people in Israel, and

spend time in bomb shelters running from Hamas-launched missiles—and you don't go to the other side of the border to see the pools of Palestinian blood, and hear the wailing, then you must be, simply, part of Establishment, cowardly or not-yet-“woke.”

This kind of group mentality is toxic to Covenantal relationships. It reflects “*NAASEH*” without “*V’NISHMA*” – doing without listening, activism without smarts. Covenant demands both. We deserve both.

I am not here to propose a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, nor am I prepared tonight, just 7 months in, to propose a resolution to our internal vitriol on all things Israel. I am here because whatever levers are available to us to bless humanity, by virtue of being Reform Jewish Congregation, we ought to know about them, and we ought to strongly consider pulling them.

This election of the World Zionist Congress is one of those levers. This election is an Instrument owned by Am Yisrael, the People of Israel, to influence the State of Israel. We are a part of a Movement that is embedded into Israeli society, on the ground, fighting for the soul and fate of Israel—just like us, fighting enemies not only foreign but domestic.

Our Movement in Israel is working tirelessly to bend the arc of Israeli history toward justice. Now is the moment to be asking our Congregations in Israel: *NAASEH—what can we do to help? V’NISHMA—and if we listen*, we hear their answer loud and clear: VOTE, VOTE, VOTE.

*Invest* in Reform Judaism in Israel.

*Invest* in our Civil and Human Rights efforts.

*Invest* in our stake in this tradition as it lives and grows in Israel, a State in dire need for the Jewish values that we cherish—Jewish values that are written into Israel’s Declaration of Independence, which in 1948 was read aloud by the head of the then World Zionist Organization, David Ben Gurion—to establish a Jewish Homeland that

“ensures complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions.”

These words—much like those of our own Declaration of Independence, only inclusive of women—reflect a hope so deep in our hearts and so far from our world.

If our Movement, through this election, doesn’t win enough votes to direct those millions of dollars toward a more pluralistic, peace-driven, love-driven State of Israel, those dollars aren’t going away; they will be steered elsewhere. We are “in this” whether we participate or not.

This week we hear the call, the pairing of *Naaseh v’Nishma*, action and understanding.

We do this in community, in our congregations— we aim to be both prayerful and understanding, as well as active and healing.

And we do this as *Am Yisrael*: we are still the people of Israel, who still stand at Sinai. Standing at Sinai this week we hear, *Eleh mishpatim*, these are the rules.

When it comes to *these rules*, each of us has a voice—if we choose to use it—and all of us, as Israel, share a fate with all humanity.

So long as *Am Yisrael Chai*, the Jewish People lives, may our Covenant endure as a blessing for love, for wholeness, for peace. Amen.