

God's call to Avram to go forth and enter "the land that I will show you" (12:1) is one of the most important moments in the Torah. It is critical not only to Avram's journey and his life but also to the future of the Jewish people, which bases its connection to *eretz Israel* on God's charge.

Why is land so central to the charge that God delivers to Avram? Inhabiting a land means having a stake. It means being a part of, belonging to something. It means exercising responsibility. I'd like to relate Avram's staking a claim in the land of Canaan to the claim that we stake in our society when we vote.

Voting is one of the simplest acts that we can perform. Its simplicity betrays its tremendous importance. To vote is to take responsibility for the world around us; it is a key way that we exercise control over our destiny and the destiny of those around us.

Voting has a fascinating history. Women's right to vote, which was granted in the United States in 1920 is one of the most important episodes in the history of voting. So too is the Civil Rights Movement of late 1950s and early 1960s. Although they had not been slaves for nearly one hundred years, African Americans were effectively barred from voting in many Southern states by a host of barriers and restrictions. These recent episodes in the history of voting are the ones we learn about the most because they represented significant societal breakthroughs.

The ability to vote is intimately tied to citizenship and self-governance, two ideas that bloomed in the late 1700s as the Enlightenment swept across Europe. These rights were nothing short of revolutionary and changed the course of human history in manifold ways. More than two hundred years later, we may be susceptible to forgetting how transformative and powerful the ideas of citizenship and self-governance are and how voting is critical to each.

Turning back to Avram for a moment and his quest for a stake in the land of Canaan, we recall that the right to vote was usually reserved only for those who owned property. Gradually, it expanded to include all members of society – rich and poor.

Two weeks ago, when we read parshat Bereishit, we came into contact with one of the most basic teachings of the Torah – that every human being is created in the image of God. This teaching is the basis for the modern idea of human dignity and the conviction that every human being is of infinite worth. The right of every person to vote – regardless of property, gender, or origin – is an affirmation of this basic and critical teaching of the Torah.

When I was an undergraduate, I was deeply involved with a movement for prison reform. The United States has a disproportionately large portion of its population incarcerated. One effect of incarceration is that many states strip ex-felons of the right to vote. I believed then, as I believe now that once someone has paid their debt to society through imprisonment, they should be restored as fully as possible to society, and that means they should not be stripped of their right to vote.

Three weeks ago, the nonpartisan Florida Rights Restoration Coalition received a big fundraising boost from former NYC mayor Michael Bloomberg. The \$16 million dollars Bloomberg donated

enabled 20,00 people to pay their court debts, which enabled them to vote. This move should have been universally praised. Unfortunately, in our current political climate, making sure that as many American citizens over 18 have the ability to vote is controversial.

I have watched with disappointment as aspersions have been cast on absentee mail-in voting and efforts have been made to limit the number of locations at which an absentee voter can drop off her ballot. This is a reversion to modes of governance that do not affirm freedom.

My message to you is to vote. Vote in person if you feel comfortable or vote absentee if you do not. In addition, encourage the people in your life – family and friends – to vote, and finally, if you have the means, donate to organizations that work to get out the vote. Every election year, only about half of American citizens cast their ballot. In some countries, in fact, voting is mandatory, and those who don't vote are fined. I'm not sure that we should take that step, but we should at least do everything possible to maximize voter turnout. Any effort to curb voter turnout is an assault on our republic and ought to be condemned.

Avram avinu, of course, lived in a time very different than our own, but his life serves as an example of what having a stake in society means. For him, securing land, as he did by purchasing the Cave of Machpelah in Hebron in order to bury his wife, was the means by which he found a stake in Canaan. From that stake developed the Jewish people's connection to the Land, eventually resulting in Joshua's conquest of the land after Moses had led the people through the wilderness.

The claim we stake in our own society through voting is more mundane, simpler, less glamorous. For some the absence of glamour dissuades them from voting. They convince themselves of its insignificance and make no effort to register, secure a mail-in ballot or go to the polls. What they don't recognize is that voting is as much about principle as it is about impact. To be sure, to date, one vote has not swayed an election, but the principle stills stands. Taking responsibility for the society in which we live demands voting no matter how insignificant the act may feel.

As we head toward election day next Tuesday, we therefore have two obstacles to overcome. One is the lack of enthusiasm some citizens have for participating in the political process. The second is the efforts by some in our society to intentionally tamp down voter turnout or to spread misinformation about the efficacy and security of mail-in voting. Apathy is a continual problem in election years, but the second problem is simply pernicious. Voting is the political instantiation of the Biblical teaching that each of us is created in God's image. With that in mind, let us cast our ballots.