

- 14 See Gedaliah Alon, *Jews, Judaism and the Classical World*, trans. I. Abrahams, Jerusalem: Magnus, 1977, pp. 374ff.
 15 Based on Exod. 23:2.
 16 Jerusalem Talmud, Bava Bathra, 60 b; Maimonides, *Yad, Mamrim*, 2:7.
 17 Tosefta, Pesahim 4:12.
 18 Gen. 5:1–2.
 19 Sanhedrin, 4:5.
 20 Babylonian Talmud, Yebamot, 62a.
 21 Sanhedrin, 4:5.
 22 Sifra, Kedoshim, Lev. 19:18, 4:12. Genesis Rabba, 1:24.
 23 Rabbi Yissachar Ber Katz, aka Berman Ashkenazy.
 24 Mishnah, Avot, 3:14.
 25 Tosefta, Yebamot, 8.
 26 Genesis Rabba, 1:24.

Chapter 3

Grounding Democracy in Reverence for Life: A View from Judaism

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Two core values are at the heart of Judaism. The primary value is that human beings are created in the image of God. The second is covenant, the partnership between God and humanity in order to perfect the world (*tikkun olam*). Democracy is the best political framework for their realization.

The Talmud asks: what is the great principle of the Torah? Students of Christianity will recall that Jesus' answer to this question is: 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength' and 'love your neighbour as yourself' (Mark 12:30,31). These two commandments themselves can be derived from the core principle which Rabbi Ben Azzai offers in the Talmud. According to Ben Azzai, the great principle is that God created human beings in the image of God.

This statement must be seen in context. The Bible tells a narrative of creation. Scripture suggests that there are three fundamental movements infused into creation by the Creator. These rhythms define and guide the good life; human beings are commanded to live in harmony with these three vectors in creation. The first movement is from chaos to order; the second cosmic direction is from non-life to life. In the third movement, life itself is increasing not only quantitatively but qualitatively – that is, it is moving from being less to being more and more like God, its Creator. When humans live in harmony with these three rhythms, they consciously shape every action of life to be on the side of order, on the side of life and against death.

In the development of the cosmos, the climax of this threefold process thus far is the emergence of that form of life that we call human. In human form, life has become like God. Humans have the power of a consciousness able to understand the very laws of the universe. Human life has a capacity for relationship and love that is truly like God's. In other words, a human being's love is able to embrace all of creation. Therefore, it says in Genesis: 'And the Lord God created human being in God's image; in the image of God, God created the human; man and woman, God created them' (Gen. 1:27).

Three Intrinsic Dignities of Human Beings

What is the implication of this understanding that every human being is created in the image of God? The Talmud suggests that there are three fundamental dignities

inherent in being the human image of God. These intrinsic dignities are non-negotiable; they are, in principle, independent of social and economic conditions. Society and culture may cripple their realization but, in God's eyes, they are inviolable. The first dignity is that every human life is unlimitedly valuable. Images of the human have a finite value. A Van Gogh painting once sold for 82.5 million dollars; but an image created by God is worth infinitely more than a Van Gogh. (One should note that such precious Van Goghs are stored in rooms with climate control and cared for with every caution, lest they be damaged in any way. That human beings are allowed to lie on the street, homeless and freezing in winter, is a fundamental violation of this intrinsic dignity.) Since humans are of infinite value, saving one life is like saving a whole world.

The second implied dignity of the human image of God is implicit in the fact that any claim that one understanding of God is the *definitive*, superior one is a form of idolatry. God is beyond any literal definitive image; the claim that there is a fixed, preferred image of God is a human fabrication. By implication, all humans in the image of God are equal. The claim, for instance, that white, brown or black, male or female persons are superior images of God is idolatrous.

The third intrinsic dignity of human beings created in the image of God is uniqueness. Humanly created images are replicable. Stamps and coins can be identical when they come from one mould. The essence and the evidence of God's creativity is that all humans come from one mould – all are descended from Adam and Eve – yet each one is unique. To recognize another's human uniqueness is to see him or her as the image of God. Democracy is built on the realization of these three fundamental, inalienable human dignities.

