

A democracy distinguishes itself by freedom of choice for its citizens. Along with those freedoms comes responsibility. “Do not follow the majority” assumes that there is something inherently wrong with the majority, as in the case of a lynch mob pursuing a suspect without due process. Examples today include suspecting and ostracizing Arabs and Muslims because some of their members spew hatred.

It is very tempting in this case to react with the majority by stoking this fire of hostility and anger. Judaism, however, teaches us to appraise each individual; to resist mass opinion and generalizations that result in group-think and characterizations of a class of people.

Democracy requires that individuals think and act for themselves, but also act for the greater good of a civil society.

— Terry M. Rubenstein

Daniel Rothner writes eloquently of a society in which free will is exercised free from the “pressure to behave dishonorably,” and a democracy certainly has more potential than a dictatorship to embody this vision. A candid look at our own country, however, suggests that this ideal remains as elusive as Elijah.

To wit: the 14-week life of an anemic veal calf is lived in a dark crate so small the animal can’t turn around; undeveloped muscles make the meat tender. Factory chickens are pumped so full of growth hormones that by the ends of their eight-week lives, their legs have broken from their own weight.

Such facts are shocking, but they are not news; they have been reported for decades. And yet 97 percent of our society continues to make dietary choices that support these industries. Why? The impact of each of our everyday actions simply becomes too much to contemplate. We are overwhelmed. We don’t have time to examine everything.

We, the world’s wealthiest nation, give the lowest percent of our GNP in foreign aid of any industrialized country (0.14 percent); we are the highest consumers of global natural resources (31.5 percent.) We are a nation of well-meaning, insatiable, SUV-driving souls with a long ways to go.

— Joysa Maben Winter

Daniel Rothner’s commentary reminds us to make choices with integrity. Jewish tradition, though, wants us to go further. The rabbis teach that when a majority are pursuing something that is wrong, we must attempt to change the individuals’ opinions and actions from evil to good.

Consider the accepted interpretation of Rabbi Moshe ibn Chabib. When a court is ruling on the death penalty and there is a unanimous vote to condemn, the law requires that the accused be acquitted. Our rabbi explains that “this is because there is no one to speak up in favor of the accused. If at least one member of the court claims the person is innocent, the case can be adequately debated.” This is necessary to ensure a just trial.

From this we learn that it is in the debate that we open the door for people to change from pursuing evil to pursuing good. Our obligation as Jews goes beyond knowing and acting on what is right. We must also interact with those who, often in the majority, act in a way that is unjust. We can only change the world by changing them.

— Amy Schwartzman

Daniel Rothner seems to believe that individuals making responsible, informed, and hopefully righteous choices will create a collective good for all. The extension of this argument would be that the current humanitarian crises we face — 40 million citizens without health insurance, two million incarcerated, and

inequitable resource distribution — are all the results of misguided individual actors.

Not even half of eligible citizens vote in the United States — the most basic gesture of an organized democracy. The challenge, then, is to actually build a righteous majority, and lead, not follow, it.

The original bearer of our verse, Moshe Rabenu, took the daring first step to leave his palace home and lead a group of slaves to Sinai. Their collective liberation became the model for a redeemed human society. For generations, in the name of that vision, our people tried to build righteous majorities fostering human dignity and care for the most vulnerable. America and Israel ache deeply for a revival of just such a movement. Do we still believe our people are up to the task to lead?

— Daniel Smokler

Do not follow after the majority...

Exodus 23:2

אחרי רבים להטות

שמות כג:ב

Humans distinguish themselves from other creatures through their ability to consider a multitude of options and independently choose an appropriate response. As this verse suggests, free choice is a privilege that requires a certain level of consciousness. Even more importantly, it obliges each person to be proactive against those who oppose his or her value system.

“Do not follow after the majority...” suggests a situation where one may be prejudiced by personal, social, or political pressure to behave dishonorably. We are instructed to always act with integrity; to refrain from being misled by bias. We cannot rely on others to make decisions without weighing the righteousness of our choices. Neither can we be persuaded by the majority to think that something unjust is, in fact, virtuous.

The very institution of democracy functions because of this responsibility. We choose leaders who act, hopefully, on the values we hold dear. Thinking independently and acting with integrity, we achieve collective greatness when we fulfill our responsibility to make this world a better place.

— Daniel Rothner

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