

Mikkets

This week's parsha describes the rise of a Jew to a position of power in a non-Jewish society. Joseph's rise from the dungeon to the office of vizier got me thinking about Jews and the relationship to power. I'm going to share some of these musings with you.

What stands out to me is that Joseph's rise to power puts him *second in command*. Pharaoh, of course, is the ultimate power in Egyptian society. Joseph may be the power behind that power, but Pharaoh is unmistakably the one whose will governs society. The role of the Jew as second in command or the power behind the power is a familiar one. Throughout Jewish history and in contemporary life, Jews fill positions that come right up to the pinnacle of power but never quite reach it.

Even the discussion of Jews and power makes us uneasy. One of the classic antisemitic tropes plays on our relationship to power. Of course, in the eyes of our enemies, power is something we have too much of. Yet we know, as Jews, that tragically, our powerlessness has endangered us in horrific ways. Given this gap between perception and reality, it is no wonder that the subject of Jews and power makes us profoundly uncomfortable.

I remember when I voted for the first time in 2000. Joe Lieberman was on the ticket as an American vice-presidential candidate. At the time, Jews responded in two distinct ways. Some were proud that a Jew had reached this position of recognition and authority; others were frightened since they feared that any mistake – or perceived mistake – Lieberman would make as vice president would lead our enemies to blame the Jews. “Better that a Jew should not be president,” I heard many people say. To this day, many feel the same way.

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Before Barack Obama was elected president, people would debate who would be elected first: a Jew, a black, or a woman. Now that an African American has been elected president, and a woman has been the leading person on the ballot and the second leading person in a successful campaign, we might ask the question, What happened to the Jews?

Indeed, in just twenty years, we appear to have stopped our ascent within American society. Our presence has weakened not only in places like Jericho, but at large. To be sure, a Jew can pursue whatever profession she wants in this society, but the office most symbolic of power in society – the presidency – appears to have forgotten the Jew.

Or perhaps the situation is worse. After all, a Jew was runner up in the primary two election cycles in a row. Bernie Sanders cannot be discounted as a political force. Yet even this just substantiates the larger point since Bernie is truly a “Jew in name only” if that. When he described his parents in 2016, he called them Polish immigrants. To think that someone would refer to his Jewish ancestors as Poles after the Poles’ behavior during the Holocaust when most Poles certainly did not consider Jews Poles, is deeply upsetting.

Perhaps I am making too much of the presidency. I’ve thought about this. I believe there are ten Jewish Senators in the U.S. Senate, well beyond the proportion of Jews in society at large. If we’re really doing a calculation of power, we might consider that fact. As a point of comparison, three African Americans – including the Vice President elect – are Senators. All this is to say that Jews do possess political power. Some might argue that the Presidency is irrelevant.

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Yet I harbor a feeling that it is not, and the Joseph story leads me to wonder whether we should expect to always be the power behind the power rather than the power itself. To me this would be terribly unfortunate. I imagine, and there is reason to believe that imagination is fantasy in this case, that becoming President, is a statement about merit. In short, if Jews have proven to be successful in every field and industry in America, why should we not expect a Jew to be a great President?

This is only the first of a series of worrisome questions about what it means that our access to power is often mediated, rather than direct.

At this point, we have to return to the subject of antisemitism. As I mentioned, one of the leading tropes of antisemites is that “Jews have too much power.” Antisemitic websites search media companies and lists of the richest people in American to “prove” this “fact.”

We must be open about the nature of antisemitism. One of its first effects is to convince Jews of the antisemite’s “truths.” I don’t want to utterly discount the opinion among Jews that we are better off not having Jews in positions of great power, like the Presidency, as strictly the imbibing of antisemitic poison. We have a lived experience of being persecuted for having “abused power.” We might naturally conclude that the lower profile we keep, the better off we will be because no one will blame us when society descends into the depths. This is ultimately a question of strategy. My opinion, which I hope you will entertain, is that what will best ensure how survival and prosperity is not exercising power behind the scenes, but exercising it directly. We need to stop being afraid of exercising power. We cannot allow an antisemitic trope to control our behavior.

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By all means, we should be proud that the husband of the Vice President elect is a Jew or that the daughter of the outgoing President is a Jew, but let us not mistake this for power. It may be influence, but power is something altogether different.

Power obviously operates outside of the offices of the President, but I have found this such a useful example in this sermon because it touches the heart of the matter at its most sensitive place. Clearly having a Jewish President is not the end all and be all, but neither should we view our descent since Lieberman with equanimity. For America to truly be the home it promises to be, an American Jewish president must happen, and she should be a lot more like Lieberman than Sanders.

Being Joseph is valuable, but we should not make more of it than it actually is.