

The Ambivalent Jewish View of Meritocracy

“You cannot compare one who has reviewed his studies 100 times to one who has reviewed his studies 101 times.”

—Hillel, *Tractate Hagigah 9b*



AT THE HEART of modern meritocracy lies the presumption that those who wield power and influence, those who are to be admired, earn their status. Hard work and talent are recognized and rewarded. Those who “arrive” do so honestly. Because Jews have a long history

of studying hard and striving for excellence and success wherever the societies in which they live make it possible, it is often assumed that meritocracy is a Jewish value.

The reality is more complicated. First, there are two primary Jewish conceptualizations of meritocracy—the biblical and the rabbinic. Second, neither matches the modern definition, which is problematized from the very first Jew.

“From the beginning, our ancestors were idol worshippers,” the Haggadah announces. The allusion from the Book of Joshua is to Abraham’s polytheistic family. The Bible does not explain why Abraham is called by God to “go forth from your land... to the land that I will show you.” Certainly, the text offers no suggestion that Abraham had done anything to deserve the call by way of spiritual daring or selfless acts.

He does, however, amply demonstrate these qualities later. Overall, the story of the patriarchs suggests that the Torah’s idea of merit—essentially, being chosen to carry forward the covenantal line—is a function of unexplained Divine favor followed by the revelation of personal qualities that appear to justify the Divine choice.

Abraham justifies that choice in both faith and deed. Isaac, Abraham’s son with Sarah, is a more passive figure, enduring more than he acts. Perhaps his claim to merit lies in his bearing the ordeal of near-sacrifice without complaint: Inscrutable Divine action combines with a faithful response. But the Torah does not say so. Further, meritocracy as we understand it requires that, in a just world, people deserve the bad things that happen to them, too. Isaac’s inheritance requires that the older Ishmael be disinherited. Worse, Ishmael is cast out twice. The second time, Abraham is uneasy. The first time, however, he simply tells Sarah that Hagar is hers to do with as she wishes—at a time when Ishmael is in his mother’s womb and Abraham has no assurance his pregnant concubine will not simply die in the desert. That’s what happens in deserts, after all. Abraham fights an awful lot harder to save the inhabitants of Sodom than to save Ishmael from almost certain death. To be fair, he doesn’t fight to save Isaac from death at his own hand, either. In the meantime, God offers no explanation for why it must be Sarah’s son with whom He will maintain His covenant.

Isaac’s sons Esau and Jacob each initially merit favor—the first by his father, the second by his mother, Rebecca. Jacob is younger

but prevails over the ancient custom of primogeniture by obliging a starving Esau to yield up his birthright for stew and then fooling his blind father into giving him Esau's covenantal blessing. He flees Esau's wrath, spends 20 years being tricked by and tricking his uncle Laban, fails to respond to the rape of his daughter Dinah, suffers the apparent death of his beloved Joseph as a direct result of his favoritism—shades of the fallout of the preferential treatment by his father Isaac and his mother Rebecca—and proves so protective of Joseph's younger brother, Benjamin, that he leaves one of his other sons in prison in Egypt. No wonder Jacob remarks to Pharaoh that his 130 years have been “short and bitter.” His life hardly reads as a guide to “How to Found a Nation and Have a Country Named After You”—and yet that is his reward. Esau is relegated to the sidelines, just like Ishmael.

Notably, however, like Isaac and Abraham before him, Jacob maintains his faith in God throughout, and this appears to be the salient quality that explains God's choices.

Similarly with Joseph, who also has plenty of strikes against him. Brash enough to share with his older brothers the dreams that suggest they will bow to him, he finds himself enslaved in Egypt, where his good looks and, perhaps, a naïve lack of self-management, land him in jail. When the story turns, and his brothers bow to him in their quest for food, he puts them through agonizing trials and tribulations before eventually serving as their economic guarantor and saving the family from starvation. Once again, however, he keeps the faith, insisting both to his fellow inmates and to Pharaoh that it is God who interprets dreams, not him—and to his brothers that they should not trouble themselves over their betrayal: It was all God's plan.

Exodus does not change the pattern of Genesis. Moses had murdered an Egyptian he found beating an Israelite and fled into the desert, seemingly content with a shepherd's life in Midian, when he receives the call at the ripe old age of 80. He is extraordinarily hesitant to take up the mantle of leadership, despite all

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God's assurances of success. Though he had earlier attempted to break up a fight between quarreling Israelites and assisted a group of Midianite women in drawing water from a well, it is only after being chosen by God that Moses shows his extraordinary qualities as the leader of a nascent nation.

