

Democracy and Religion

Creatures of Rights of Creatures of Duties

Moshe Taragin

Korach was a cynical demagogue who launched a mutiny against Moshe. This was nothing holy about his intentions. The actual claims he lodged however, did carry legitimacy. He asserted equal rights for every individual member of society, foreshadowing the great arguments of modern democracy.

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, ... Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness". These words, written in the Declaration of Independence in 1776, and carved into history, launched the great project of modern democracy. For the first time, governments preserved basic human rights, including the freedom of worship. No longer banned, Judaism flourished. Yet the culture which democracy has construed is often dissonant with deeply held religious values. Democracy and religion have a peculiar relationship: democracy gives, and it takes.

Religious identity is built upon the values of commandment, commitment, mission, and mutual responsibility. At Sinai, we were charged with a comprehensive system of mitzvot commands, which limit freedom of choice, but infuse our lives with higher meaning. Additionally, we model a *life of meaning* and commandment to the broader world. As a "kingdom of priests", our mission is to showcase a godly life of devotion for all humanity. In addition, we bear mutual responsibility to one another. The doctrine of *areivut* asserts that that every Jew is morally and legally responsible for each other. Unless I assist others in their mitzvot, I haven't completely satisfied my own commandment.

Mission, commandment, commitment, and mutual responsibility form a cornerstone of duty which is the foundation of religious life. In his 18th century moral guide known as "Mesilat yesharim", Rav Moshe Chaim Luzzato, framed a haunting demand which defines Jewish identity. Every Jew must ask themselves "What are my duties in this world?". Hashem

created us a *creatures of duty*, and our call to duty provides us meaning, nobility, and loftiness.

Sadly, in many modern democracies, we often view ourselves as *creatures of rights* rather than *creatures of duty*. How did we get here, and what are the dangers for religion?

Democracy and Human Rights

Without law and without government, weaker members of society would be exploited by stronger members. Additionally, society at large would be vulnerable to foreign aggression. To establish strong government to preserve order and provide safety, individuals must voluntarily waive some of their freedoms. The willful relinquishing of personal freedom on behalf of common welfare is known as a social contract. We enter a mutual agreement with society, in which we deliver our rights in exchange for effective government.

Though personal freedoms must be surrendered for this government, there are certain *basic* freedoms so central to human welfare, that they can never be relinquished. These sacred freedoms are inalienable – they can't be *alienated from* a person, but must remain forever theirs. A person's life, liberty and pursuit of personal happiness are so vital to human experience, that they cannot be suspended under any condition or in the context of any social contract.

In short, democracy balances between which freedoms can be relinquished to governments, and which can never be surrendered. At its heart, democracy was never about preserving rights. Human rights were part of an internal calculus calibrating the boundaries of the social contract and which rights can and cannot be suspended. Democracy was never primarily about rights, but about something larger than the individual- the common good.

Demanding Our Rights

Something happened. Somehow modern democracies morphed into cultures obsessed with the pursuit of human rights. In the past, democracies stirred us to devotion to some larger common agenda.

Sadly, today, democracies are often centered upon petty rivaling demands for rights and resources.

Several factors contributed to this decline. Ideally, democracies work best when its citizens share a unifying narrative. When people are unified by a larger common project, they more naturally sense mutual responsibility to that joint endeavor. Immediately after the American Revolution, the young country viewed itself as a global experiment in democracy, or as the “city on the hill”. Likewise, in the 20th century the United States viewed itself as the defender of human liberty against the horrors of Naziism and Communism. Unified by a common narrative, lives were defined by mission and collective responsibility.

Modern society has lost much of that common narrative. Rapid urbanization relocated people from socially connected villages into cold and impersonal cities, making common narratives even more elusive. Fortunately, life in Israel does provide a common unifying narrative, and, by and large, citizens are patriotic about fulfilling their duties and obligations for the common good. At least in this respect, Israeli democracy is healthier than its Western counterparts, many of which have been emptied of a common story.

Additionally, as society expanded, governments became bloated providers of a wide network of services and benefits. Once government becomes a supplier of benefits, people become consumers rather than partners. Politics has begun to resemble the market: no duties, only opportunities for profit.

Religious Duty or Personal Rights

This cultural shift poses many dangers to modern democracy, but also to religious identity. We have become excessively fixated upon our rights and less upon our duties. We are preoccupied with what we should be receiving, and less attentive to what we should be contributing. We have become consumers and not producers. Religion and moral behavior challenge us to act selflessly toward Hashem and altruistically toward others. A life pivoted on legal rights is self-centered and self-seeking. Absent a mindset of duty and selflessness, religion becomes hollow. Religion may still be vigilantly practiced, but religious identity becomes faint. Stout religious identity should be crafted upon Rav

Moshe Luzzato's mandate of human duties and less upon modern democracy's obsession with rights. The Mesillat Yesharim and not the Declaration of Independence.

A Culture of Victimhood

A second danger in our "culture of rights" is the appeal of collective and personal victimhood. In the modern competition for rights and benefits the best way to triumph is to insist that others recognize your past disadvantage. Any society or group, which, in the past has been most victimized, possess superior virtue and deserves a larger piece of the pie. The politicalization of victimhood demands societal recognition of grievance and compensation for collective past suffering. Victimhood becomes a power play. The weaponizing of victimhood is ultimately responsible for the corrosive phenomenon of identity politics and the muddying swirl of intersectionality.

Religion is also threatened by the culture of victimhood. Victimhood breeds hatred and resentment, rather than generosity and compassion. Victimhood paints the world in post Marxist darkness, as a world sharply divided between oppressors and victims. It encourages antagonism and confrontationalism rather than harmony and collaboration. It can divide internal communities just as it divides the body politic. It becomes a mindset which invades every communal setting and even our relationships. Nothing is more destructive to a marriage than victimhood.

Additionally, victimhood enfeebles us rather than empowering us. At some point in their lives, everyone is victimized, either through human misconduct or by forces beyond our control. It is seductively easy to collapse into a state of lack of accountability and thereby release ourselves from responsibility. It is cathartic to convince ourselves that we aren't culpable because, in the past, we have been the victim.

Any releasing of responsibility is contagious, and will infect our general religious discipline. Once we begin to acquit ourselves of responsibility our religious discipline unravels. We fall down a slippery slope of self-

exoneration. There is too much victimhood in our world, and it is suffocating religious aspiration. Every victim faces a choice: to fall into victimhood or to choose redeemed lives of responsibility.