

THE WIND REPORT

An Interview with Steven Windmueller author of *The Quest for Power: A Study in Jewish Political Behavior and Practice*

Why a book on Jewish power?

As my academic studies were centered on political science and a significant portion of my career involved public policy issues and intergroup relations, I have had a sustained interest in the questions associated with Jews and political power.

What was your inspiration/motivation behind this work?

My family experienced the Holocaust; I in turn lived through the Civil Rights and anti-War Movements and witnessed as well the birth and evolution of the State of Israel. As someone so deeply interested in and connected to the political agenda of the second-half of the 20th century, I developed a particular interest in trying to understand the role of minority groups in advancing their interests, and more directly how Jews understood their political interests.

Is there a demographic/market for this type of work?

This book offers, I believe, some valuable and historic insights into Jewish political behavior that can be helpful to community activists and policy makers. For other minority communities, the Jewish story is instructive in offering some guidance on how best ethnic and religious communities can maximize their influence. For historians and policy-makers, this text provides insights into how groups without power or who may have limited access to political power, can nonetheless maximize their presence and grow their influence.

There is no question that Judaism is a religion, but you assert that Judaism is also a political ideology. What aspects of Judaism justify this statement?

Judaism as a political system is really not my idea; other writers including historians and political analysts have understood this concept. Jewish tradition is clearly focused around two core ideas: God's promise to the Jewish people that He will make of this, His people, a great nation. Yet, beyond the commitment to nation-building, the body of Jewish texts also addresses the second component of Jewish political engagement, namely how Jews will live and function in the world. In many ways the idea of nationalism and the concept of universalism are in creative tension, one with the other. Jews would create holidays, introduce stories, and employ their literature to celebrate their political journey.

How do you define Jewish power?

Power in this context can be expressed in a variety of ways but I think its essential feature is the moral imperative of Jewish thought, namely how should Jews live in the world? The ethical character of the Jewish tradition informs not only personal conduct but also group consciousness.

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What elements comprise Jewish power and/or influence?

In many ways other peoples have given over to Jews significant power! Some of these labels are created as an expression of anti-Semitism or are formed out of jealousy. In reality, Jews have a very limited range of political influence. Indeed, Jews have long had a passion about politics, realizing that minorities as with any group of people need to assert their political interests. But politics limited to self-interest is also self-defeating, as groups need to be able to act on behalf of the welfare of the general society and its broader interests.

Where does the State of Israel fit into this equation?

Israel is still a new phenomenon, as Jews have not experienced their own national state in some 2000 years. The art of nation-building and the use of state power are still evolving concepts for the Jewish people. Jews have lived most of their existence without experiencing their own nation-state; no other community in the world has undergone such a disconnect from their homeland.

Jewish history is rife with tales of suffering and loss; how does "power" fit into that narrative?

Indeed, Jews have lived in many different societies and encountered a range of political systems. They would come to understand the idea of living without power or having access to only limited forms of political influence; yet, they would learn over time to maximize their position within different societies, drawing upon their own resourcefulness, the role of spokespeople, and where possible in constructing political connections and alliances with others. In many ways their exposure to other cultures and peoples would uniquely prepare Jews for modernity. In many ways the success of Jews in the modern Western world has grown out of their full and equal participation as citizens.

What is the reality of Jewish power today?

In the modern world the notion of power is constantly changing, as new actors and entrenched ones are constantly challenging one another, seeking to assert their political influence. Power as a political tool must constantly be re-affirmed as it is not given or a "right." As with any group, Jews seek to affirm their status and pursue their interests.

What are some myths about Jewish power?

Certainly, the enemies of the Jewish people have constructed images of Jews that would suggest a people with extraordinary access and influence. In reality, as a small community amidst large populations, Jews have sought to harness whatever influence to pursue certain core interests. What is particularly striking has been the role that Jews play today in an array of public and civic causes, well beyond specific Jewish core interests. One finds Jewish activists engaged in domestic and international causes related to education, culture, environment, human rights, social and economic justice, and immigration, only to name a few of the broad range of interests that have captured their involvement. The marvel of Jewish political action is not that Jews as a community or collective have extensive power but rather that Jews as individuals have embraced the importance and value of civic engagement.

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The State of Israel has been called both a Jewish state and a state of Jews. Can you mix politics and religion and still operate in a democracy?

This question is one of several that the State of Israel must continue to address, as it seeks to define what type of “Jewish” and “Democratic” society it will become. Israel still lacks a formal constitution and as such must eventually address the questions associated with its legal and constitutional structure. In many settings where religion and state have been joined together, minority faith traditions have had to contend with majoritarian control over the rights of religious practice. Conversely, in societies where church and state have defined and separate roles, faith communities often flourish.

How does this book shed light on the unfolding Israeli-Palestinian conflict? The state of Middle Eastern affairs today?

While not directly addressing the Arab-Israel conflict, the book places the question of Zionism and the birth of the Jewish state into a political context. Many of the earlier experiences of Jews dealing with such issues as governance, political relationships, and threats to Jewish security shed light on some of the current challenges to Jewish life and to Israeli nationalism.

What makes you an expert on Jewish power?

I actually don't believe I am “an expert.” I do have a level of interest and passion around this subject area. I am actually not sure that one can identify anyone as distinctively knowledgeable about “Jewish power.” In some measure, writers such as David Biale, Ruth Wisse, Daniel Elazar and Michael Walzer have each contributed to the building of a body of literature about the nature and substance of Jewish power.

Where do you see the future of Jewish power/influence heading?

Predictions of this type are both problematic and dangerous. Throughout their history Jews have always dreamed about “Next year in Jerusalem;” the notion of Jewish national renewal is now a reality, so one political goal is the commitment to sustain the State of Israel, ensuring its security and maintaining its vitality. The well-being of Jews wherever they maybe living represents a second core theme. In a world that has seen overt acts of anti-Semitism and the heightened presence of religious conflict and ethnic war, neither of these political goals is necessarily assured. Power is not affirmed or sustainable, unless groups seek to pursue their interests, have created a shared vision of their priorities, learn to build alliances, and retain access to key political influentials.

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