



A Jewish Contribution to American Politics

By Michael Gottsegen

There is much talk these days about the new relation between religion and politics. Some argue that a contemporary Jewish politics should be grounded upon a "Jewish political conscience" that would help us to discern what stand we are to take on issues of the day. Such a conscience would be a solid keel to keep us from being tossed about by ever-changing political currents that, almost randomly, push us now left and now right. Conscience, by its inherent ability to focus upon what is really important and upon what really matters, would keep us true to our Jewish vocation.

As beautiful as this all sounds, I am nonetheless skeptical about awarding such preeminence to conscience. Quite simply, conscience -- Jewish or otherwise -- is hardly up to the task. For the idiom of conscience is, by its very nature, inimical to the kind of discourse that enables the democratic political process to work as it should. For the lifeblood of the democratic process is the sort of persuasive speech which gives reasons and makes appeals to principles and values that are commonly held by the members of the body politic. But the voice of conscience does not know this language game. Quite simply, conscience is too inward, too private and too idiosyncratic. After all, because something is a matter of conscience for me, this need not make it a matter of conscience for you. Even worse, from a political perspective, those who speak at the prompting of their conscience rarely give reasons, but offer the call of conscience itself as their reason. Now, this may suffice for the individual who indeed has experienced the call of conscience. But the mere fact that conscience compels someone to speak is hardly reason for the community to heed his counsel.

Of course, those who recommend that we follow the call of conscience recommend not conscience per se, but a Jewish conscience and, more particularly, a Jewish political conscience that has been "cultivated" through exposure to "Jewish historical memories" and "the Torah, a book of sacred ends." At its best, then, such a conscience would be shorn of all that is idiosyncratic and would speak, as the vivified and internalized sensibility of the tradition, to contemporary political concerns. But even this would not overcome all of the problems that beset the voice of conscience when it endeavors to make itself heard in the public square.

For even an articulate Jewish political conscience, if it is content to be no more than that, will find that the public is deaf to its concerns. Even when it deigns to give reasons, because its idiom remains foreign, its reasons will carry little weight. They may strike a chord among fellow Jews, but the general public will listen without

comprehending.

In practical terms, this means that we must decide whether, as Jews, we are more interested in salving our own Jewish consciences or in moving America's political soul. If we only want to feel good about ourselves (and conscience always wants to feel good about itself), we need only to heed the voice of conscience (or the voice of the tradition) and practice a politics of moral purity and good intentions. From this perspective, it hardly matters whether or not we manage to persuade our fellow citizens to do x or y.

If, however, we are intent upon influencing our fellow citizens, then, insuring our own clean hands will not suffice. What, then, is necessary?

First, there is a need to begin to articulate the central principles that should inform a Jewish political sensibility. Such is required, if only to enable the Jewish community to articulately discuss what Jews should stand for in politics. Second, there is a need to translate these principles into the idiom of the principles that already have standing in the secular public space of contemporary American public life. For it is only by so doing that we will have any chance of influencing the national political conversation and thus the direction of our common political life.

What are the central principles that rightly inform a Jewish political sensibility, and how do we translate them into the idiom of the American public space to constitute a politics that is at once authentically Jewish and American? Reflection upon the value commitments of the Jewish tradition suggests that the following four are utterly essential.

First in priority is the principle of *the respect that is due the human being* which the Jewish tradition affirms when it speaks metaphorically of the human individual as having been created *b'tzelem elokhim*, in the divine image, a formulation that expresses the tradition's opinion that the human person is of inestimable worth. From this idea, the political principles of justice and equity follow. In the political realm, this first principle suggests the importance of procedural and substantive due process. Thus of any proposed policy, it can be asked whether it is compatible with the equal dignity of all who stand to be affected by it. In American political life, the corollary principles are those "self-evident truths" that are articulated in the Declaration of Independence and reiterated in the Bill of Rights.

Second in priority is the principle of the respect that is due to the entire non-human realm of creation because it is *ma'aseh b'reishit*, or "the work of the beginning" (i.e., the work of God) and as such possesses intrinsic dignity. At the end of each act of creation, the Bible declares that God looked upon what God had created and "saw that it was good" -- not good-for-x but intrinsically so. From this principle, a Jewish ecological orientation arises. In the political realm, this principle leads us to ask whether a given policy would do gratuitous damage to that part of nature that it would subordinate to human ends. There is no direct creedal American equivalent,

but contemporary secular ecological philosophy provides an appropriate public idiom.

