

An Interview with Rabbi Menachem Genack

BY: Ari Lamm

parameters of the word "serarah," but they all seem to involve supervisory positions involving civil matters in the community.

Another consideration for today's congregations is a question that cannot be fully discussed in this article, that of democracy and the how it compares to the appointment by a prophet. Certainly, the king needed to be chosen and anointed by a prophet, as we see in *Sefer Shemuel*. That alone, however, was insufficient. National acceptance was also required.¹ What does acceptance in isolation mean? Would the Torah consider that an "appointment?" In our congregations, we might have appointments that we vote on—how would our system compare to the appointments of old?

In conclusion, we have explored several approaches throughout biblical and rabbinic literature with regards to women in leadership positions. We uncovered a solid reasoning behind the *Midrash Halakha's* exclusion of women from the monarchy. Some limit that exclusion to the original appointment. Exceptions to this rule act as a case study to uncover what exactly the parameters of our Midrash are, and they highlight and isolate the different components of an appointment, and what it might include. This article should lead readers to continue to think about these matters, and to explore further what might guide us in forming our own positions in our communities about women in leadership positions.

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¹ Certainly, women's ordination is a related issue, but not one I wish to address in this article.

² Deut. 17, JPS trans.

³ Ibid.

⁴ *Shemuel I*, 8:5

⁵ Ibid., 8:20

⁶ *Sanhedrin* 20b

⁷ *Hilkhos Melakhim* 5:1, *Kesef Mishneh*

⁸ *Yevamos* 65b; *Kiddushin* 2b

⁹ *Hilkhos Melakhim* 1:5

¹⁰ *Sefer ha-Hinukh*, mitzvah 497

¹¹ Interestingly, some synagogues today have policies banning both women and converts from becoming the *shul* president, and that rejects this entire merit-focused mode of operating.

¹² *Shoftim* 4:5-9

¹³ Granted, Tosafot are troubled by a legal difficulty of women judging if they cannot testify. Nonetheless, their arguments defend her judging and behaving as a leader to the people.

¹⁴ *Bava Kamma* 15a, *Gittin* 88b, *Yevamos* 45b, *Shevuot* 29b,

¹⁵ *Rif*, *Shevuot* 13a

¹⁶ *Noda bi-Yehudah*, first edition *Hoshen Mishpat*, *siman* 1

¹⁷ *Yoreh Deah* 2:44

¹⁸ *Kiddushin* 76b

¹⁹ *Shemuel I* 10:24; Abarbanel to Deut. ch. 33.

Is it important for Jews to become involved in the world of public service and politics? Is there a difference in this regard between international, national and local politics?

Getting involved in politics is certainly a worthy endeavor per se, provided that it doesn't consume one's whole life, because political philosophy determines the direction that this country takes. Indeed, we as Jews are very lucky to live in the greatest country in the world. The United States is the greatest force for good in the world, and given that we, as Jews, want to do good, getting involved in American politics can be a positive thing.

Political involvement is also important at the Jewish communal level. As a community, we need to have access to leaders in power in terms of, for example, support for Israel. We should remember that in 1939 Senator Wagner introduced a bill in committee to permit ten thousand Jewish children to enter the US above the immigration quota. That bill died in committee and tragically those children died in Europe. We as a community had limited access to the lever of power then. As a community we learned an important lesson. That is part of the reason that as Jews we have become so politically galvanized, so as to protect the interests of Jews and most specifically Israel. Currently, there is a strong sense of support for Israel in the United States. The primary reason for this is because it is in the American national interest; America identifies with Israel and its democratic values. But there is no question that Jewish political involvement from AIPAC and others do an excellent job in helping to maintain this relationship. This is one of the reasons why it is important for us to be important in national politics.

As far as local politics are concerned: one should always remember that those at the national level had to start somewhere. Barack Obama is now a presidential candidate, but a short time ago he was a state senator. Very often, that is how the political system works. To reiterate, America is a wonderful country and, as Jews, we want to contribute to society, whether through involvement in academia, research or business. Political involvement is another way in which we can participate in American society.

