

WHO DOES GOD VOTE FOR?

Perspectives from the Hebrew Bible

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God judges that the outward, the external in a human being is not essential for leadership. God does not attach any importance to someone's age, strength, beauty, physical stature or the size or level of intelligence.

Although it is intensely concerned with the political, the Hebrew Bible does not idealize any particular political order. Instead it provides a set of values against which a system or a would-be leader can be judged.

'Not as human sees, does God see. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.' (1 Samuel 16.7).

God looking at the desires and motivations of a person explains why, on countless occasions, God's choice of a leader is so unexpected. God seems to favour the least, the last and the lost, and so a shepherd will make a suitable king.

God judges that the outward, the external in a human being is not essential for leadership. God does not attach any importance to someone's age, strength, beauty, physical stature or the size or level of intelligence. So out go photo ops, publicity stunts, talk show circuits, photo releases, chief communication officers and spin doctors.

What will matter to God, however, is how many of the key ethical values that he cherishes and that are unavoidable to create a just and flourishing society, will be included and will control the aims and policies of his candidate.

His candidate manifesto will always seek to promote and implement *mishpat*, and *tsedaqah*. Jeremiah addressing his king says:

'Listen to what the Lord says: "do what is just (*mishpat*) and right (*tsedaqah*); rescue from the defrauder the one who is robbed; do not wrong the stranger, the fatherless and the widow; commit no lawless act and do not shed the blood of the innocent.'" (22.3).

Mishpat has to do with fairness, equity, impartiality. It means that the voice of the defenceless, weak and underprivileged in society, the widow, the orphan, and the

immigrant worker, for example, must be listened to, as they would be listened to by a judge in a tribunal. Executive decisions must not be influenced by the powerful and wealthy at the expense of the defenceless and the poor. Ruling by exercising *mishpat* means that bribes, pay-offs, corrupting gifts must be rejected. It means that the rights of the powerless and destitute must never be ignored when executive decisions are taken and that, in any case, political decisions must never make the innocent suffer.

But justice alone is not sufficient. A politician who only adheres to norms of fairness, equity and impartiality will not be able to create a decent and humane society. Equity needs to be complemented by *tsedaqah*. *Tsedaqah* describes an attitude of generosity towards fellow human beings. It is a virtue that causes people to take care of others, to give them their due. In the Hebrew Bible *tsedaqah* is exemplified in three institutions that reflect the agricultural background of ancient Israel. In the year of release, debts were cancelled. In the year of the Jubilee, the ancestral fields were returned to their original owners, and the slaves were able to go free in the seventh year of service.

Tsedaqah mitigates the rigour of bare justice and impartiality, as is shown in the example of the creditor who must return a pledged coat to the debtor who needs it to keep warm by night (Deuteronomy 24.13).

Behind *tsedaqah* lies the idea that what we possess we do not own, but we hold it in trust for God, and one of the conditions of that trust is that we share some of what we have with people in need. There must be justice not only through a fair legal system, but also in how the means of existence are distributed. God's candidate will have to make sure that no-one should be without the basic requirements of existence.

Finally, God's candidate will know the central importance of a third virtue that is mentioned numerous times in the Hebrew Bible: *hessed*.

'What the Lord requires of us is this: to do what is just, to love *hessed*' (Micah 6.7). *Hessed* is the virtue that makes a bond between people work and endure: it is fidelity, faithfulness, loyalty that results in acts of kindness, and love, of help and support. It is love-as-deed exercised toward the neighbour. *Hessed* generates habits of cooperation and care. It humanizes society and as such is a vital social ingredient. Because of its very nature, because it springs from the love and compassion of the individual, *hessed* cannot be legislated or imposed by an act of Parliament. However, it can be taught and the acquisition of *hessed* can be encouraged. It will certainly have to appear as a subject in the Educational programme of God's candidate.

The candidate for whom God will vote will have a manifesto shaped by the knowledge that God is a liberating God; the history of Israel starts with the liberation of an enslaving people from an enslaving power. He will know that society exists in virtue of a covenant between the people and God, in which both sides pledge themselves to mutual loyalty and to the task of constructing a society and communities in which the human person, regardless of rank, power, or privilege is honoured as the bearer of the image of God.

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