

their families. “You are a historian,” he told Talmon, whereas those in government “have a vision to which we are obligated: the future of the Jewish people.” Ben-Gurion, prime minister in a sovereign Jewish state, clearly enjoyed playing biblical king, practicing realpolitik as David and Solomon once did, against sages who—acting politically like Diaspora rabbis—were prudent, careful, and sober in judgment. In a similar interchange with Martin Buber, conducted in 1949, the philosopher chided the prime minister for using the religious language of “redemption” for secular state purposes.

MB: “We said redemption of the soil and meant to make it the soil of Jews. Jewish soil for what?”

DBG: “To bring forth bread from the soil.”

MB: “For what?”

DBG: “So as to eat.”

MB: “For what?”

DBG: “Enough!” (David Ohana, *Messianism and Statism* 188–194, 74)

The prime minister had the power to shut down argument when he pleased—but he knew as well as Buber that the legitimization of his power, and that of the Jewish state, depended on Jews (and others too!) believing that the actions taken by the state advanced vital Jewish interests and cleaved to the highest Jewish principles.

This is how Jews make our way through the wilderness in 2018, relatively new to the facts of statehood in the Land of Israel and of influence and affluence in North America. We figure out as we go what Jewish politics means in this situation for our eternal vocation. Jews need normalcy. We have to eat. But we also need covenant—which requires that the question of “for what” never cease.

The publication and distribution of the *JTS Parashah Commentary* are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee (z”) and Harold Hassenfeld (z”).

This week’s *Speaking of Text* by Dr. Galeet Dardashti is a on a liturgical poem for Shavuot with a new recording. It can be found at:

www.jtsa.edu/making-torah-our-own



Bemidbar 5778

במדבר תשע"ח



Politics as a Jewish Vocation

Professor Arnold M. Eisen, Chancellor, JTS

This week’s commentary is part of a special series for 5778, in which Chancellor Eisen reflects on the main themes of each of the five books of the Torah and their meaning for contemporary Jewish life.

The book of Bemidbar, which aims to help its readers navigate the chaotic wilderness in which the Children of Israel have always lived and wandered, deals more directly than any other book of the Torah with what the great sociologist Max Weber called “Politics as a Vocation.”

Jews have no choice but to be concerned with politics. We are a *people*, and therefore have lives to protect and interests to advance. Following Zionist parlance, I call these matters of thriving and survival “normalcy.” But Jews are also a *faith community*: committed since Sinai to serving the covenant made there with God, fellow Jews, and the world. There is a right path to be walked through the wilderness, called mitzvah, and much good to be done in the world. We are commanded to make the world more just and merciful, in accordance with the wishes of the Creator. This is our enduring, life-giving vocation as a people.

It is clear from our own experience, as well as from the narratives of the Torah, that the two aims—normalcy and covenant—will at times be in tension or even conflict. Every “is” sooner or later collides with the “oughts” that tell us how things should be, as opposed to how they are and always have been. Ponder Bemidbar’s many tales of power and intrigue, internecine struggle and battles with external foes, and you come away convinced that a Jewish theory of politics as a vocation can never be simple or straightforward.

There will always be a need to count the people Israel, to delimit its members, and to determine who among them can be counted on. This occurs in the opening census that gives the Book of Numbers its name. One can expect periodic rebellions against divine and human authority like the one undertaken by Korah, a populist demagogue who proclaimed that “all the people are holy” just as they are, without need of the strictures or guidance of law to make them so. The people for their part will at times vote and think with their stomachs rather than their heads, will let fear conquer their judgment or give in to base desires. At other moments they, or at least some of them, will summon the courage needed to face the unknown and stride confidently toward the future.

Neighboring peoples will inevitably be encountered on the way. Some of them will turn out to be enemies, others allies, and still others an ambiguous, shifting combination of the two.

And, in the midst of all the realpolitik, blessing will be conferred and received. Divine light will shine through human eyes. Refracted there, it will elicit unexpected goodness and ennoble the practice of politics. With God's help there may even be a measure of shalom: peace with others, and fulfillment of self.

Max Weber begins his essay "Politics as a Vocation" with two definitions relevant to our own reflection on politics as a Jewish vocation. He suggests first that the word, politics, "comprises any kind of independent leadership in action," expressed in *policy* of virtually any sort and common to every kind of human group imaginable. The emphasis in this conception falls on "independent." What course an individual or group should take in a given situation is never entirely clear. Every such decision involves risk. When one leads a group of people and bears responsibility for their welfare—as opposed to issuing recommendations, or engaging in theory that need not be translated into actions—one enters the domain of politics. A responsible political leader must bear in mind that life is short, resources scarce, dissent inevitable, and peaceful or violent competition ever-present.

