

Mubarak, Egypt, and Moses

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The more I consider Mubarak of Egypt, the more I am tempted to compare him with Moses (unfavorably, of course). Some parts of the Torah may be alien to the modern mind. But there is so much that wise and relevant thousands of years later.

We use "democracy" loosely and mean different things by it. The modern version does not come about either at the stroke of a pen or a sudden change at the top. It can only thrive if there are democratic institutions, and when the mass of the population has some measure of confidence in them.

Without an independent and reasonably honest judiciary, a police force that can be relied upon to do its job fairly, without freedom of expression and the right to gather; without an army that remains independent of politics, the theory of democracy will not work in practice. These elements were all missing from Mubarak's Egypt.

Moses had a fractious, unemployed, unemployable mob to contend with, divided tribally, religiously, and economically. It didn't matter how much aid they got from God (or the USA) they were ready at the drop of a donkey's dung to go out and demonstrate, to attack their leader, and demand his resignation. Even if Moses always had God on his side, look at the institutional steps he took to deal with the problem of getting the majority to share his vision.

At first he tried running things himself until his father-in-law taught him the importance of delegation. So he established a supervisory judiciary of the seventy elders to administer the constitution. Everyone had access to a just and fair legal system, a system in which, civilly at least, all citizens had equality, and so did strangers and aliens who accepted its principles. These elders presided over others who were responsible for "thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens". The criteria for appointments were honesty and freedom from corruption: "Honest men who hate bribery" (Exodus 18). The role of the judiciary then was not simply to execute the law but to teach it to everyone, universal education. This ensured that everyone felt invested in the system.

There was a police force to support and work with the judiciary. But they too were circumscribed by the principles of honesty and freedom from corruption. The problem in Egypt today is that neither the police nor the judiciary is considered by the vast majority to be fair or incorruptible.

In the wilderness the judiciary sat in and was part of the Tabernacle, which itself was a response to the need that emerged for a visible focal point at the center of the people. Everyone, regardless, was encouraged to come and voice concerns (Exodus 38, Samuel 1:2). In the post-wilderness settled communities, justice was accessible in city gates and travelling judges catered to the needs of the rural population.

The priesthood was responsible for seeing that the national public face of religion was a cohesive factor in national identity. It too was part of the same constitutional framework as civil law, not beyond it. It too was responsible for education.

There was no standing army. Volunteers from the tribes, came together to meet specific challenges. Only when the nation was under threat did conscription become a matter of obligation.

For all of this, the Bible itself recounts that these systems were as subject to decline and decay as any other human organization. That was why, parallel with the judiciary, the Torah introduced the role of the prophet, the voice of idealism and of opposition to corrupt government. In many ways the prophet then was like the free media now, although there were deceitful practitioners then too.

Mubarak claimed to have opened up lines of communication through the internet and social networks in ways that China has not, but in fact any serious expression of opposition landed the modern voices of protest in torture chambers. The checks and balances that Moses introduced and his willingness to listen to the complainants were effective safety valves during his period of leadership.

The Torah was not doctrinaire about systems of government, allowing for different models to suit different eras. If the monarchy acquired historical significance over judges or the rabbinic councils, it was more as a nostalgic reference point than a prescription. Anyway, even the king in theory, was always subject to the law of the land and never above it.

Jewish governance in the post-Biblical world was dominated by other powers and cultures. Where Jewish communities were allowed to govern themselves, as often happened, they were in theory led by a meritocracy subject to the will and the vote of the community. Sadly, oligarchies of the rich and the rabbinic protecting their own interests, too often came to dominate.

“It is a truth universally acknowledged” that humans succeed in diminishing almost all values that seek to restrict their selfishness and lust for power. The history of the Jewish people proves that the highest of ideals are no guaranteed protection against corruption. Nevertheless, seeing how the Torah maps out the requirements of fair and honest government fills me with admiration for the original inspiration, and perhaps a tinge of schadenfreude that over the millennia others have done far worse than we have!