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Parashat Chayei Sarah

Bowing to the People of the Land: Reflections from Working the Polls

Tuesday was a big day! Over 650,000 Chicagoans joined 122,000,000 other Americans in casting their votes for local, state, and national representation.[1] Voting is sacred duty, a hallowed ritual in our civic society; and the principle of majority rule lies at the heart of the Rabbinic legal enterprise. As citizens and as Jews, we can rightly consider voting a mitzvah—a good deed, yes, and also an obligation for the preservation of liberty.

As for me, I had a very special privilege on Election Day. I rolled out of bed at 3:30 am, picked up a dozen donuts from the Dunkin around the corner, and walked into Parkside Elementary School, two blocks south of Jackson Park, just before 5:00. I joined eight other cheery and enthusiastic citizens as we took our oaths and assumed our positions as election judges.

I want to share about my experience as an election judge not only to offer insight into the inner workings of our nation's massive electoral enterprise but also to offer encouragement to anyone who might be thinking of taking on this unique civil service for yourself.

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Let's start with the basics. Every jurisdiction in America is divided into local precincts. Here in Chicago, our 50 wards are divided into 1,290 precincts, each of which serves about 1100 voters.[2] Ballots cast by mail or through early voting are collected in central locations, but on Election Day, the precinct is where the action is.

Each precinct is overseen by a coordinator and a handful of election judges. Our precinct was typical – our coordinator, Vera, has been serving in that role for more than seven years, though she started out as a regular election judge like the rest of us. In addition to our coordinator, five election judges were assigned to our precinct. Four of us showed up: a high school student too young to vote, two women who had the day off work, and myself. The other three judges were serving for the first time, and I was grateful that I'd had a few years' experience and also that I'd been able to attend the

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[1] See the University of Florida's "2026 General Election Turnout," available: https://election.lab.ufl.edu/2026-general-election-turnout/. Notably, this occurred one week after elections in Israel, where 5.6 million people voted in an election that saw the highest turnout since 1999. See The Israel Democracy Institute's "Final Results for Israel's 2026 Elections," available: https://en.idi.org.il/articles/66833.

[2] https://app.chicagoelections.gov/documents/general/Chicago%20Board%20of%20Elections%20Releases%20New%20Ward%20and%20Precinct%20Maps.pdf

training downtown. Not everyone did, and it was important that at least a few of us knew the ropes.

The first hour was spent setting up. We erected the voting stands, unwrapped the ballots, activated the voter check-in tablets, turned on the touchscreen voting station, and prepared the ballot box and scanner. We put up the American flag, hung the informational posters, filled out our paperwork, put on our nametags, and prepared to welcome our first voters by 6:00.

Once the voters start to arrive, that's when it gets interesting. Judges work in one of three roles during the day, and I enjoyed rotating through each one.

The first station involves checking in voters. We ensure that they're registered to vote and are in the right location. If they're not registered, we register them on the spot and hand them a ballot. If they need redirection, we tell them where they're supposed to vote. After checking in voters, we activate their digital keycard for the touchscreen voting station or the second judge hands them the appropriate paper ballots. After the voter finishes, the third judge helps them insert their vote into the scanner and, most important of all, gives them their "I Voted" sticker.

There are many redundancies built into this system. Votes are counted and tabulated by the scanner, and these results are transmitted electronically and printed manually at the end of the night. The actual ballots are also collected and transported to a central location, where they are able to be counted by hand if needed. And the number of voters is tracked by the check-in stations and cross-checked with the number of ballots cast to be sure all the numbers line up. There can be some complicated situations—such as when a voter left before casting her ballot or when a voter showed up in the system as her identical twin at the same address—but the comprehensive judges' manual and the heavily-staffed call center are able to answer any and all questions.

Because the system is so strong, I find I can always relish in my favorite part of being an election judge: interacting with voters. I love greeting them and saying good-bye, answering their questions and assuring them that, no matter what, they will be able to vote today. We welcomed 175 voters throughout our 13 hours of operation and almost every single one was pleasant and happy to be there. And we judges became a hardworking team; by the time we finally left at 9:00 pm, even the first-timers were saying they hoped to do this again. It's exhausting but extremely rewarding, and almost anyone can do it.

That's the part the inspires me the most. As I discussed with my fellow judges throughout the day, it is a marvel to me that this massive operation is conducted by amateurs running on goodwill and common sense. The systems are resilient, the voters are patient, and holding it all together is an army of well-intentioned individuals volunteering for civil service in order to enact the democracy we all believe in.

