



Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

OF AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY

PRAY FOR THE WELFARE OF THE CITY A RABBI'S REFLECTIONS ON POLITICS

A rabbi whose community does not disagree with him is not really a rabbi, and a rabbi who fears his community is not really a man.

Rabbi Israel Salanter

To avoid discussing social problems is as great a denial of the relevance of *halakhah*, of the authority of God, as to refrain from discussing *kashrut* or marriage. God is not merely concerned with ritual, but also in *mitzvot bein adam le-havero*, commandments between people. The Prophet Isaiah makes it abundantly clear that we have a Jewish obligation.

To loosen all the bonds that bind men unfairly, to let the oppressed go free, to break every yoke. Share your bread with the hungry; take the homeless into your home. Clothe the naked when you see him, do not turn away from people in need.

It is, therefore, more than just permissible to discuss political issues from the *bima*. It is obligatory to bring out the Torah's perspective on any social question involving morality. The American attitude toward religion is basically Christian. Jesus, when he told his followers to "render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's and unto God that which is God's" was implying that there could be something which belonged to the state, over which God had no authority. Much of subsequent Western history has been built on that notion. Some of the consequences have been good, such as the concept of the separation of church and state. Yet this idea that we must limit religion only to matters of the spirit has also produced a sickly, superficial view of the role of religion. With such restrictions, Judaism cannot survive. The Jewish people was not formed through individual decisions to believe in God. Judaism emerged out of a corporate act — we, as an entire people, agreed to transform our societies into religious communities. We agreed to sanctify our laws, to become a nation of priests, an *am kadosh*.

Consequently, Judaism has something to say about all aspects of life. It is a responsibility of every rabbi to alert the community to the Jewish insistence on justice, on peace, and on the implications of the fact that all people are created in the image of God.

Rabbis have an obligation to God to use the *bima* as a forum to address the pressing social problems of our time, to educate the community about the parameters beyond

which a person's views would violate the priorities and values of Jewish tradition. I am not saying that there is only one Jewish response to issues such as war and peace, poverty, or the environment. But there are limits on both sides of any issue, beyond which Judaism says, "No." It is the job of the rabbis to give their congregants enough information on how the Torah sees the issue so they can then incorporate that viewpoint into their own. This implies, among other points, that a rabbi should not tell the members of the community explicitly how to vote. But we can make it clear what are the special concerns of Torah and the Sages.

Rabbis have greater learning in Torah, but we don't have a special tie to God. Because of our own human limitations, I approach the *bima* self-consciously and with humility. It is inappropriate for a rabbi to endorse a specific candidate from the *bima* (although, no less than any other citizen, she or he is free to do so in the press or in campaign literature). To give an endorsement in the setting of the synagogue or Jewish agency would be to falsely imply that the candidate has the approval of God — something even rabbis lack the power to bestow.

Politics, while important, is also seductive. Rabbis would be well advised to avoid over involvement, the sense that they have to address *every* public question. The rabbi's primary focus should be the moral and religious vitality of the community. To the extent that Judaism takes moral stands on an issue being discussed generally, the rabbi is obligated to make the Jewish position and concerns public.

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