

The Fate of Our Nation

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Sometimes the weekly Torah portion and the events of the week dovetail just perfectly. This week's Torah portion is called *Shoftim* – literally “judges” – or more idiomatically “leaders.” One of the highlights of *Shoftim* is the rules it sets out for a king. It says that if we choose a king, “He shall not keep many horses... he shall not have many wives... nor shall he amass silver and gold to excess.” (Deut. 17:16-17) The king is also commanded to write a Torah scroll, or to have one written for him. The idea is that keeping the Torah before him will prevent him from “acting haughtily toward his fellows” (Deut 17:20) and remind him of God's commandments.

Despite its commandments concerning the leaders of society, this Torah portion focuses more on all of us. Its very first words instruct all of us to appoint judges, leaders, officials. And then, just when we might think the portion is about to address those leaders to give them instructions, the Torah keeps the focus on all of us. It says, “*You* shall not judge unfairly; *you* shall be impartial; *you* shall not take bribes.” (Deut. 16:19)

And certainly we have judged. In recent days there have been many in the Jewish community who have criticized certain Jews who work for the White House or in the cabinet. They have been criticized for their failure to speak out against their employer when he espoused values contrary to Jewish tradition. By their silence they have seemed to endorse their employer's opinions and actions.

I will not defend those members of the administration. In fact, we will continue to call upon all our leaders to uphold the values we hold dear: to love our neighbors as ourselves; to look out for the stranger, widow and orphan; and to honor the divinity of every human being.

But let us be careful not point the first finger. Rather, let us consider how we would act if we were in their shoes. Let me pose the following questions:

Should a Jew refuse to take a job with a coal mining company?

Should a Jew refuse to work for Hobby Lobby?

What if your boss tells a racist joke? Should you confront him or her, or let it slide by?

It is easy to criticize from the sidelines. It is easy to espouse certain values in one's own mind, or even in conversation with others. It is more challenging to figure out how to live those values within the confines of one's own home. And it is even more difficult to live those values in the public arena.

Some of us might know what it is like to work for an employer who has made decisions contrary to our deeply-held core values. We have had to consider how to best express and live out our

values in the public sphere, where there are consequences. We have had to consider the consequences of speaking up or remaining quiet.

Maimonides, the greatest of all rabbis, who lived 800 years ago, wrote that each person is judged solely on his merits and demerits. Our actions are weighed and we are judged as good or evil. Maimonides wrote that the same is true of a nation. All the merits of its citizens are added up and weighed opposite their mistakes and sins. Then the balance is tallied and that nation is judged either good or evil. Most importantly, all our actions count equally. A nation is not judged solely according to the behavior of its leader. On the contrary, a nation is judged according to the behavior of all its inhabitants.

The actions of our leaders are undoubtedly important. But let us not be content to criticize. Our own actions are equally consequential for the fate of our nation, if not more so. We set the agenda, determining the discourse around our dinner tables and in our office meetings. We determine the values we will teach our children.

The generation of Americans who came of age through the Depression and who fought the Second World War have come to be known as the Greatest Generation. They are remembered for selfless action and for how they collectively established values and norms for our nation.

Our generation and our nation will be judged too. May we, through our actions, merit to be judged for good.