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Surprising though it may be, this week's Torah portion underscores these fundamental values of democracy and respect.

When Sarah dies at the opening of the *parashah*, Abraham mourns her and then arranges a place for her to be buried. He approaches the local population, the Hittites, and asks to buy a gravesite. They reply, נְשִׂיא אֱלֹהִים אַתָּה, "You are a prince of God" (Gen. 23:6), offering him a burial plot for free. And then we read וַיָּקָם אַבְרָהָם וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ לְעַם־ הָאָרֶץ לִבְנֵי־חֵת, "Abraham got up and bowed to the people of the land, to the Hittites" (Gen. 23:7). As we come to learn, he does not want to receive a burial plot for free; but he also doesn't want to offend his new neighbors.

This scene has puzzled some commentators. Is the great and honored Abraham really bowing to these foreign commoners? Some sages, such as the 16th-century Italian Rabbi Obadiah Sforno, contend that he was really only bowing to רָאשֵׁי הָעָם, the *leaders* of the people, not *am haaretz*, the people themselves.[3] But other sages read the text plainly: Abraham is, indeed, bowing to "the people of the land."[4] Indeed, according to the 18th-century rabbi known as Or HaChaim, "Abraham revealed to them the opposite of what they said about him: that he did not esteem himself a prince among them; rather, he regarded them as more highly honored than he."[5]

What's more, later in the scene, Abraham will also bow down to Ephron, the wealthy landowner from whom he ultimately buys a grave.[6] But as one commentator points out, Abraham bowed down to the commoners *first* לִיתֵּן כָּבוֹד לְרַבִּים קוֹדֶם לְהָחָשׁוּב וּמְיוּחָד בָּם, "To give honor to the many before [giving honor to] the important and special among them."[7] In other words, Abraham is demonstrating that dignity resides not only in the rich and powerful but also—and more significantly—in the common folk.

And therein lie the principles that undergird our democracy, most nobly on display on Election Day. Every person, and every vote, counts. It is in honor of the people that my fellow judge and I spent twenty minutes counting, recounting, and writing down *in triplicate* the <u>four</u> write-in votes received at our precinct. It is in honor of the people that our coordinator spent a half-hour registering a new voter with a complicated profile of documentation. It is in honor of the people that a high school student used her day off school to hand ballots to her neighbors and to say, halfway through the day, "I just can't *wait* until I can vote."

Aaron Dorfman, the founder and executive director of the Jewish Partnership for Democracy, reminds us that the "ordinary features of democratic life are not inevitable. They depend on people."[8] People like every one of us, ordinary, common folk. And if

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[3] See his comment at Gen. 23:7. Samson Raphael Hirsch agrees, citing a usage of עַם הָאָרֶץ in Leviticus 20 that he understands to refer to people with power and influence. Notably, in a democracy, *am-haaretz* might indeed conflate "ordinary people" with "people with power and influence."

[4] See, for example, Haemek Davar on Gen. 23:7.

[5] גִּלָּה לָהֶם הֵפֶךְ דִּבְרֵיהֶם אֵלָיו, כִּי אֵינוֹ מַחְזִיק עַצְמוֹ נָשִׂיא לָהֶם, אֶלָּא בְּגֶדֶר שֶׁהֵם בְּכָבוֹד לְמַעְלָה מִמֶּנּוּ.

[6] Commentators agree that וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ אַבְרָהָם לִפְנֵי עַם הָאָרֶץ means Abraham is bowing *to Ephron* "before the people of the land" (Gen. 23:12). See, for example, Ibn Ezra *ad loc*: וזאת ההשתחויה היתה לפני עם הארץ לעפרון לתת שבח לו.

[7] HaEmek Davar on Gen. 23:7. The text as accessed on Sefaria reads להחשוב (instead of לחשוב, as would be more standardly grammatical). I have supplied *n'kudot*.

[8] https://mailchi.mp/jewishdemocracy/an-election-reflection?e=9d1b34f30d

you feel ready for democracy to depend on *you*, then I hope you'll consider joining me as an election judge. Chicagoelections.gov will tell you all you need to know.

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As tallies are finalized and elected representatives prepare to assume their offices, may we follow in the footsteps of Abraham. May we always recognize the dignity and honor of *am haaretz*, the common people. May we protect and preserve the sacred duty and the hallowed right to vote. And may we recognize that democracy relies not on *other people* to stand up, work hard, and do the right thing—but on each and every one of us.