What in our life is infinitely valuable, equal and unique? The answer is that which we love. All other things are fungible or replaceable. Furthermore, each of the three dignities is not only the outcome of love; each evokes love. To discover the uniqueness of another person is the essence of falling in love with them. Coming to experience the other's equality evokes love in this interactive process. This love is more than a commandment; its realization is a central task of religion. Each religion is called – and judged – by its capacity to create the framework of love out of which the other will be recognized and honoured as an image of God.

The task of religion is to nurture and sustain the image of God in human beings. The commandments can be seen as instructions to live in accordance with this principle. Thus, for example, *tzedek* – the concept of acting with justice – follows from the axiom that since two people are equal, each should be judged on his or her merits. Similarly the requirement of *tzedakah* – the obligation to help the poor – flows from the fact that the other is infinitely valuable. If I am rich and you are poor, I feel an obligation to equalize our situation precisely because no person of infinite value should lack the fundamental necessities of life.

The idea that human beings are infinitely valuable is incompatible with the presence of poverty and hunger. Poor countries cannot spend large amounts of money to keep people alive; in fact they often let their citizens die, sometimes for lack of a penny's worth of medicine or dollar's worth of food. Second, if one truly believes that equality is a non-negotiable intrinsic dignity given by God, then racism, sexism or

anti-Semitism – you name the discrimination – is a fundamental violation of this cosmic principle. If one holds that uniqueness is infinite and inalienable then the very notion of stereotyping is a violation of that principle. To claim that all Arabs, all Jews, all whoever repeat certain given behavioural patterns, or are of one specific type, is a violation of the fundamental dignity of the uniqueness of human beings.

Judaism (and Christianity's) redemption narratives promise that poverty and hunger will be overcome, because they are incompatible with full human value. Oppression will be overcome because it violates the dignity of equality. War will be abolished, because it wastes and kills lives that are uniquely irreplaceable and infinitely valuable. Sickness and death are ultimately also in contradiction with these three dignities, which is why the ultimate Messianic dream in Jewish (and Christian) tradition is that death itself will be overcome. A loving God will not abide the death and annihilation of a creature so marvellous as to be infinitely valuable, equal and unique.

Nurturing the Image of God: Democracy and Covenant

Still, the obvious truth is that we are not living in a world which upholds these three intrinsic dignities; indeed, current conditions often contradict these values. This contradiction drives the second Jewish narrative, which is the narrative of redemption, to which I have already drawn attention. In essence, Judaism says that the status quo of poverty and oppression is illegitimate – or, perhaps, one might say that it is temporary. Although there may be some short-term legitimacy in a status quo in that one cannot change the whole world overnight, the present conditions must be overcome because they contradict these three fundamental human dignities. Our task is to create a societal/political framework to uphold these dignities to the best of our ability now, while pursuing the longer-term dream of transformation needed to bring into being a system which can sustain them fully. Democracy has proven to be more capable of this combination than any other political system.

The working principles of democracy make it the best framework in which the image of God can be nurtured. If I am infinitely valuable and equal to you, why should my words be worth any more (or less) than yours? The correct answer is: they should not be. Therefore, in the democratic process, the only way we can resolve an argument between us is by majority agreement. Again, if two people are infinitely valuable and equal in relation to each other, then the practice of law and justice follows naturally. One has no right to use force or coercion or any other form of exploitation to get one's way. To use force on another is to treat them as unequal.

The ultimate implication of this logic is not just political, but economic and social as well. Since the religious end is to highlight and respect the image of God of every individual, then political activity to create a democracy is a fulfilment of a religious mandate. Similarly, since affluence has the potential for translating into better health, longer life and more dignity, then economics and education are fundamentally religious issues. Society should be judged religiously by its capacity to establish an infrastructure so that the image of God can be nurtured properly. This is the basis of a religious affirmation of democracy.

Nevertheless, the question remains: how does one best move from the world as it is to that perfect world which sustains human dignities at their greatest potential? The classic Jewish answer is through the mechanism of covenant or partnership. Only a divine-human partnership can perfect the world. Covenant is a strategic choice by God and human beings. Covenant implies that God will not do the work for humanity; God will not bestow a perfect world, not by miracles and not by divine will alone. Nor can God bestow freedom, because freedom must be claimed. Similarly, the idea of covenant teaches that perfection will not be accomplished by human beings throwing off God and taking power, as has been the dominant alternative religion in the twentieth century.

