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# The Jewish Case for Public Service

*What our ancestors would give  
to give back to America*



ON FRIDAY AFTERNOONS, as the sun descended, I would sign off from my U.S. government classified email at a secure facility and speed home to prepare for Shabbat. I closed my eyes and lit Shabbat candles, bringing a physical separation between the frantic pace of work at the National Security Agency (NSA) and the slow calm of what Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel used to call the “sanctuary in time.”

In those moments of stillness, I often reflected on the bridge I tried to walk between two worlds: that of religious faith and of high-stakes national security. Many assume that these worlds require mutually incompatible lifestyles, but for 20 years, I found them to be mutually reinforcing. Whether I was doing my part to combat the physical threats of ISIS or helping America in the silent, invisible

wars of cyberspace, my sense of spiritual purpose was ever present. Working as a religiously observant Jew in the White House, as well as leading global organizations and international coalitions to face threats that crossed national borders, gave my career constant spiritual resonance.

The ethos of public service—the quiet dedication of one’s time to the service of one’s country—is waning. College graduates flock to Silicon Valley and Wall Street, driven not just by compensation but by a cultural narrative that views government as sclerotic, polarized, or, worse, morally compromised. This leaves the country vulnerable, at risk of losing its next generation of public servants. We need these public servants, talented citizens devoted to the protection and welfare of their fellow countrymen and others around the world. To reverse this trend, we must revive a spirit of commitment to public service, starting in the Jewish community. For American Jews, public service is not just a civic necessity; it is a religious imperative born of *hakarot ha-tov*, literally translated as “recognizing the good,” more colloquially, showing gratitude.



I am named for my great-grandmother, murdered in Auschwitz with most of her children and grandchildren sometime in the Spring of 1944. My maternal grandmother survived, with a number tattooed on her arm and a void in her heart. My father and his parents fled Soviet-occupied Budapest after the 1956 revolution, living as refugees in Vienna before coming to the United States.

In our home, America was not just a country; it was a *medina shel rachamim*, a place of mercy and refuge. My parents taught us that we owed a debt of gratitude to America for opening her doors when so many countries slammed them shut. On Shabbat, when we pray for

the welfare of the government, it is not rote recitation for my family. It is a weekly recognition that the stability of this republic is the guarantor of our safety and our freedom to worship.

The prophet Jeremiah, writing to the exiles in Babylon two millennia ago, established how Jews would live for centuries as a dispersed Diaspora: “Seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray to the Lord for it; for in its peace shall you have peace” (Jeremiah 29:7). It was not a prophecy but an imperative, a charge to the generations of Diaspora Jews to take responsibility for the safety of the lands where they would find themselves. Today, seeking the peace of our city means ensuring that America’s intelligence agencies can prevent the next 9/11 and that the next generation of drones, robots, and AI are integrated responsibly within our military. It means being in the Situation Room, wrestling with difficult choices to keep America and her allies safe. It means drafting executive orders outlining quantum strategy, or participating in innovative cyber-warfare efforts to bridge the intelligence and military communities and disable attackers’ systems. It could also mean joining your city or state police force, national guard, coast guard, or any branch of the military. Rarely in Jewish history have there been so many ways to fulfill Jeremiah’s words.


And even more rarely have there been governmental systems as responsive to and aware of Jewish religious needs. During a particular threat surge in 2018, I was the co-lead of a task force designing new tactics to blunt new threats. One Saturday night after Shabbat, I slipped into my office to catch up on classified email. There was a note from earlier that day sent by the director of the NSA to the director of the FBI, explaining that I would be delayed responding to his email because of my religious observance, confirming that nothing was needed until I was back online. And I, named for a woman who was murdered for practicing her faith, sat in my darkened office, unspeakably grateful.

The question is: Why are fewer and fewer American graduates of the country's most prestigious universities choosing public service?

When I speak with young graduates, Jewish or otherwise, about their future, I hear a frequent refrain. They want to have an impact, and they question whether they can do so in government. They perceive government as a system strangled by bureaucracy, a place where ambition goes to die. Nothing could be further from the truth. For more than a decade at the NSA, I led thousands of soldiers, coders, cryptographers, and compliance officers who missed their children's soccer games to ensure that adversaries' plans were decoded and sailors on a remote mission were safe. The software engineers on my team were top-shelf talent. They could've worked anywhere—on Wall Street, say, developing algorithms to optimize trades and shareholder returns. Instead, they were at Fort Meade or Langley, developing algorithms to combat cryptocurrency money laundering, or to optimize border patrol or threat assessments to stop attacks like the one on Bondi Beach. They saved countless lives. At a hedge fund or investment firm, their impact would have been quantifiable. At the NSA or the CIA, it was incalculable.

