

DOES MAJORITY RULE?

by Rabbi Berel Wein

In our current democratically oriented mindset we subscribe to the tenet that majority rules. Because of this mentality, many times the opinion of the minority is never taken seriously or properly assessed. Yet, throughout world and Jewish history apparently the majority opinion was not always the correct one, and harmful consequences followed from its adoption.

The Talmud therefore is always careful to preserve the minority opinion even when the normative practice of Judaism does not. It explains that there perhaps will come a time when circumstances will dictate that the minority opinion will be correct and should be implemented. The flaw in always following the majority opinion is patently illustrated for us in the Torah reading of this week.

The majority opinion, by a vote of 10 to 2, rejected the entry of the Jewish people into the land of Israel, despite God's promises and the entreaties of Moshe. Yet, all Jewish history is based on the minority opinion being the correct one and that following the majority only doomed a generation to a seemingly useless death in the desert of Sinai. Apparently, God's will, so to speak, and the trajectory of history is not subject to a majority vote.

A Jewish Congressman famously stated a century ago that God and one constitute a majority. Truth, wisdom, measured action and a vision for the future are not subject to be overturned by a temporary majority opinion. The fact that there it is a Jewish people and a Jewish state in the world today testifies to the eternity of a holy and wise minority opinion.

As human beings who do not have the gift of prophecy and often find it impossible to foretell the future, following the majority opinion is comforting and reassuring. We were brought up on the slogan that 50 million Frenchmen cannot be wrong. Well, they have been very wrong many times over this past century. While we do not want to ignore the wishes of the majority, as there is power and a modicum of truth in numbers, when it comes to matters of faith and historic vision, the rules of majority and minority must be cast aside.

Common sense and historical experience coupled with strong beliefs and traditional faith should move the day when making decisions and policies. Many a leader has been faced with making unpopular decisions for the preservation and welfare of his people. We are told that King Saul lost his crown because he told the prophet Samuel that he had to bow to popular demand instead of heeding God's commandment. In Saul's case, following the majority opinion regarding the spies in this week's Torah reading, proved disastrous. We, who live in a society where majority rules, should

bear this caveat in mind.

Shabbat shalom,
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