Covenant grows out of the fact that there is love on both sides – love that is willing to become committed or obligated. In this partnership of committed love, human beings are asked to exercise their God-like powers to perfect the world. Human consciousness now understands the code of life, DNA, and how to utilize it; God now asks humans to use this power to overcome sickness and extend life. Human consciousness has grasped some of the astronomical scope of the vast universe, a tiny corner of which we inhabit. Human beings are called to use these powers to perfect the world in partnership with, and in accountability to, the judgement of God. Democracy incarnates the human will to perfect the world in partnership with others.

The Value of Limitations

There is another crucial element in covenant that links it to democracy. The essence of covenant lies in setting limits. For God to enter into covenant, God must self-limit. The Kabbalah argues that the very act of creation is a form of self-limitation. The laws of nature are the first steps of covenant. Creation begins with God's self-limiting to make the universe possible. Otherwise, the divine plenitude would fill the world and there would be no room for existence. The next covenantal step comes when God further accepts the boundaries and guidelines of covenant to make room for human dignity.

What does it mean when we say that entering into the covenant imposes limits on God? One implication is that God will not force or coerce humans to be good. That is the lesson of the flood story in the Book of Genesis. In the aftermath, God renounces divine power to override nature, promising never again to attempt to force people to be good. The Divine also renounces the alternative possibility of programming people to be good. Thus God fundamentally accepts human freedom. Freedom is built on the right to do wrong. In order to do right, you do not need freedom. But God prefers achieving the dignified free creature (the human) over the guarantee of that creature doing the right thing. The divine goal in creating and sustaining the image of God is to create a creature that is free, independent and responsible.

The covenantal commitment shows that God would accept disobedience and failure rather than insist on perfection by coercion. This further implies that the Divine treats humans as truly equal and truly unique, passing up the opportunity to programme humans to do the right thing. The implication of this model for democracy is that it is not enough to establish majority rule. One needs to allow for the independent dignity of the others; true democracy demands minority rights, not just majority power.

Divine self-limitation implies the importance of making room for the existence of another. The covenantal partner must listen to the other. It follows that a religiously guided democracy must embrace the right to be heard. If I am infinitely valuable, equal and unique, I have a right to be heard. The mere fact that an infinitely valuable creature is speaking, one who is equal to you, means that I have the right to speak. But what if I am wrong? If I am equal, then you may try to persuade me to think otherwise than I do. However, elemental respect for my equality means that I have the right to speak and to be heard – even if I am wrong.

All of this sounds lovely and ideal, but the historical records of the monotheistic religions show little past affinity for democracy. What went wrong? As participants in the process of covenant, all religions, all people, are involved in historical temporality. They start from the real world as it is; they become implicated in all the inequalities and injustices of the world. But in trying to improve the world, religions have too often gone out of control. They have failed to learn the lesson that the Divine works within limits out of respect for humans. Therefore human beings – even when they uphold divine religion – must work within limits also.

The lack of limits has been the key to religious misbehaviour. As democracy teaches that there are limits so that one should not coerce the minority, so religion should have understood the same message. If the image of God is truly respected, if the principle of covenant is truly obeyed, then one would accept bad behaviour rather than force good behaviour. Out of respect for human freedom one tries to educate and persuade, not to coerce. Unfortunately, the classic monotheistic religions, in the name of God and in the name of their own teachings, have insisted on having the right to enforce the faith. Often this has meant demanding the right to pressure, or even to kill, in order to uphold that faith. Absolute power in the name of God always goes wrong; it constantly slides into abuse of the other and betrayal of the principles of human dignity. In short, religions have historically acted badly because they failed to imitate God's nature, especially God's self-limitation.