Jews have been familiar with this sort of politics since the beginning, and over the course of two millennia in Diaspora, our ancestors acquired great skill in its practice. You and I would not be here today as Jews had their political choices not been wise much of the time. Discrimination, persecutions, expulsions, pogroms—and worse—were of course not infrequent events in our history. But neither were they the whole story. Besides: as our late friend and teacher Alan Mintz (z"l) reminds us, the key to Jewish history is not catastrophe but "creative survival" in the face of destruction. I would add that another key has been the ability to take maximum advantage of the blessings which have come our way. Jewish politics today in North America and much of the world is largely concerned with protecting collective interests and advancing communal well-being in unprecedented conditions of affluence and opportunity.

Weber then adds a second definition of politics that makes his address still more relevant to Jewish politics in the age of renewed Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel. Politics in this narrower sense is "the leadership, or the influencing of the leadership, of a political association, hence today, of a state." What is a state? Weber approvingly cites Trotsky's dictum that "every state is founded on force," and proceeds to declare—in a formulation that has often been cited by scholars of politics—that "a state is a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of force within a given territory."

When Korah challenges the authority of Moses and Aaron, he is explicitly contesting Moses's claim to decide—as God's agent among the Israelites—what use of force is legitimate. God intervenes to settle the argument—and even then the people who rallied to Korah's cause remain restless. Jews have long experience over the centuries in influencing or seeking to influence those with power in the states where we resided.

All of those rulers were of course Gentiles. Think of Mordecai and Esther in Ahashuerus's palace, or the many "court Jews" who plied their trade in Christian or Islamic lands. But only since 1948 have Jews regained regular access to the kind of force routinely exercised by police and armies. Only in the State of Israel, therefore, have Jews had to decide when the use of Judaism to justify violence perpetrated by the state is legitimate.

The Orthodox philosopher Yeshayahu Leibowitz, reacting to the invocation of divine authority by the Gush Emunim movement of West Bank settlers, asserted categorically that "no state whatsoever, in the past, present, or any foreseeable future, in any society, in any era, in any culture, including the Jewish culture, ever was or will ever be anything but a secular institution The State of Israel of our day has no religious significance." ("The Religious Significance of the State of Israel" in *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State*)

I fully understand Leibowitz's fury, though I would not deny the State of Israel all religious significance. We Jews are the heirs to prophetic and rabbinic traditions that regularly questioned state policy in the name of a higher standard set by God, and particularly the unjust use of power. We have made a habit of speaking truth to power, and have often suffered as a result. Today, Jews wield that power in the State of Israel. Prophetic critique pits Jews versus Jews and, often, sets one reading of Torah against another.

This situation is of course without precedent. Imagine a sage from the ancient academies, the Middle Ages, or the shtetls of early modern Europe or North Africa re-awakening, Rip Van Winkle-style, in May 2018 to headlines reporting that "Israel [i.e., an army of Jews] strikes military assets of Iran in Syria." That sort of Jewish political action would be utterly incomprehensible. Classical Jewish texts on politics often prove inadequate to the dilemmas Israelis face regularly. My personal friends in Israel include not only attorneys, civil servants, and professors, but experts in national security and critics of Israeli military policy. New sorts of Jewish selves have been created by the Zionist revolution—and new ways of practicing and conceiving the vocation of Jewish politics.

These issues came to the fore early in the history of the State, as we see from a set of fascinating exchanges between Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion and leading Jewish intellectuals and scholars in the late 1950s and early 1960s. They argued about Ben-Gurion's appropriation of the language of messianism, his creation of a Jewish civil religion to legitimate the policies of the state, and about the use of power to achieve national objectives.

"Moses never used force?" Ben-Gurion asked rhetorically at one point. The rabbinic sages had a problem with it, replied Ephraim Urbach, one of the leading experts on those sages. There is no necessary contradiction between ideals and power, Ben-Gurion retorted. Historian Jacob Talmon warned about the dangers inherent in "totalitarian democracy." "One can use power in a just cause," Ben-Gurion insisted. He reminded his interlocutors that, unlike them, he was in regular contact with soldiers and