



How Jewish Democracy Endures

Eric Cohen | CEO, Tikvah

As the Jewish holiday of Pesach fast approaches, I wanted to share a few reflections on our mission and our moment: as Jews, as Zionists, and as an institution—Tikvah—that aims to strengthen the Jewish people through education and ideas.

For the past many weeks, all Jewish eyes—and the gaze of the world—have been fixed on Israel: the political battles, the rallies in the streets, the growing fear that Israeli society is coming apart. We all know that the current struggle in Israel is much larger than disagreements about judicial reform or the role of the Supreme Court in Israeli society. Our cherished Jewish state is engaged in a great struggle—cultural, constitutional, political—to define its very soul. We are witnessing, in real time, another watershed moment in Jewish history.

For those who care about the unity and strength of the Jewish people—and those who believe that the fate of Israel has great significance for the world: we are right to be concerned. Jerusalem—the moral capital of the West—is quaking. Yet we should pause, amid our worry, to celebrate this very fact: our eyes are cast on *Israel*, a sovereign Jewish state. Unlike most epochs in Jewish history, our Jewish fate rests in Jewish hands—not tsars, not kings, not Pharaohs, not foreign powers who rule over us. We have the freedom, as Jews, to define who we are. We may fight about the meaning of Israel, but most of us proudly wave the Israeli flag.

Tikvah—the organization that I am privileged to lead—finds itself at the center of these debates, but not in the way you might think. Yes, for the past two decades, we have sponsored in-depth analyses and high-level seminars on the role of the judiciary in Israel society. Yes, many Tikvah alumni are now leaders in the Israeli civic and political arena: as journalists, activists, intellectuals, and Knesset members. And yes, we have even been the target of false accusations, wild conspiracy theories, and mean-spirited protests.

But the real reason Tikvah is at the center of the debate is because we offer the very thing that Israel—and the Jewish people—need most if we are to build a Jewish future together: education, ideas, and conversation on things that count.

The word “democracy” is thrown around in these debates—on all sides—as a sacred ideal, a partisan slogan, and a rallying cry in the streets. Yet perhaps it is worth asking why democracy

is so important—and what makes democracies endure. Democracy matters because the alternative is political tyranny or mob rule. And democratic self-government only endures if nations pass down the soul of citizenship from generation to generation. And so we ask:

- Can Jewish democracy succeed if we fail to educate young people in the defining epochs, great ideas, and heroic leaders of Jewish history?
- Can Jewish democracy succeed if we don't nurture political and intellectual leaders who carry the fate of Jewish history on their shoulders?
- Can Jewish democracy succeed if we cannot understand the other side of great arguments—and if we cannot defend our own side with both strength and civility?
- Can Jewish democracy succeed if we don't understand the indispensable role of the Jewish people in the history of the West and of the world?
- Can Jewish democracy succeed without educational institutions like Tikvah?

It is not Tikvah's purpose to engage in the high-stakes short-term battles of political life, important as they are. Our purpose is to educate the next generation of Jewish citizens and Jewish leaders—men and women who can face the challenges of the coming age with wisdom, strength, civility, and courage. And if we can look beyond the tweets, the water cannons, and the screaming matches of the past few weeks, the hardest challenge we face is this: Where will the next generation of great Jewish and Zionist leaders actually come from? Can the Jewish people—in Israel and around the world—bear the weight of Jewish history?

In the months ahead, Tikvah's team in Israel intends to take a leading role in addressing one big question: how does Israeli society fashion a true constitution, worthy of a great, maturing, and proudly Jewish democracy? This will be the focus of our major conference in Jerusalem this coming May. My colleagues in Israel rightly understand that they are living in their own Lincolnian moment—roughly 75 years after Israel's founding—that demands a new birth of Jewish sovereignty without the pain and bloodshed of civil unrest. If there is hope for a great constitutional agreement in Israel—which is the defining issue of this momentous hour in Jewish history—we know that Tikvah will be central to shaping the debate at the level of ideas.

In America, we plan to expand our efforts to educate committed and courageous Jews in a culture that often dismisses Hebraic values as outdated and diminishes Israeli nationalism as parochial or even racist. At Tikvah, we will study the moral wisdom of Genesis and the political wisdom of Exodus. We will uncover life's mysteries in the writings of Maimonides and stir the Jewish soul with the poetry of Halevi. We will learn strategy with Thucydides, economics with Adam Smith, and the proper balance of tradition and freedom with Edmund Burke. We will study the influence of Jewish ideas on the American soul, and we will study the heroic history

of Zionism as a source of inspiration. Just as future leaders in ages past studied Plutarch's *Lives* in search human excellence, our young Jewish students will study the lives of Herzl and Ben-Gurion and Begin and Sharansky in search of Jewish excellence.

Viewed as snapshots for Instagram, the scenes from the streets of Tel Aviv are surely unsettling. Yet in moments of conflict and uncertainty, great leaders look beyond the current crisis to envision a better future. And the only way to see a better Jewish future is to understand and learn from the turmoil and triumphs of the past—a drama that has brought the Jewish people from slavery to freedom, from the desert to the holy land, from ghettos to battlefields, from exile to sovereignty. At Tikvah, we teach history *because* we believe in the future. We invite young Jews into the great minds and defining moments of the past so they can understand that today's fights are tomorrow's lessons in the making. Today's Jewish struggles are tomorrow's Jewish memories redeemed.

In the coming weeks of Pesach and Yom Ha'Atzmaut, we can all hope that a period of calm will return to Israel: not because we want the civic contest over Israeli self-government to end, but because we want the battlefield of Jewish democracy to move from the streets to the Knesset and from bitter conflict to prudent compromise. And we can all hope that when young Jews from around the world turn their eyes and hearts to Jerusalem, it stirs their sense that the Rock of Ages summons us—the Jews—to remain an exceptional people: a Menorah to the world.

I wish you all a meaningful Pesach—filled with reflection, remembrance, and celebration.