How important is it to be involved with organizations like AIPAC? On a related note: most national politicians, on either side of the aisle, claim to be doing what is good for Israel. But very often, the policies espoused by some of these public figures will be completely at odds with those advocated by others. How,

then, should we define the term "good for Israel"?

AIPAC is an important organization that has been extremely effective in Washington. Obviously, the political left and right wings – both in America and in Israel – disagree on many issues. But I don't think that the American Jewish community's lobbying efforts need extend that far. Rather, advocacy should be concerned with seeking general support for Israel. This may manifest itself in terms of securing military deals for Israel, the issue of the resettlement of Soviet Jews, the danger of a nuclear Iran, and so on. One of the characteristics of the democratic system is open disagreement, but general support for Israel is something that can extend to both sides of the aisle. Take Iran, for example: if Iran manages to produce nuclear weapons it would be catastrophic – even if they didn't use them. An Iranian nuclear weapon would be an existential threat to the existence of Israel. It would create a chain reaction of Sunni countries that would immediately seek nuclear capabilities for themselves, thereby destabilizing the state of the world. These are the sort of issues that are important, and involve general support for Israel – and AIPAC is very effective, indeed indispensable, at garnering this sort of support.



Where if ever do Jewish values intersect with American political values and where if ever do they diverge? Aside from support for Israel, are there any issues that Orthodox Jews are especially well equipped to address?

That's a difficult question. Obviously, as Orthodox Jews we should express an opinion about certain social issues like gay marriage and abortion. And there are many issues regarding which Jews are perceived as believing one thing, while actual Jewish values in fact dictate the opposite. An example might be the idea that being pro-choice is a Jewish value, when in fact the pro-choice agenda flies in the face of halakha and Jewish tradition. But these are obviously very complicated issues about which different people can disagree.

There are issues that are important to the Jewish community on a more utilitarian level.

For instance, the average Orthodox Jew carries an enormous burden in terms of the cost of yeshiva tuition. Whatever we can do to ameliorate that burden – whether in the form of school vouchers or anything else – can be very important. This might be an area in which it would be profitable to work with other communities with the same problems; for example, in the form of a program with the Archdiocese of New York such as the TeachNY Program in which the OU participates, or something along those lines.

Does personal faith have a place in the political world and the world of public policy? How might this issue relate to church and state issues?

This is an issue that must be handled very delicately. We would not want to force our beliefs on others just like we don't want others to force their beliefs on us. We live in a pluralistic society and have to respect other points of view. But we should recognize that the United States is a religious country that believes fundamentally in God. If you look at its charter documents – the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution – it is clear that they are, in a sense, religious documents. The concepts discussed therein – like the inalienable rights of man – are Jewish concepts related to the doctrine of *tselem Elokim*.

Another example of a democratic political value is employee rights. Liberal views like this stem from the Torah. In a letter, one of the prominent Founding Fathers, John Adams, even quotes the Talmud. These figures were deeply steeped in religious tradition and it infused the founding documents and American political philosophy. So I think that in that sense Jews and the Jewish faith have an important place in the American political system. But I think that we begin to enter dangerous territory when we start to speak about particular doctrines. America is a country with a diverse population and it is not appropriate to impose one or another doctrine on others. In other words, America is, in a sense, a religious country. It believes in God and its destiny – the shining City on a Hill. But imposing specific doctrines particular to one religion on the entire population is inappropriate.

Rav Genack mentioned the American political tradition; who are the greats of American history who can serve as models for us?

Well, obviously American history has had giants as well as midgets. But there is no doubt that there were those among the founders with absolutely extraordinary minds. There was John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, George Washington – and I suppose I must mention Thomas Jefferson *be-af korbi*. And these men were aware that they were shaping the course