In the Torah, one is chosen, somewhat or completely arbitrarily, and then proves one's suitability to inherit the covenant or bear the mantle of communal leadership. Who deserves recognition seems to be a matter of how those carrying the weight of Divine interest deal with human struggles, false starts, doubts, deceptions, and self-control, and less about the way in which natural ability translates into individual achievement. Even the master builder Bezalel—responsible for designing the Tabernacle—is chosen because God filled him with His spirit and granted him keen craftsmanship, not because of talents he has honed through long practice.

There is, in the Torah, something closer to what we would recognize as a societal elite—the dynastic priestly class. It is more like an aristocracy than a meritocracy—certain privileges, specifically the service of the Tabernacle, accrue to them through birth. They do however follow the earlier model in that they are first chosen, and then they live up to the responsibility (or not). But the priesthood also differs from both an aristocracy and a meritocracy in that, despite being given tasks of enormous ritual import, maintaining

their holy status involves considerable personal restrictions rather than greater freedom. They also come exclusively from the tribe of Levi, whose selection for this special status is directly tied by God to His decision that they will never own land. Their survival depends on the tithes the other tribes are commanded to provide.



What of the second and third sections of the Bible? There are too many relevant stories in Prophets and Writings to explore here. But we may note a few telling ones. As with the Torah, they do not uniformly support a modern reading of the meritocracy.

Ruth's unexpected loyalty to her mother-in-law ends with an advantageous remarriage and the revelation that she is the great-grandmother of David, the great poet-king of Jewish tradition. Score one for meritocracy, the great irony being that Ruth is a Moabitess, not an Israelite.

David himself rises to prominence by killing Goliath and other martial exploits. When Saul loses his claim to the monarchical line because, having been chosen, he does *not* show himself worthy, David replaces him. Later, however, David allows himself to get caught up in never-ending palace intrigue and the bloodiness that goes with it. He even sends Uriah into the front lines so that he can regularize his adultery with Uriah's wife Bathsheba by making her his queen. Their son Solomon becomes king, and Bathsheba becomes queen mother, with the determined help of the prophet Nathan. And although Solomon's son, Rehoboam, loses most of his kingdom because he treated his subjects so poorly—a meritocratic event—the monarchy ossifies into a sorry dynastic affair, one bad king after another offset by the occasional Josiah.

Meanwhile, the long line of prophets offers a stark demonstration of fealty to God unevenly rewarded. Think of Jeremiah, whose pleadings and warnings of impending doom go utterly unheeded, and Elijah, hunted for years by Jezebel. Later, in the Writings, Esther

is elevated simply because of her beauty—hesitant to admit her Jewish identity, she embraces her role in exposing Haman only when told by her uncle Mordecai that if she doesn't save the Jews, someone else will.

To some extent, we can extend the Torah's version of meritocracy to the servant-leadership of the dynastic priesthood and monarchy, outstanding figures who respond to responsibility arbitrarily bestowed rather than in recognition of skills or capabilities. But, as shown in the stories of David and Solomon, widely regarded as the two greatest kings of Israel, God's favor can coexist with troubling behavior. David is perhaps most like Jacob: a man of great faults compensated for by his faithfulness. And in every model—from the forefathers and foremothers through the priesthood to the monarchy—whatever gifts are given, they are emphatically not for self-aggrandizement.

One meritocratic contrast should be drawn between the Israelite kings and other ancient Near Eastern monarchs. The latter are routinely regarded as somehow Divine; the Israelite kings “earn” their place because of God's covenant with David due to his righteousness.

This, then, is the “meritocracy” of the individual in the Bible.



In the post-biblical era, political autonomy lost, a largely Diaspora-based Judaism yearned for a return to Israel but shifted its focus to study. The Rabbis projected this new focus backward: King David is said in the Gemara to have studied the Torah day and night; one of his warriors, said in the Book of Samuel to have killed a lion one winter day, is understood by the Rabbis to have “slain” the notoriously challenging book of Leviticus by learning all of it on a single cold day. Achievement manifested itself by way of generational transmission through study rather than through intrafamilial and international politicking. It is here that a semblance of what

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we think of as meritocracy emerges—but with very important differences.

In the walls of the *beit midrash*, a sage was admired independently of his origins if he (or the very occasional she) mastered the corpus of Jewish learning. Rabbi Akiva, a shepherd, began to study when he was 40. Reish Lakish went from marauding bandit to brilliant scholar. And Hillel, too poor to afford entry into the *beit midrash*, sat atop its roof listening in, until the other students took pity on him one freezing day.

On the rabbinic scale, even a bastard takes precedence over a high priest who is an ignoramus. “According to the effort is the reward,” the Rabbis state in *Ethics of the Fathers*, likely referring both to Jewish learning and obedience to the mitzvot. Hence the Talmudic recognition that, “in a place where those who have repented stand, even the completely righteous cannot stand.”

