

My Community—My Self and God: What is Jewish about Voting?
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Midterm Elections are rapidly approaching, merely two weeks from now. On November 5 we will vote for local, state and federal officials. Over the past few months as I have promoted voter registration drives and vocalized the importance of informed voting, I have been asked, "what is Jewish about voting?" The pessimist would use the following quote to explain the importance of voting:

"Be wary of the government, for they are interested in you only for their own designs. They appear to be beloved at the time when they are benefiting [from you]. And they won't be there when a person needs them." Values of our Ancestors: Chapter II Mishnah 3

Clearly as we watch campaign commercials on television leading up to the election we witness the negative side of politics. With candidates hurling criticisms at their opponents and using catchy campaign slogans to appeal to voters, one might become skeptical. The sages above are referring to the Roman authority, but even today we can see how we might be wary of the government and candidates for office. As voters it is our duty to be wary of those who claim they have the best model for effective policy, but as Jews it is our duty to elect officials who will not only be effective leaders, but also morally conscious ones. A few weeks ago, I attended the PEW Forum on Religion and Public Life's event entitled Religion on the Stump: Politics and Faith in America. At this event

former Gov. Mario Cuomo and Rep. Mark Souder discussed when and how faith is appropriately incorporated into the lives and actions of public officials. Former Gov. Cuomo, who is not Jewish, spoke about the importance of the Jewish values of Tzedakah and Tikkun Olam. He said that they are universal values that can guide us in decision and policy-making. If we take Governor Cuomo's viewpoint as the optimist's version of why it is Jewish to vote, we might use this text:

"Hillel says: Do not separate yourself from the community, and do not be secure of who you are until the day of your death. Do not judge your friend until you have been in your place." Values of our Ancestors: Chapter II Mishnah 5

Hillel reminds us that we are part of a community and that we have an obligation as members of that community to involve ourselves in its well-being. When we vote, we are making a decision on behalf of our community. We are making an effort to elect a leader we think will best serve that community. When we do so, we are doing something greater than ourselves and our own self-interest. We are actively pursuing justice, by electing the officials we believe will carry out policy with a moral conscious and a sense of justice and righteousness. We are fulfilling the mitzvah of Tikkun Olam—the ultimate Jewish value.

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