

Parasha Lech Lecha

Czech Scrolls and Civic Service

Dear friends, Shabbat Shalom !

We are honoured to have such distinguished guests with us today. The very nature of a civic service is to celebrate the relationships the Jewish community has with other organizations and institutions, here, in Surrey, and in the entire country.

I've been thinking a lot recently of the nature of the relationships between political power and religion. In my birthplace, France, we have a very clear and strict separation between the State and all religions. In my opinion, it creates more tension than it solves, but we have to understand it in the French political context of the 19th century. The Catholic Church aligned itself with the most conservative parts of the French political landscape, mainly the Royalist, and in order to establish the Republic in France, they had to break the Church's power. It became law in 1905, and today no one would dream of revisiting this. As a result of this fight for "laïcité", which is more than simple secularism, the French religious landscape was structured, at least up to the 1990s. Today, the Muslim community challenges the *status quo*, but that's another story.

I made some interesting discoveries in the Jewish tradition on politics, and I wanted to share them with you.

Prophet Jeremiah said to his people in exile in Babylon, "Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you in exile, and pray to the Eternal on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare" (Jeremiah 29:7). It is true that Jews are a minority in almost all countries where they live. The level of advancement and openness of a society can be measured by the way it treats its minorities. Most Jews today live in democratic countries where they can thrive and contribute to the country they call home.

The psalmist has a slightly more cautionary approach. King David said, "It is better to trust in God than to put confidence in princes" Psalm 118:9. It is echoed by a passage in the Talmud, "Be careful in your dealings with the ruling authorities, for they do not befriend a person except for their own needs: they seem like friends when it is their own interest, but they do not stand by a man in the hour of his distress" (Pirkei Avot 2:3). Again, context here is important. This passage was written at the time when the Jewish communities in the Land

of Israel were under Roman rule. Authorities were not elected, and therefore not accountable for their actions. We live in a very different world; our political system is based on values that sprang forth from the Enlightenment in the 18th century, and this legacy is too precious to be discarded.

The last passage I wanted to mention is also from the Talmud. It says, "Pray for the welfare of the government, for were it not for the fear it inspires, every man would swallow his neighbour alive" (Pirkei Avot 3:2). That is, I think, a tribute to Jewish pragmatism. Government, laws are necessary to give a society a strong framework that will avoid the manifestation of human emotions in uncanny and unruly ways. But today, because our political system is based on a moral contract between citizens, there is no need to fear the government anymore.

The truth is, sometime the system fails and swerves out of the way towards tyranny. Today, we remember those people who suffered greatly in Europe in the 1930s and 1940s. German democracy, ridden with insurmountable challenges, threw itself into the arms of Hitler, with the consequences we know. November, 11th marks the end of the First World War. There will be commemorations all over the country on Sunday. November, 9th, today, is also the date we remember the Kristallnacht pogrom against German Jews. 80 years ago, the Second World War started in the East. Our recent History is filled with terrible memories, and there are still atrocities committed today, not far from our shores, in the Middle East.

My point today is not to deliver a lecture in politics. I am not qualified for that, and it is not my role as a Rabbi. However, there are some lessons to draw from our past, that some have tried to compare to the current situation to make us feel even more distraught.

The first lesson, is, I believe, to reflect on what it means to be a minority living in Britain. However integrated Jews feel in this country, they should never forget that they are a minority.

That fact has two main consequences.

The first is that Jews should be committed to the larger society and make sure they contribute to its welfare. If you remember, we held after the last local elections a special service for five of our members who have just been elected. We have two Labour, one Green, one LibDem, and one former Conservative councillors in our community. That shows how committed our members are to

the larger debates that are raging in our society, and all sides are represented, which is a healthy sign of our democracy. No one can pretend to hold the entire truth, and we know that truth, if such a thing exists, lies in the middle of the complex conversations we have.

The second is the necessity of being alert to what is happening around us, and to act accordingly. There are talks about antisemitism in one of Britain's major political parties, but there are also signs of racism all over the political spectrum. This fact is worrying in itself, but Britain is healthy enough to have a proper conversation about it. There are many people who find it unacceptable and are ready to act.

Reacting to Rabbi Jonathan Romain's letter to his congregants, urging them to vote tactically against Labour wherever they can, Rabbi Howard Cooper wrote an answer published in the Jewish Chronicle. He says, and I quote, "A Rabbi's job is, I believe, to help the Jewish community contain its worries and its emotional distress, not by telling people how to cast their vote (as if they didn't have a mind of their own) but by strengthening their psychological and spiritual wellbeing¹". Rabbinic leadership, and beyond that religious leadership, is not about telling people what to do and whom to vote, but allowing people to find in themselves the spiritual strength that informs their life and their choices. I said several times how uncomfortable I was with a senior Rabbi telling his congregants how to cast their vote. I am delighted to see that I am not the only one. It doesn't mean that Rabbis have no political views, but in public, we have to remain neutral.

There are always two sides of a coin, and one can decide to see the half-empty glass, or the half-full. There are indeed dark forces at work that try to spoil the fabric of a society, or a community, and sadly, these forces can be found within us. We have the capacity to be our worst enemies and to destroy the good things we create. But we also have the capacity to build, to create, and to establish a society that, in the words of our prayer book, "excels in freedom and justice, tolerance and compassion, so that it may be a force for righteousness in the life of humanity"².

When, in our Torah portion, Abraham hears God's call *lech lecha*, go towards yourself, he is compelled to discover in himself the strength that will give him a

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<https://www.thejc.com/comment/comment/rabbi-s-don-t-vote-corbyn-message-will-only-stoke-jewish-fears-1.491022>

² Siddur Lev Chadash p. 484

purpose in life. This call is for each of us. God is asking, what is your unique purpose in life? What are you doing to contribute to the creation of a better world? What is your particular mission? A life of meaning is a life where everyday brings an opportunity to grow. Where are you going to next ?

Shabbat Shalom,

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