

May God Bless and Keep the Czar...Judaism and Government  
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*A group of people were traveling in a boat.*

*One of them took a drill and  
began to drill a hole beneath himself.*

*His companions said to him:  
"Why are you doing this?"*

*Replied the man:  
"What concern is it of yours?  
Am I not drilling under my own place?"*

*Said they to him:  
"But you will flood the boat for us all!"*

(Midrash Rabbah, Vayikra 4:6)

Judaism teaches us that we are to be held accountable, not just for the way in which our actions affect us personally, but for how they affect the broader community. This is, to a certain extent, the basis for the Jewish understanding of government. Sure, there are commandments in the Torah such as "Love thy neighbor as thyself" and in the rabbinic literature such as Hillel's statement "Do not do unto others as you would have them not do unto you;" statements about how we as individuals should relate to others. This story from the Midrash tells us why we need government. The group works to counter the harmful actions of individuals.

Leviticus, chapter 4, for which the story about the boat is a commentary, discusses the way in which the High Priest

should make atonement for the guilt of the whole people. The story is offered to help us understand how the sinful actions of one person can, well...sink the ship upon which we all travel. The Torah and Tanakh detail many occasions in which larger groups suffer because of the actions of an individual.

In the Book of Joshua, for example, we learn that the entirety of the Israelite people may be punished because of the sins of individuals. Achan, a single Israelite is said to have kept for himself items captured in battle that were to be sacrificed. As a result of his actions, the Israelites could not win in future battles. God had removed his blessing from them. I'll not go into all of the details now. I'll let you look up the story and its terrible consequences for Achan and his family on your own. It's in Joshua, chapter 7. Suffice it to say, it wasn't a slap on the wrist. The intention of that story is to tell us that we're all in the boat together. Even one person who decides to go their own way can bring down the group, can harm the community significantly. One person, Achan, acted wrongly. God's response to Joshua, the leader of the people, was "Israel has sinned."

Thus, in the distant past and still today in some Traditional circles, particularly among the Ultra-Orthodox, there is the concept that the sin of one Jew may lead to the punishment of all Jews. As liberal Jews, we do not believe in this type of God and certainly not in collective punishment. We do, however, understand that the actions of one person may have a much larger impact. They may even be widespread and have a long lasting impact, influencing the actions and well-being of many others.

We also understand that rules are there to help our society. Our tradition teaches us that government is important to enable us to interact with each other well. We find in the Sayings of the Fathers, Pirkei Avot (3:2) a statement by Rabbi Chanina, who is said to have been an assistant of the high priest. Chanina said simply, "Pray for the welfare of the government, since but for fear of it men would swallow each other alive." Government was seen as essential for our well-being.

Yet overtime, our people became more and more afraid of the abuses of government. How could we not have? Only a few generations passed between each invasion, persecution, and exile, bringing dramatic changes with them. Even during the rule of the same dynasty, rulers arose who were more abusive than those who conquered the lands in which we lived or who had perhaps invited us to live in those lands.

We need not look to non-Jews as the sole source of problematic governments. We can begin with those rulers from among our own people. For example, the Hasmoneans, also known as the Maccabees, are said to have ruled with violence, killing their opponents. The Herodian dynasty, installed by the Romans, was equally bad. Then of course were the Romans themselves who made people dream lovingly of the days when the Hasmoneans and Herodians ruled. Subsequent governments of every ethnicity who persecuted our people were compared to the Romans. Until World War II, the Romans were always seen as the worst of evils.

The rabbis warned us to keep our distance. Rabban Gamliel, son of Judah HaNasi, a Third Century CE leader said (Avot 2:3):

Be careful in your relations with the government; for they draw no man close to themselves except for their own interests. They appear as friends when it is to their

advantage, but they do not stand by a man in his time of stress.

We, as a people, had not entered the days of religious persecution at that point in our history. Those who hated us in those days did so because we were connected to those problematic people who lived in Judea, not because of our religious views.

If this rings any bells for those who feel that Jews face persecution around the world because we are connected to the people who now live in Judea, it should. Jew Hatred comes in many varieties and some of those forms are based on political and cultural issues, not on religious ones. We have the privilege of being disliked by different people for things having nothing to do with who we as individuals are, what we as individuals believe, or what we as individuals have done.

In modern times, especially during the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century into the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, our relationships with governments ruling over us have been relatively poor. Hence, the all too appropriate joke from Fiddler on the Roof:

**Leibesh:** Is there a proper blessing for the Czar?

**Rabbi:** A blessing for the Czar? Of course! May God bless and keep the Czar... far away from us!

Our lot was not great. Our people came to see Ben Zoma's statement in ancient times of comfort to the poor, as a statement comforting our entire people in modern times. Ben Zoma said (Avot 4: 1):

Who is rich? He who rejoices in his portion, as it is written (Psalm 128:2) "You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands; you shall be happy, and it shall go

well with you." "You shall be" refers to this world; and "it shall be well with you" refers to the world to come.

