

**Jewish Responses in an Age of Populism**  
**Rabbi Alexander Kaye, Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun**  
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We live in interesting times. Our attention is captured by the impending presidential election, elections in Egypt and political unrest the world over. Despite the huge differences in political culture in different parts of the world, there seems to be one element that characterizes events more or less everywhere. That is, the role of what we might call populism in current politics. I mean by that the mass involvement of ordinary people in rallies, demonstrations, revolutions; and the drive for a certain kind of uncompromising utopianism. We have seen this in North Africa, from the largely peaceful demonstrations in Tunisia to the bloody revolt in Libya. We have seen this in Israel with the huge demonstrations over economic policy in Tel Aviv and many other cities. And we see it in the United States, on both the left and the right, where the Occupy Wall Street protests and Tea Party protests have each involved masses of people in country-wide demonstrations. It appears that we are living in an age where the outcomes of elections and the political direction of entire countries is being determined less by the deliberations of political leaders in the halls of power and more by the rank and file on the streets and on the internet.

Given this global mood of political populism, it is worth considering what might a Jewish response be to all of this: what does the Jewish tradition have to say about this way of doing politics?

We will be helped by a few words of historical context. It is important to realize that we have seen this kind of global mood before. Many in this room will remember the year 1968 - some, I imagine, with fondness and nostalgia, others with distaste. This was a year in which, like today, there were popular uprisings all over the world, calling for greater social justice, and end to war and so on. But even in 1968, this was a very old story.

Throughout the inter-war period, there was a global battle between communism and fascism that was fought not in governmental board-rooms but in street riots, civil wars, and mass demonstrations all over the world. Going back even earlier, in 1848, revolutions broke out all over Europe. Huge numbers of people, frustrated at their exclusion from the political process, disappointed in their governments, and crushed by low pay and difficult working conditions, gathered together to push for reform in over 50 countries. Some did it through peaceful demonstration and some through violent uprising. Some of these protests and revolutions were successful, but most of the gains made during that year were reversed during the following decade when other forces, this time comprised of people loyal to traditional authority and the status quo, undertook a reactionary clamp down.

I could go back even further, but that is enough history for us to realize that the question of the desirability of this kind of political mood is a question of enduring rather than fleeting interest. The Jewish tradition, as we would expect, has a great deal to say about it.

The Jewish tradition is firmly in the camp of democratic politics and against totalitarianism and coercive rule. It is anachronistic to try to find references to democracy in the modern sense in our ancient canonical texts. Nonetheless, it is reasonable to claim - as did Rabbi Shimon Federbush, the great twentieth-century religious Zionist thinker - that there is a “רוח דמקרטי” a democratic spirit, that runs through our sacred texts. By emphasizing that all human beings are descended from the same Adam and Eve, the Torah teaches that all human beings, irrespective of religion, gender, color, or anything else, are fundamentally and entirely equal under God.

A perhaps more radical teaching of the Torah is that even God chooses not to rule over us using coercion. The most basic political relationship in the Torah is that of ברית, covenant, where each party, be that party Divine or human, comes freely into the relationship. In the words of Federsbush, the idea of a covenant is that every religious or political order entered into by the people of Israel was not out of coercive force but rather: “ על ידי בחירה חופשית על יסוד חוזה שנכרת עם העם על יסוד ” – through freewill on the basis of a contract that was undertaken with the people on the basis of a democratic agreement.

The greatest pre-modern champion of this democratic spirit was Don Isaac Abravanel, the leader of Spanish Jewry at the end of the 15th century. He writes explicitly of how government by the many is superior to government by the one (i.e. monarchy, the most prevalent constitutional arrangement of his day), and this for a number of reasons. For one thing, it is far less likely that leaders will become despotic, given that their actions will be open to review by the leaders that will replace them and they will be subject to punishment for their misdeeds. And besides, Abravanel writes, it is far more likely that a plurality of political leaders, with all the debates and discussions between them, will arrive at the best way to govern than a single king ruling alone.

