

זרמים
Zeramim

*Zeramim: An Online Journal of
Applied Jewish Thought*

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SPECIAL ISSUE:

JUDAISM, THE 21ST CENTURY & THE POLITICAL

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Dear readers,

In committing to publishing essays of applied Jewish thought — that is, scholarship that not only analyzes data of the Jewish past and present but also promotes a path forward—*Zeremim*'s editors recognize the special place that *Zeremim* holds as a forum for reflecting on Judaism, the 21st century and the political. In a moment when many democratic institutions are being challenged, this special issue of *Zeremim* dedicates itself to the intersection of today's political climate with Jewish history, thought and identity.

In this issue's opening essay, Arnold Eisen asks "Are We Witnessing the End of the Enlightenment?" and subsequently urges Jewish leaders to collaborate in ensuring that the answer is a resounding "No." Eisen reflects on several disturbing shifts in American culture and offers some insights into how the Jewish tradition is well-poised to respond to these contemporary challenges.

The work of infusing one's values in the context of a larger entity challenges us to identify what it is that constitutes the heart or conscience of any political or religious group. In "Conscience, Criticism and Contemporary America," Alan Mittleman turns to Aristotle, Martin Luther King Jr. and the Hebrew Bible to explore Americans' responsibility in forming a national conscience through dialogue between a nation's courts and its citizenry.

Sanford C. Gordon's "The American Jewish Community as Civic and Political Association: Some Foundational Thoughts" explores James Madison's and Alexis de Tocqueville's conceptions of united collectives and their political sway. In determining the aptness of these terms to American Jewry, Gordon proposes what responsibilities lie ahead for the American Jewish community.

Rewinding to a critical moment in Clinton's 2016 presidential campaign, Ben Fink, in "On Big Lies, Prophetic Truths and Ham Sandwiches," turns to the lifework and wisdom of Saul Alinsky (and some of his most Jewishly mischievous turns of phrase). Exploring how Alinsky's cultural Judaism—aligning with contemporary understandings of the Hebrew prophets—provides guidance for and models the labor of political organizing, Fink presents rhetoric that can thoughtfully and honestly advance the pursuit of equality.

Criticisms abound for artful speech in synagogues when the rhetor gets "political," as Daniel Kirzane shows in "To Serve the Cause for the Love of Truth: Politics from the Jewish Pulpit." Kirzane

provides a brief history of the great American tradition of rabbis whose political (or allegedly apolitical) stances have stirred up trouble and evaluates what lies behind the polemics of their critics.

Entering territory beyond the United States, in “In Fashions & Out Fashions: When Appearing Jewish Becomes Illegal,” Jonah Rank reviews Québec’s recent legislation that banned Muslim women’s facial coverings when receiving or offering public services. Speculating what an appropriate Jewish response ought to be to the suppression of visible marks of Jewish identity, Rank explores five episodes from Jewish religious history and mythology when Jews—real and imagined—have faced such crises.

In “A Proposed Distinction Between Expectation and Aspirational Messianism,” Richard Claman juxtaposes the writings of several Jewish studies scholars with the work of John Rawls in order to flesh out how Jewish messianic trends can articulate a Jewish political ideal. Building on Rawls’ questions of “ideal theory” and “non-ideal theory,” Claman outlines how the variety of Jewish messianic expressions model for Jewish political theorists a way to distinguish between aspirations and the means that lead to such ends.

Closing our issue in *Midrash Zeramim*, Monica R. Howell offers a close look at her artist’s book *We Were Strangers Once*—a meditation on the “human waste” of refugees, the ill-fated subjects who are all-too-often destined not for life but for death. Reverberating with the words of *Un’taneh Tokef* from the High Holiday liturgy, Howell’s work translates into simple but sobering images of the destiny of those who are bound to die by hunger, by thirst and by other atrocities. Howell’s title silently hints that the wanderings of Jewish history demand that Jews offer compassion even to those whose fate might appear sealed for misfortune.

Addressing some of the deepest crises in how Jews can best participate in and observe political ongoings, this issue of *Zeramim* aims to inform, to provoke and to engage. We hope that the applied Jewish thought in this issue inspire readers to fulfill the wish propagated by the Babylonian Talmud: “Study is greater [than action alone] when [that study] leads to action” (Kiddushin 40b).

With gratitude,

Jonah Rank, Managing Editor & Designer

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~ | **MIDRASH ZERAMIM** | ~

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