Ben Zoma intended that statement to be of comfort to those who were not rich, whose labors did not grant them luxuries in this world. It was a statement designed to assure the poor that indeed they would be rewarded in the world to come. Some might look at this statement as one defending an inherently flawed economic system; as a case of religion placating the masses. I look at it as a statement acknowledging the reality that life is not ideal or even fair.

We may have it bad in this life, but in the world to come, we will be rewarded for enduring. As this was true for the individual, how much more true for the Jewish people!

Yet, our people have never been content to "be content." We believe in Tikkun Olam and we believe that while we may indeed be happiest if we "rejoice in our portion" that does not mean that we cannot try to improve it along with that of others. And so, Jews, few in number, find their way into positions of political leadership, not trying to take over the world as conspiracy theorists would be led to believe, but to MAKE OVER the world, to fix what is wrong, to improve the human condition, to make life more bearable for more people.

We care about health care. We care about feeding the hungry. We care about housing the homeless. We care about ending conflicts and creating peace. We care about justice and righteousness. We care about freedom.

We do so, however, bearing generations of baggage. We work with, or in, the government knowing the power of the government to make positive change and at the same time fearing governmental ability to do harm. We seek to foster and protect civil rights, while decrying attempts to expand government into our lives. We fear being judged because we

fear that those judging us will be unfair to us. For some of us, the government may have well been unfair in our past.

We have an aversion to judgment. We do not like being judged and avoid judging others. And here we are on Rosh Hashanah, preparing ourselves to be judged. Here we are entering the Yamim Noraim, the Days of Awe, examining our lives, revisiting our sins, and seeking forgiveness. As we will hear on Yom Kippur, "Atem Nitzavim," "you (I, all of us, we) stand arrayed before God, the judge."

Rationally, we question how. Psychologically, we cringe at the thought. Spiritually and emotionally, well, that is a different story.

Rabbi David Aaron (pp. 84-86 of Inviting God In) teaches:

For children, part of growing up and discovering themselves is discovering boundaries. They naturally want to know what they can and can't do. They need to test their limits, learn the consequences, and discover the reward or punishment for their actions. When they err, when they are out of bounds, they are punished accordingly, so that they can get back in line... Parents need to relate to their children in a balanced way. Too little judgment or too much judgment will damage a child's feeling of self worth and confidence. This is one of the great challenges of parenthood...

True judgment is actually an act of loving-kindness. When I judge my child, I am giving him a sense of self-worth; I am instilling within him the confidence that he is a powerful person, that his choices are significant and consequential. I am assuring him that his actions make a difference, that he matters, and that I love him...On Rosh Hashanah...my illusion of being self-contained, without any accountability to a Higher Power, is shattered...I realize that I cannot do whatever

I want, whenever, or wherever I want...There is someone to whom I am accountable.

**My self wants to feel accountable, because if I am not accountable then I don't count.**

Rabbi Aaron's words are profoundly meaningful. Tonight, tomorrow, and for the days ahead, we are held to account. Some of those here may not believe that God is out there somewhere judging us. But they should realize that we also judge ourselves in a similar fashion. It is all too easy for us to fail to hold ourselves to account and to end up without self esteem simply because we fail to value our own decisions or we judge ourselves too harshly.

Do not pretend that we are totally defined by the way in which others see us. We are our own greatest critics, our own greatest judges. Over the days ahead, you will place yourself in your own court with you as judge over your life and you will decide how successful you have been and how much harder you must work to be the best you can be.

I thought about Rabbi Aaron's words, about the idea that being held accountable means counting, means mattering. I thought about how that applies beyond the individual. How many times over the ages have our people been held accountable? To hold the Jews to account, to blame the Jews, is practically a pastime in some corners of the world. We, as a people, count more than any other in that respect.

We also know that many times we as a people are held to account for false reasons based on incorrect thinking and bias. We decry this kind of judgment. It is an evil. It breeds hatred and contempt. We know it is wrong.

This day and in the days ahead, remember that. Apply that thought to yourselves in your judgment. You are human. You make mistakes. You err. We all do. Sometimes we may

well deliberately do wrong. For that, we must hold ourselves to account. Sometimes, we may seek to do the right things and fail to achieve them. Sometimes we may even have been forced to do what we know to have been wrong. We must ask ourselves, "Am I being fair to myself?"

Then when we hear the words on Yom Kippur, "I have pardoned in response to your plea." We will feel that indeed—being held accountable to God and to ourselves, we count.

In the coming year, may we see the importance of our actions and inaction as individuals, may we strive to strengthen our congregation and our community, and may we judge and be judged fairly—and with compassion to ourselves and others.

Shanah tovah u'metukah!

May you have a happy and sweet new year!