

INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL WALZER

Michah Gottlieb

A member of the faculty at the Institute for Advanced Studies since 1980, Michael Walzer is one of the world's most distinguished political theorists. His publications include *Obligations: Essays on Disobedience, War and Citizenship* (1970), *Just and Unjust Wars* (1977), *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality* (1983), *Exodus and Revolution* (1985), *On Toleration* (1997), *Arguing about War* (2004), and *Politics and Passion* (2005). He is currently engaged, together with co-editors Menachem Lorberbaum, Noam Zohar, Yair Loberbaum, and Ari Ackerman, in the publication of a four-volume compendium of traditional texts and contemporary commentaries entitled, *The Jewish Political Tradition* (Yale University Press, 2000–).

Is there a field of Jewish political studies and, if so, what is it?

Michael Walzer: Well, yes, of course there is such a field, just as there is a field of Chinese politics or of French politics. It is also true that these fields could be broken up: you could study Chinese political history in a history department and, say, Confucian political theory in a political science or philosophy department. You could separate Jewish history from the political thought of Maimonides; you could study halakah in a law school. But interesting things happen when you bring people with these separable interests together. What are the central themes that might be addressed, that are in fact beginning to be addressed, in the field of Jewish politics?

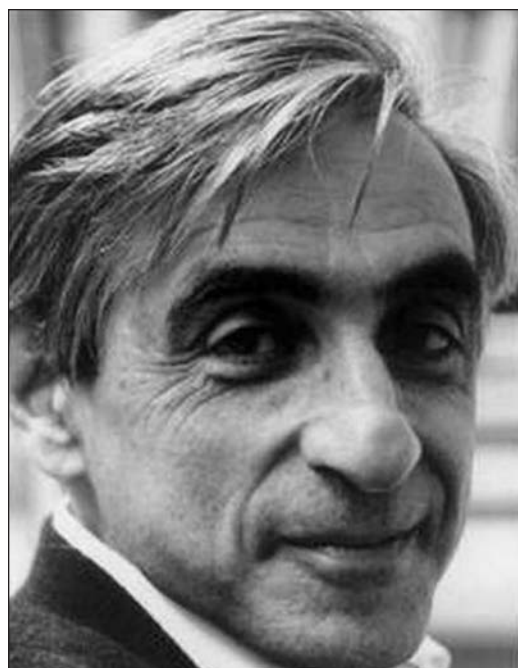
There is first the issue of religion and politics: how much room is

available in a religious civilization such as Judaism for political action? How much autonomy do

political actors have? Obviously, this is a question that arises also in Christian politics, but the Jewish answers are interestingly different from, as well as similar to, the Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox answers. A related question is the extent to which politics as a form of human coping can be valued in a religious context where God is “a man of war,” and a king, and a redeemer—and where men and women who act independently in the political world (as the Zionists did), without divine authorization, can be criticized as faithless, idolatrous, or heretical.

The second major issue is the meaning of exile—and its consequences: how did the Jews sustain a common life and a common legal system without sovereignty or territory? And how did they come to understand this achievement? Indeed, it may well be true that the exilic focus is what most specifically defines Jewish political studies. The first and second commonwealths can easily be treated within the comparative politics of the ancient world (although as Henri Frankfort long ago noted, the Jewish view of kingship was unique among the ancients), and the modern state can (more easily?) be treated within the comparative politics of the Middle East or of the modern state system. These polities are, perhaps, most interesting when we consider them as they were remembered or imagined in the years of statelessness.

How does your work in Jewish political studies relate to your other research? Has your work in Jewish



Michael Walzer. Courtesy of the Institute for Advanced Study.

political studies impacted your thinking about more general issues in political science?

Walzer: Sometimes I think that my work on the Jewish political tradition project is just an effort to escape from the seemingly endless business of studying John Locke's *Second Treatise* yet again, or reading another monograph on that undoubtedly important work, or teaching it or lecturing on it for the twenty-seventh time . . . Or on Rousseau, or on Mill . . . The canon can get tiresome, even though I am not particularly interested in subverting it. So, consider Jewish politics as a form of escapism for aging political theorists. On the other hand, I have always been engaged by the condition of the Jews: it is a form, after all, of self-knowledge. And all my writing about group attachment, cultural pluralism, and the different “regimes of toleration” is, whatever else it is, an effort to develop and defend a picture of the political world that makes room for us—specifically, for a stateless people. But when I first began writing about those questions, I took “us” for granted, without knowing much about the history of Jewish statelessness or about the arguments that have gone

on within the different Jewries of the exile. My work on the Jewish political tradition is an effort to understand the specific features of this people, which is my own people: who rules (and who has ruled) in the Jewish community? How were (and are) its boundaries determined? What was (and is) the character of its institutional life? How have we (how do we) understand our place in world history and in the society of nations?

Engaged with these questions, I have also become increasingly interested in what might be called “the Jewish question for Jews”—which has to do with the meaning of our membership in what is simultaneously a people or a nation and a religious community. Can we distinguish these two and choose only one of them? Certainly the Jewish world is defined primarily in religious terms—and yet disbelief and selective belief have played a major part in its history, and today a very large number of Jews are not believers at all. Is there a secular Jewishness? Well, secular Jews have been the major political actors in recent Jewish history, but it isn’t clear that they have succeeded in producing a sustainable culture. I identify strongly with their efforts, but at the same time I believe that a full-scale engagement with the Jewish tradition is necessary to any reconstruction of our common life. The Zionist project of negating the exile was both understandable and wrongheaded. I now think of my own work on the tradition as an effort to make the case for criticism and appropriation rather than negation. And I have begun to write about this as a general problem, which arises also in Hinduism and Islam, for example, where secular nationalists attacking the religious traditions of their own people have produced a militant religious revivalism, which has some similarities to messianic Zionism and religious nationalism in Israel.

