

CONGREGATIONAL POLITICAL ACTION

By Rabbi Moshe ben Asher, Ph.D. & Magidah Khulda bat Sarah

Unlike many of our colleagues, we don't believe in politicizing the pulpit. That is, we don't believe in exhorting a congregation to take a particular political position or action on the basis of our personal ideological convictions or interest commitments.

We have no doubt, based on our many years' experience as professional grassroots community organizers, that the *collective* political wisdom of the congregation, *if* it's employed collectively, far outstrips any insights and understandings we might have on a political issue. So our mindset is much more Jeffersonian than Hamiltonian. Our interest is the empowerment of the congregation, as a Torah-centered community, to decide and act thoughtfully for the commonweal of its members.

Consider a concrete illustration of when and how a congregation might employ its collective political wisdom.

Some time ago there was a proposition on the ballot in a local election in the city in which the congregation we were serving was located, the outcome of which could significantly affect quality of life for residents. Although we had our own thoughts and feelings about the measure, we decided not to vote on it because we were moving out of the area and wouldn't have to live with the consequences. But we assumed that before this election, many of our congregation's members also had thoughts and feelings about the measure in question, which had to do with enabling or restraining big-box commercial development.

What was striking to us at the time was that, although individual members must have had concerns about the effects of the measure on the local quality of life, there seemed to be a kind of covert consensus that either it was inappropriate or irrelevant as an item for congregational discussion, decision, and action. So the congregation as a body never considered the issue.

But does this example represent an instance in which the congregation should have at least discussed and decided their position on the issue, if not taken action?

We distinguish between (1) the rabbi politicizing the pulpit to promote pet issues and ideologies, and (2) the congregation exploring an issue in the larger community that can affect the lives of its members for good or ill—an issue treated specifically by our tradition.

It's true from our point of view that the pulpit should never be treated as the rabbi's personal political hobbyhorse. But it's equally true that the congregation should never be indifferent or inert when it comes to issues and events that affect the communities in which members live—particularly when the tradition offers us guidance on the matter at hand.

Undoubtedly we all understand the necessity of acting together as a congregational community if overt anti-Semitism threatens us. But some would say that's different, because we should only act together as a congregational community in relation to *Jewish* issues. We suggest, however, that any issue that affects the welfare of Jews *is* a Jewish issue, notwithstanding that it affects other members of the larger community as well. So by our lights, city planning and development—like public education, adequate police and fire protection, drug dealing and gang activity, etc.—are potentially Jewish issues.

Now suppose for the sake of discussion that many members of the congregation had voiced their concerns about the effects of this ballot measure. Suppose there was a consensus that the outcome of the election, one way or the other, could potentially affect the well being of many Jews. Suppose, too, that it was agreed, the congregation should examine the teachings of the tradition to determine what, if any, action to take as a community.

What might we have learned?

In *parasha* (weekly Torah reading) Masei, we encounter the Torah's vision for urban development. When supplemented by *midrash*, commentary, and rabbinic enactments, we find ourselves the beneficiaries of an insightful package of policies and practices that are aimed to promote social health and harmony, not simply to create an esthetically pleasing urban landscape.

In parasha Bamidbar (35:2-4) we read: "Command the children of Israel that they give the Levites from the inheritance of the cities they possess in which to dwell, and an area around the cities you shall give to the Levites. And the cities they shall be for them to dwell in, and the surrounding belts shall be for their cattle and their goods, and for all (the things) of their lives. And the surrounding belts of the cities that you shall give to the Levites shall be from the wall of the city and outward a thousand cubits all around."

And the text goes on to say that from without (מחוץ) the city on every side, the Levites shall be given 2,000 cubits for surrounding belts (מגרש). (35:5) A cubit, *amah* (אמה) in Hebrew, the unit of measurement used in the Torah, is equal to about 18 to 20 inches. So when the text talks about 1,000 cubits, we should have in mind a distance of about a quarter to a third of a mile.

It should be noted that three of our classic commentators have very different interpretations of these verses—to wit:

FIELDS & VINEYARDS OF A LEVITE CITY*	
According to Rashi	
Size of City	1,000,000
Open Land	8,000,000
<u>Fields/Vineyards</u>	<u>16,000,000</u>
TOTAL AREA	25,000,000
According to Ramban	
Size of City	1,000,000
Open Land	2,785,898
<u>Fields/Vineyards</u>	<u>214,602</u>
TOTAL AREA	4,000,000
Rambam	
Size of City	1,000,000
Open Land	8,000,000
<u>Fields/Vineyards</u>	<u>40,000,000</u>
TOTAL AREA	49,000,000
* From <i>The Chumash</i> (Mesorah Publications, 1997), p. 927.	

Incidentally, at first there were only 48 such cities with green belts around them, but in time there were scores of them.

The Sages and rabbis bolstered the scriptural mandate for cities surrounded by green belts. According to the Sages: “They [the Levites] may not change a field [outside of a city] into an open space, and an open space into a field, neither an open space into a city or a city into an open space.” (Mishnah, Arachin 9:8)

A modern commentator (Simon M. Jackson, Esq., legal advisor to Torah MiTzion), explains: “The clearing outside a city must be maintained as such in order to preserve the aesthetic quality of the city. . . ; the fields too must be maintained to en-

sure that the national food supply is not threatened; while to convert a city into a clearing would also be forbidden, because it would destroy some of the inhabited area of the city.”

Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888) clarifies some of the primary motivations and effects of these *mitzvot* (commandments) and rabbinic ordinances.

- Cities would be limited in growth—not allowed to overtake and destroy the surrounding countryside.
- A relationship would be permanently sustained between the urban population and agricultural activity.
- The likelihood of absentee proprietors of fields and vineyards would be lessened.
- Urban population growth would be accommodated not by unlimited expansion of existing cities, but the founding of new ones.
- Co-mingling and balancing of urban and rural culture would be encouraged, creating a society that experienced and valued both.

What we’re given here is not a political opinion, but the teachings of our tradition. Here Torah and *halakhah* are not meant for intellectual stimulation or illumination, but *l’maaseh*, for *doing*—for practical application of the teaching.

So what are we to imagine the Torah contemplates us doing about the vision for urban development that we’ve been given here?

Is all this simply something to be reprinted in the Jewish voters election guide, for our individual edification? Or should we be examining and responding to it—and similar teachings that clearly are meant to guide our actions when our communal welfare is at stake—as a congregation?

The question really isn’t, should we act together as a congregational community under such circumstances, but why aren’t we doing so much more often?

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