Glossing the Mishnaic teaching that there are three “crowns,” those of priesthood, royalty, and Torah, the medieval sage Maimonides notes that, unlike the first two, “the crown of Torah remains for anyone who wishes to be crowned with it.” The Talmudic sage Phineas ben Yair had earlier suggested that learning’s impact extends well beyond the intellect, inducing humility, the ability to

avoid temptation, and even the gift of prophecy and the ability to resurrect the dead.

All this said, as a matter of practice, the full recognition of achievement independent of origins sometimes proved a challenge. Appreciation of family background (what the Talmud, had it spoken Yiddish, would have called *yichus*) sometimes played a role. In the Talmudic mind, Isaac’s prayer for children is deemed more effectual than that of his wife, Rebecca, because his father was the righteous Abraham, while hers was the scheming Bethuel. The same Rabbi Akiva lauded for his swift gains in scholarship was passed over for leadership because he did not come from good rabbinic stock. Instead, Rabbi Elazar was chosen, because he was not merely wise, but wealthy and of illustrious ancestry, too. The biblical emphasis on family ties was not totally ignored, even in something close to an intellectual free-market economy. Nor were the Rabbis naïve about the advantages of having a leader of means who could play on the communal and political stage.

In one crucial way, however—the idea of life after death—the rabbinic idea of meritocracy departs completely from anything we recognize as modern, while departing also from the biblical model, in which life seems to end exactly when it appears to end. The Rabbis emphasized that the ultimate recognition for one’s achievements in life lay not in positions of authority within or even beyond the *beit midrash*, but in the World to Come.

Of course, one was not supposed to observe the commandments here to receive Divine reward there. Nevertheless, per Tractate Sanhedrin, “all of Israel” has a portion in the hereafter, as do righteous Gentiles—and it is there that one receives one’s due from God for deeds both positive and negative performed on Earth. One could even salvage a life spent wastefully through one redemptive act in death, as a Roman executioner did by ensuring a swift death for his victim, the martyr Rabbi Haninah ben Teradion.

But God remains ultimately inscrutable. We don’t know the precise mechanics of the realm beyond, as well as the central question

of its relationship to the Messianic era. Are they one and the same? Or is the realm of souls, as the medieval sage Nahmanides suggests, a prelude to the return to physicality upon the arrival of the Messiah? What manner of pain is felt for sins, and pleasure for obeying the commandments?

Whatever the specifics, this model could hardly contrast more with whatever individual and group self-congratulatory experience those who have risen to the top of today's earthly meritocracy enjoy—picture the Met Gala, the Goldman Sachs staff retreat, new faculty orientation at Harvard, or the swearing in of new members of Congress. For the meritorious, according to the sage Rav, something rather different awaits: “In the World to Come there is no eating, no drinking, no procreation, no business negotiations, no jealousy, no hatred, and no competition. Rather, the righteous sit with their crowns upon their heads, enjoying the splendor of the Divine Presence.” Frankly, I'm not sure how many top investment bankers and politicians would go for it.

What about the modern Jewish era? As far as Orthodox Judaism is concerned, nothing has changed: We are still in the Rabbinic era, so the view of merit and meritocracy has not changed. Central to the rabbinic vision, for instance, is the concept of *zechut*, which is usually taken to mean merit. *Zechut* can also connote virtue, favor, credit, or legal right. Today, entirely in line with this thinking, one of the things one is most likely to hear at a traditional Jewish wedding is that the bride and groom should “be *zocheh*”—i.e., sufficiently meritorious—“that they build a faithful home in the nation of Israel.” Similarly, many sermons and study sessions in Orthodox synagogues conclude with “and may we merit to see the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem.”

These wishes evoke a cross between encouragement of righteous acts for which a reward may be hoped for but never

expected, and a request for the bestowal of Divine grace. Put another way: Being judged meritorious is *never guaranteed*. Certainly, being judged meritorious never guarantees earthly reward. There always remains, then, something mysterious in the Jewish idea of merit. In line with this, one Talmudic teaching reads, “Length of life, children, and sustenance do not depend on one's merit but on fate.”

The Talmud's eclecticism also militates against any simplistic summation. One might alternatively conclude optimistically with Rabbi Hananya ben Akashya that “the Holy One, Blessed be He, sought to confer merit upon the Jewish people; therefore, he increased for them Torah and the commandments.” And when one's individually accrued merits might not be salvific enough, there might also be the merits of the forefathers, *zechut avot*, on which to fall back.

How might we sum all this up? Like it or not, canonical Jewish ideas of meritocracy are sufficiently different from what meritocracy means today that it is hard to find clear support for the modern idea in our tradition. Again and again, ideas of obedience to God and notions of loyalty to the past cut against our understanding of meritocracy, which makes little place for God—except perhaps to say that God helps those who help themselves.

In one regard, however, biblical and Rabbinic Judaism and modern meritocracy agree on one thing: It never hurts to pray. *