What drew you to work in this field?

Walzer: I partly answered this question in responding to the second question above. But I would add a word about the importance of life cycle celebrations, especially the bar and bat mitzvah, and of teachers. My bar mitzvah portion, *Ki Tissa*, included the story of the golden calf, the smashing of the tablets, and the killing of the idol worshippers by Moses and the Levites. I studied the portion with a wonderful rabbi and teacher, Chaim Perelmutter, worried about it and argued about it with him. At first I did not want to read the section that began: “Take every man his sword . . .” I did read it, but never stopped arguing about it, and the eventual result was my first book on a Jewish theme: *Exodus and Revolution*. Given the academic division of fields and my place in it, this book was an act of trespass. But Moshe Greenberg, a great biblical scholar, read the first draft of the book and encouraged me to keep working on it; he sat with me in Jerusalem and continued the arguments that I began at age thirteen. And another extraordinary teacher, David Hartman, welcomed me into the intellectual community that he has created in Israel, where it is a cardinal principle that trespass is not a sin (so long as it is serious). Edmund Burke says somewhere that if people are to love their state, the state has to be lovely. The same thing is true of a field of study, and the crucial attraction can only be the people who are already there.

How do descriptive and normative concerns fit together in your work in this field?

Walzer: It is the glory of political theory as an academic field that these categories and all the arguments about facts and values are largely irrelevant to the work we do. Political theorists are not objective scholars; we are allowed to have and to express opinions; we just have to

be a little systematic (some of us are more so, some less) in defending our opinions and giving our reasons. The history of political theory is a descriptive discipline, though even this history is commonly written to advance a particular view of contemporary politics. But an actual theory, of distributive justice, say, is simply an argument about how social goods ought, and ought not, to be distributed: who should get what? It is normative from the beginning, and any descriptive elements that it includes serve the normative goals. So, by collecting texts and writing commentaries, we are in some sense describing the Jewish political tradition, but we are also constructing it in a certain way and then engaging with it in a certain way—a mix of appreciation and criticism. The mix is different for the different contributors to the project, but all of us share a commitment to this constructive work and to this mode of engagement.

What impact do you see your work in this field as currently having, and what do you hope its impact will be in the future? Is Jewish political studies primarily an academic pursuit or is it also supposed to affect contemporary politics? If the latter, is it supposed to impact Jewish politics alone (in Israel? in the diaspora?) or it also to be of interest to other societies/communities?

Walzer: The work I am now doing on Jewish politics is collaborative work; I could not do it myself. Still, I will answer these questions from my own perspective. My collaborators probably have somewhat different, though not entirely different, views about the impact they hope to have in the academy and the political arena. I hope that the four volumes of *The Jewish Political Tradition* (two are out, two more are in the works) will challenge the claim of orthodox Jews to have a monopoly on the

tradition—to be its true owners and authoritative expounders. I want all the texts that we have collected to become (what the Sinai story implies) a common possession. And then I want this possession, these texts, religious and secular, sacred and profane, to be recognized as objects of critical reflection, all of them subject to the same scrutiny, the same questioning. That's why in our volumes the texts are accompanied by commentaries—so that readers are shown how the scrutiny and the questioning should proceed. We are displaying the tradition in the style of the tradition, and that style is argumentative. We asked our commentators, and we ask our readers, to join the argument. The impact we hope for—here I can speak for all of us—is an open, lively, ongoing argument.

The more open and lively the argument is the more likely it is to spill over into Israeli and diaspora political life. Religion is a driving force in contemporary politics, and it is often a dogmatic, authoritarian,

and apocalyptic force. The state of mind that our volumes are (in my view) designed to encourage is a state of mind compatible with liberal, pluralist, and democratic politics. The texts themselves, obviously, don't all fit that model—most of them don't—and our commentators range across the political spectrum. But the argumentative style does fit the model. Jews who break with the tradition have long had an elective affinity with liberalism. I hope to find that affinity again in an engagement with the tradition.

Finally, all of us hope that these books will be of interest to political theorists and historians generally. Some of the writers that we include are already being studied outside the Jewish world—Maimonides, Spinoza, and Mendelssohn are the obvious examples. But there are also issues that arise and debates that have gone on within the Jewish world that should be of wider interest, and our volumes are organized to highlight some of these

and to make them available to people with no special Jewish knowledge. I will mention just one example. In an age when there is so much discussion (much of it premature in my view) about the end of sovereignty and the decline of the nation-state, the Jewish experience of statelessness takes on a new importance. We have a lot to tell non-Jews about the advantages and a lot more to tell them about the disadvantages of not having a state. There is also much to be learned from the institutions that we created and sustained without a territorial base and without sovereign power. Whether there will be people eager to learn—that I don't know, but if Jews engage with the tradition in a newly open and undogmatic way, other people may take notice.

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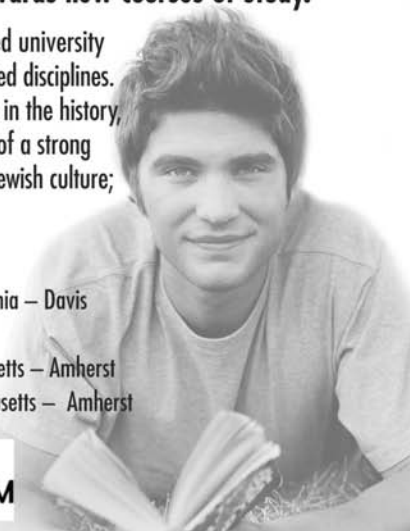
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