The positive impact of good security work is by definition not perceivable. It is the absence of violence that citizens never knew was imminent. Misperceiving the quiet functioning of our society as *having no impact* is not only wrong but also dangerous because it shifts the mindset from personal responsibility to a self-fulfilling prophecy. If talented young men and women cease going into public service, ceding those jobs to their potentially mediocre or more partisan peers, the machinery of our democracy will rust and our nation's security and safety will suffer.

What we need is a revival of American public service, and that revival should begin in the Jewish community.



The reason it surprises people when I say that the two worlds I inhabit are easily bridgeable is that they don't realize how integrated those two worlds can be. My commitment—and that of many of my colleagues—to public service was rooted in the spiritual idea that each person has a divine mission that requires channeling her personal gifts toward the public good. For me, that was in the realm of security, but there are so many aspects of public service that have nothing to do with security: law, accounting, engineering, economics, you name it. When a visibly Jewish man negotiates a treaty with Indo-Pacific allies, it displays that same kind of spiritual and religious integration. It sends the message that devotion to the country is part of one's devotion to Judaism. The American Jewish community should encourage our children to see a badge, a security clearance, or a civil service ID as a form of *kiddush Hashem*, a sanctification of God's name.

In the face of rising winds of antisemitism, some feel the pull to fold the tent and seek a safer shore, hearing only the echoes of past exiles. But we shouldn't let fear dictate our future. Instead of preparing to flee, let us double down on our devotion to this country. Rather than walking away, we should be investing our hearts, our intellects, and our labor into making this nation the sanctuary it was always meant to be. And every young person should be encouraged to think seriously about how he might best contribute to that sanctuary.

The Jewish community should create an Americorps-like program with tracks for individuals at various points in their careers, combined with study of Jewish texts on leadership and civic responsibility. Such a program could cover tuition for college students in high-demand fields in exchange for five years of government service. It could also include "tours of duty" that allow

mid-career professionals to cycle in and out of government, bringing private-sector agility into public-sector missions.

All segments and generations of the Jewish community have a role to play in this revival.

To parents: Do not just encourage your children to be doctors, lawyers, or financiers. Encourage them to pursue those aspirations as servants of the public good. Be a doctor on an Army base, a lawyer in the Judge Advocate General's Corps or the Department of Justice, a financial analyst for the CIA. Tell your children where their family came from, why they came here, and how they can make this a better place for future arrivals following the same dream of freedom and opportunity.

To high schools: Teach the history of American virtue alongside the history of American vice. Teach about slavery and abolition and the civil and civic wars fought for racial equality. Teach them about when America mobilized its might and treasure to free Europe from the hatred of Nazism, and Asia from Axis aggression. Teach them that the United States was and remains an indispensable nation, the only power capable of organizing the free world against authoritarianism. Teach about the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS relief (PEPFAR) under George W. Bush that saved millions of lives in Africa. Tell them they can be a part of these kinds of initiatives or even create new ones if they work in public service.

To rabbis and other spiritual leaders: Remind your congregants of the many examples of public service, from Don Isaac Abravanel, the 15th-century statesman and financial adviser to Spanish and Portuguese monarchs, to Adolphe Crémieux, the 19th-century French minister of justice who championed civil rights and the abolition of slavery. Remind them of Florence Prag Kahn, America's first Jewish congresswoman; Anna Rosenberg, former assistant secretary of defense who

helped oversee the desegregation of the U.S. military, described by the *New York Times* as “one of the most influential women in the country’s public affairs for a quarter of a century.” Remind your community that these people’s call to service stemmed from their Jewish heritage.

And to the youth: See all the good you can do for your country. Identify your strengths, your interests, your talents, and know how dearly you are needed by your country. You have a place to serve. You can make a difference by showing up, by saying, like Abraham did, *Hineni*, “Here I am.” If not now, when?

Will there be periods of frustration and exhaustion? Yes. There were certainly moments when navigating and leading government bureaucracies, during challenge and change, proved difficult and tiresome. Did I question whether the long work hours were worth the time I was missing with my children when they were young? Yes. But I never had a moment of regret. There is a specific feeling you get when you walk out of the Eisenhower Executive Office Building at night. You glance over at the Washington Monument, a beacon in the darkness, and you know that you’ve played a tiny part in holding up the sky. \*

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