We might also note that Jewish culture has always been a culture of protest: Protest against violent paganism, protest against the assault on marginal populations, and protest against immoral and self-serving leaders. Our prophets railed against the corrupt values of the people as a whole, and also against the corrupt values of the most powerful and the most wealthy, kings and priests alike. Jeremiah, for example, spent many years as a political prisoner. He delivered his most moving prophecies from prison, where he had been deposited because the ruling class regarded him as a threat to their own power. In this, respect he was a precursor to Natan Shcharansky and other refuseniks who proclaimed their faith in the hell of the Gulag, to Martin Luther King, whose own prophetic message of liberation rang out from the Birmingham jail cell, to Nelson Mandela in Robben Island and to all those dissidents and political prisoners who, as we speak, sit in prison cells because of resistance against coercive governments in Syria, Iran, China, Egypt and so on and so on.

Given all of this, it is clear that the Jewish tradition, in general, is firmly in favor of a politics in which the interests of the people- all the people - are well represented, in which leaders are accountable to their people, and in which the masses and not just the political class should be able to participate in the process of governance. And from this perspective we should, as Jews, be at the very least cautiously happy when suffrage expands, people have a greater stake in their own governance, and civilizations move further towards a democratic culture.

But unfortunately, this is not the whole story. There are several reasons that we might be concerned when politics becomes more populist and volatile. Mass political movements often take on a utopian flavor; an unwillingness to compromise before even the most extreme and ideal of their goals has been fulfilled. Although idealism and perseverance are virtues, utopianism is not. A total unwillingness to compromise can descend into rhetorical and, in the worst cases, physical violence. It is not a coincidence that violence known as the ‘Terror’ followed both the French Revolution and the Bolshevik revolution. I am afraid that, although it has not yet and hopefully never will turn into physical violence, this utopian lack of compromise significantly colors American politics today. The irresponsible behavior of many in Congress and the scandalous and overblown rhetoric in much of the media detracts from the greatness of the American constitution and threatens its stability.

Furthermore, populist politics very often tends to radicalism. Mass movements born from frustration at economic difficulties and political disenfranchisement, whether it be in the 1840s, the 1930s or 2011 can be manipulated very easily by fear-mongering racists and bigots. So we are, unfortunately, not surprised that racism and other bigotry surfaces at both Tea Party Rallies and Occupy Wall Street protests - professed by a small minority no doubt, but it is there. And, more worryingly, anti-Israel sentiment has become a fixture among many in the popular uprisings in Egypt and the Middle East.

The Jewish tradition has responses also to these less attractive aspects of the populist political mood. It helps us defend ourselves against the temptation of radicalism that is too often associated with mass political movements. However important our political goal, the Torah insists that we never forget the Divine image of each person. This is an important defense against the bigotry of essentialism. There is no one political party that can be blamed with all that is wrong in America; no one country that bears all the guilt for conflict; no one religious group that is responsible for the world's woes.

Furthermore, however righteous our cause, whatever is at stake, our tradition exhorts us never to allow our political culture to descend into ad hominem attacks and divisiveness. The schools of Hillel and Shamai, who disagreed about more or less everything, and were fighting over the word of God - the kind of debate that, as we know, often leads to the most terrible conflicts - remained not only civil with each other but continued to marry into each other's families. They remained aware of an important Jewish lesson that a perfect world in which everyone has the same, perfect opinion, whatever that opinion may be, will only be encountered in messianic age. And we are exhorted: שלא יעלו ישראל בחומה - we are not to fight for this perfect end by force. It will come when it will come. In the meantime, we live in a world where not utopianism but compromise is the way forward.

We read today of Jacob's dream in which he envisioned a ladder - וְהָיָה יִסְדָּל מִמָּצַח אֶרְצָה וְרֹאשׁוֹ מִגִּיעַ הַשָּׁמַיִם - Like the ladder, we too have our heads in the heavens but our feet planted on the earth. We are orientated towards the loftiest political ideals but we remain rooted to the real world of compromise, humanity and civility in the political sphere.

So as we regard the current global political mood, in America, in Israel and in the Middle East a whole, we continue to be idealistic but not utopian; hopeful but not naive. We commit and re-commit ourselves to universal suffrage, to the end of tyranny and coercion. But we also remain on guard against a slide into bigotry, radicalism and violence of word or deed. If we, like the image of Jacob's ladder, retain both our hopes and our humanity then, like Jacob, we will be able to raise our eyes and see that וְהָיָה דָּהָר נֹצֵר בְּעֵלְיוֹ - God himself is standing above us.