



The Center for Ethics at Yeshiva University

*The Ethics and Character of Leaders – From Biblical Sources*

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Any discussion on “the ethics and character of presidents” is obviously a very serious contemporary undertaking. “Presidents,” after all, are a rather recent innovation, implying a democratic choice of leaders. The present essay, focusing especially on lying and truth-telling, will seek ancient sources for enlightenment, on the premise that some ethical issues are universal and ancient, and only the arrogance of modernism will lead one to dismiss the wisdom of centuries past as necessarily primitive or irrelevant.

Hence, can the ancient traditions of Jewish thought teach us anything of value about the ethics of political leadership? More specifically, how can Judaic sources help to shed light on questions of presidential ethics and character in the United States? After all, these sources have their origins in ages that long pre-date either modern democracy or anything like the institution of the contemporary U.S. presidency. Indeed, the Hebrew Bible and the rabbinic tradition do not make the clear and sharp distinctions that we do today between private and public realms, or between religious and secular realms. Yet they are deeply concerned about ethical conduct and character, and some of their concerns about ethics are specific to individuals in leadership roles.

Focusing on the familiar question of lying and truth-telling—when is it clearly forbidden and when, if ever, is it appropriate to lie—I suggest that the Hebrew Bible (the Torah) and the Jewish legal and ethical tradition that flows from it have a sophisticated and realistic approach to the ethics of political leadership. This approach takes careful account of the special responsibilities of public office and the special duties and prerogatives of public office-holders. However, because the sources do not focus on leaders as necessarily different from ordinary folk, it is important to mention that these sources concern lying in general. We shall explicate this ethical framework as follows:

- 1) The Bible contains a strong general prohibition on lying in the administration of justice, including both the intrinsic and instrumental problems with lying. The Torah expressed disgust with mendacity not only by prohibiting it, but emphasizing that “you shall distance yourself from any falsehood” (Ex. 23:7). While this commandment was directed primarily at judges, it was applied to other issuances as well. Hence the lies that led King Ahab and Queen Jezebel to their historic abuse of power for personal gain. There is an especially strong condemnation of this sort of lying for the personal gain of political leaders.
- 2) Yet David, who abuses his power egregiously to get Uriah out of the way, is allowed to retain his power and his legacy because he recognizes and repents of the evil he has done when confronted by the prophet Nathan.
- 3) In contrast to its condemnation of the self-serving lies of Ahab and Jezebel, the Bible approves the lies concocted by King Zedekiah and the prophet Jeremiah. Those lies served to protect Jeremiah from an assassination attempt by the ruling circles who felt threatened by his prophecies of destruction—a vital purpose that the Bible implicitly treated as justifying deception. Lies are deemed acceptable when they are necessary to protect the safety of one's community or its way of life.
- 4) The qualification of the prohibition against lying is expanded by Hillel (of the first century BCE), who argues for what we would now call white lies, e.g., telling a rather homely and ungainly bride that she is “beautiful and charming.” Thus, this one important rabbinic tradition recognizes the need for such diplomacy, all the more so when it serves the public as well as the private good. According to Jewish sources, even God tells an occasional white lie—in one instance, to preserve marital





(page 2)

harmony between Abraham and Sarah.

- 5) These qualifications are coupled with a recognition that political leaders, however devoted and inspired they may be, are merely human beings, who will sometimes tell lies that cannot be justified by necessity or diplomacy. We cannot expect perfection from our leaders. Indeed, Maimonides—the great medieval Spanish Talmudist, philosopher, and communal leader—maintained that it was well nigh impossible for a leader *not* to sin.
- 6) Although the Bible does not make a sharp distinction between personal and political vices and virtues, it recognizes that an individual may be exemplary in one domain of life and seriously deficient in another. In this sense, it has a complex view of character. Saul's unmatched virtue as a "private citizen," for example, is contrasted with his serious weakness as a king. Conversely, it reveals how someone as deeply flawed in his treatment of other people as David could nevertheless be a great political and even a religious leader. A corollary to this phenomenon would be the value of confession and repentance and rehabilitation—all of which contributed to the judgment of David by history, or at least by millions of pious folk throughout the centuries.
- 7) The Bible's political ethics in effect yields this rule: is, in effect: In an imperfect world, beware of those who appear too perfect. In the words of King Solomon, son of King David: "The world contains no man so righteous that he can do right always and never do wrong" (Eccl.:20). Consequently, we ought not to overlook a potential leader because of a non-fatal flaw, one which will not compromise his people or impede his function as a leader.

How would this biblical and rabbinic position apply to recent controversies about presidential leadership in the United States?

First, we must focus on different kinds of presidential lies (for national security, for diplomacy, for self-protection, and for self-enrichment and self-aggrandizement), and compare them to some of the biblical lies I have discussed, speculating about what the Rabbinic attitude toward them might have been. Second, we must recognize that the Bible's view that political and personal virtue do not always go hand in hand is reflected in the valuation of recent U.S. Presidents (and I hope the reader will forgive any political bias in my choice of illustrations.)

For example, many historians regard Jimmy Carter as an admirable person (kind, decent, well-meaning, at least until recent reports about suspicious ties to Arab oil), but an ineffective president, and Lyndon Johnson as a deeply flawed person (vulgar, thoroughly political, bullying), but a powerfully effective President (in terms of domestic policy, at least, until the tragedy in Vietnam overwhelmed him). At the same time, some historians believe that the personal flaws of both men kept them from being better leaders than they might otherwise have been.

The contrast between Bill Clinton and George W. Bush is similarly instructive. Clinton's adultery and lies about it led to his impeachment, but his political effectiveness survived. Bush, so far as we know, led a morally upstanding life while in the White House, but his lies about national security matters, including the reasons for invading Iraq, ultimately undermined his leadership altogether.

In discussing such contemporary cases, I do not take sides in the debates (and if occasionally my bias shows, it is both unfortunate and unintentional), but rather point out how considerations about leadership that are found in the Bible and in the Jewish legal tradition that flows from it may be relevant to their resolution.