Third in priority is the principle of *brit*, or of covenant, which signifies the covenantal basis of human society and the norms of covenantal mutuality and covenantal reciprocity that should inform social and political life. The practical implications of this conception are too vast to specify briefly. Suffice it to say that from the idea of *brit* we deduce the principle of social solidarity and the correlative idea that society is a cooperative and interdependent undertaking in which the well-being of each depends upon the efforts of all (and vice-versa). The practical political upshot of this principle would ask of any policy proposal whether it is compatible with the principle of social solidarity and oriented toward the common good. In the American political heritage, Winthrop's "Model of Christian Charity" and much colonial rhetoric is exemplary of this idiom. In more recent years, neo-civic republicans and left and right communitarians from Mario Cuomo to Amitai Etzioni have invoked, and further refined, this principle.

Fourth in priority is the principle of *rachamim*, or mercy, which lays upon individual and society the obligation to care for the weak and vulnerable. In the political realm, this principle leads to the following question of any policy proposal: Does it trample upon, or does it uphold, the weak and vulnerable? In contemporary America, the secular equivalent of this principle has been articulated in the writings of such American public philosophers as John Rawls, who would have us test the legitimacy of any departure from covenantal equality by whether or not the departure from equality will ultimately serve to benefit the poorest members of society.

Delineating these principles is, however, only the first step. Beyond this lies the endeavor to articulate a Jewish-American public philosophy that would translate these cardinal principles into a form that is compatible with the secular democratic ethos of the American public space. This endeavor is of potentially great significance. Immediately, it could help to facilitate an authentically Jewish politics that could accomplish more than insuring that our hands and consciences remain clean. It might even enable Jewish Americans to uplift the body politic as a whole by arguing to shared principles that have deep roots in our own Judaic heritage and in American creedal commitments.

Ideally, these four principles (and more particularly the three of greatest relevance for social policy) are complimentary and, in wise policy, each will receive its due. Giving exclusive consideration to any one of these principles, however, will almost always produce a policy that impinges upon one of the other three in a manner that should trouble Jewish political sensibilities. Indeed, the strength of Jewishly inspired social policy may lie in its refusal to base policy on any one of these principles to the exclusion of the rest. And, in this particular respect, a Jewishly inspired social philosophy might have much to contribute toward the formation of a new American political sensibility. For America has repeatedly suffered -- and

arguably suffers now – from the ill effects of political movements that err by absolutizing one principle and repudiating every other. Sorely lacking has been a popular social philosophy that places sufficient emphasis upon the **ensemble** of principles which are needed to sustain the good society. For this reason, a Jewish social philosophy that would weave these four principles into a balanced whole might find a wide following if formulated in an appropriate idiom.

That a Jewish social philosophy will properly give rise to social policies that give each principle its due should not be understood as implying that there is only one correct policy and that the goal of the political process is to discover it. Rather, because usually there is a range of policy options that pay heed to each of the principles in some measure but give precedence to one or another, the political process entails deliberating upon, debating and, finally, choosing from among these options. In this process, even those who are deeply committed to the same principles may find that they disagree with one another profoundly.

Consider, for example, the differences that might arise in a discussion of solutions to the problem of poverty. If the principle of *rachamim* alone were given primacy, the solution to the problem of poverty might be left to individual givers of private charity. Alternatively, if *rachamim* were given primacy but combined with *brit* and *tzelem elokhim*, one might argue for a paternalistic welfare system with such case management provisions as are necessary to insure respect for the dignity of the *tzelem elokhim* of the recipients. By contrast, if precedence were given to the principle of respecting the *tzelem elokhim*, but the other principles are regarded as ancillary, one might opt to guarantee every member of society a job and a living wage. Finally, if primacy is given to *brit* and social solidarity while the other principles are treated as subordinate, one might opt for a solution that includes a radically egalitarian redistribution of income, the argument being that only this policy is compatible with covenantal solidarity and the equal worth of all who are made in God's image.

These are not, of course, the only policy options that are compatible with the four principles, but they give some sense of the possible range. Some of these options are, moreover, so far outside of the mainstream of American social thought that to advocate such positions would render one's political influence nugatory. As a matter of conscience, just being right may be enough, but if one is to have some influence upon one's fellow citizens, one needs to work within -- if only just within -- the margins of the possible.

A public philosophy is not a political platform. Because there remains room for respectful disagreement over the question of which principle should take precedence in resolving a given policy dilemma, articulating the core principles of our common allegiance will not render our political life harmonious. But it should help us to keep our disagreements within relatively limited bounds and provide us with the common vocabulary that may permit us to resolve these disagreements in a principled way. Of even greater importance over the long run, our common

allegiance to these principles might enable us to preserve the bonds of civic friendship, or *yedidut*, despite our frequent differences over matters of policy.

Not Jewish political consciences, but Jewish political sensibilities and an articulated ensemble of Jewish-American political principles will help us to realize the full meaning of our Jewish-American errand.