Limitation and Religious Pluralism

The essence of pluralism, which is inescapably built into democracy, is that I may believe that I have the whole truth but I also acknowledge the limits of my viewpoint. Pluralism is not relativism. Pluralism does not entail, as the popular misunderstanding has it, that anything goes, that one should never make judgements. In the practice of pluralism, I do affirm my own truth. Therefore my truth may contradict, challenge or critique those views which I believe to be wrong. But, in democracy, I accept that there are limits to my understanding of truth. Therefore I cannot force others to follow my truth. Pluralism is an absolutism that has learned its own limitations. Any group ideology or faith that recognizes its own limitations will make room for others. Consequently, it will self-limit. It will renounce coercion and violence towards the other. That limit makes it healthy and functional.

If God did not self-limit, existence could not exist. Religious truth that has no limits will not let anyone else exist. What is the proper religious limitation? At the minimum, it is that I recognize my religion as absolute truth, but I still make room for other religions. Or I may come to a deeper insight: that my faith has not exhausted the

divine truth. Other religions may have other elements beyond mine, or they may have the same elements as mine does. The third possibility is that perhaps I witness to the truth, the whole truth, nothing but the truth, but still God has other truths or additional revelations for other people. This may stem from the fact that God wants to include others in this partnership for *tikkun olam* or simply because God desires to reach others.

Even if a religion could finally articulate 100 per cent of the truth, there are so many polarities in these truths. For example, take love and justice. If one religion is focused primarily on love, then it cannot easily hold the other pole, justice, in tandem as well as some other faith might. If a religion is all love, it cannot do justice to justice. Alternatively, if a religion is 100 per cent focused on justice, it cannot do justice to love. Therefore pluralism teaches that we must make room for other religions that have different bounds. These are just examples of some of the ways in which pluralist self-limiting religion will understand itself.

Let me speak more personally now. My faith was challenged and broken by an encounter with the Holocaust. For a long time I dreamed that this tragedy had broken me, but that perhaps someday I would return to the wholeness of the original truth – my original experience of unfailing divine presence. I came to see later that the essence of covenant is that no truth is unbroken. The process of limitation – brokenness is another word for limitation – is the essence of the divine capacity to address human beings. God must in some sense limit, restrict, restrain – and therefore the divine word must, in some sense, break or shrink in order to communicate the truth. God cannot do full justice to God's own plenitude once the Divine gets involved with human beings. Therefore the truth is that all truths, even eternal truths, are momentary truths. What renders eternal truth eternal is that it speaks in many moments, as against a truth that has a half-life of one moment or part of a moment.

Democracy teaches us to acknowledge our limitations and to recognize the presence of many other worthy people in public life. God, too, has many messengers. Pluralism leads me to recognize that the overflowing love of the Divine is never exhausted. My presence, my mind, my revelation, no matter how great, cannot exhaust infinity. Therefore, there must be room for other messages that do not supersede mine, or messengers who are not inferior to mine. Each messenger recognizes that he or she does not own God exclusively. The notion of covenant implies that God enters into loving partnership with this particular group. But God can do so again and again. Each covenantal group needs teachers and role models to carry out its task.

Good ideas alone, no matter how good they are, do not work unless they are implemented in the real world. Therefore one needs multiple role models and one should consequently welcome the other covenant groups as such. Those seeking to affect the world for the good come to see that the obstacles are vast and the suffering is great. As the problems are beyond the capacity of any single group or religion or tradition to resolve, everyone should welcome co-workers. One should not be jealous and deny or reject the dignity and values of other faiths. What went wrong with religion is that religious leaders were so inspired by their own greatness that they could not conceive of anybody else being able to accomplish the goal. Therefore, in the end, the religious prayer was twisted into demanding that *our* will be done. If we

seek that God's will be done, then why would we not welcome, rather than reject, the fact that God called others to be messengers and co-workers and teachers in this process?

The strength of the democratic system is that it creates a framework where both intrinsic dignity and limits exist. In a democracy, failures – which are endemic and implicit in all human activity – can be criticized and corrected. The great breakthrough of democracy is that the failures are limited by the system, for others are free to correct and challenge. They are equal and possess the right to try to reform. Democracy provides the framework that maximizes the chance of an outcome that plays off the strengths of all. Democracy offers the vision of respecting the equality and dignity of others so that freedom and mutual respect are continuously advanced. This is the new calling to our religions: to affirm and to function in this democratic way in our lifetime and for the future.