



Taste of Chavruta — 5772 — Authority

KEY QUESTIONS:

- *What sorts of authority are there in ancient and modern Judaism? What about in modern society?*
 - *What is the source of these authorities?*
- *How do we deal with conflicts between Jewish and secular authorities?*
- *How do we reconcile subservience to earthly authorities with acknowledging that God's authority is ultimate?*

8. Secular authority

Babylonian Talmud, *Avodah Zarah* 3b-4a

You have made people like the fish of the sea, like creeping things that have no ruler (Habakkuk 1:14). Why are people compared to the fish of the sea?... Just as among fish of the sea the ones greater than their fellows swallow up their fellows, so with people, were it not for fear of the ruling power, the ones greater than their fellows would swallow up their fellows. This is just what we learnt: Rabbi Hanina, the Deputy High Priest, said, 'Pray for the welfare of the ruling power, for were it not for the fear of it, people would swallow each other alive' (Mishnah, *Avot* 3:2).

Translation: Adapted from Soncino

תלמוד בבלי, עבודה זרה ג' ע"ב-ד' ע"א

'וּתְעֵשָׂה אָדָם כְּדָגֵי הַיָּם כְּרֶמֶשׂ לֹא-מִשָּׁל בּוֹ' (חֲבַקּוּק א':י"ד). לָמָּה נִמְשָׁלוּ בְּנֵי אָדָם כְּדָגֵי הַיָּם?... מָה דָּגִים שׁוֹבִים כָּל הַגְּדוֹל מִחֲבִירוֹ בּוֹלֵעַ אֶת חֲבִירוֹ, אָף בְּנֵי אָדָם אֲלֵמָּלָא מוֹרְאָה שָׁל מְלָכוֹת, כָּל הַגְּדוֹל מִחֲבִירוֹ בּוֹלֵעַ אֶת חֲבִירוֹ. וְהֵינּוּ דְתַנּוּ, רַבִּי חֲנִינְיָא סָגַן הַכֹּהֲנִים אוֹמֵר: 'הָיִי מִתְפַּלֵּל בְּשִׁלּוּמָה שָׁל מְלָכוֹת, שְׂאֵלְמָלָא מוֹרְאָה, אִישׁ אֶת רֵעֵהוּ חַיִּים בְּלֵעוּ' (מִשְׁנָה אֲבוֹת ג':ב').

You can't understand. How could you? – with solid pavement under your feet, surrounded by kind neighbours ready to cheer you or to fall on you, stepping delicately between the butcher and the policeman, in the holy terror of scandal and gallows and lunatic asylums – how can you imagine what particular region of the first ages a man's untrammelled feet may take him by the way of solitude – utter solitude without a policeman – by the way of silence – utter silence, where no warning voice of a kind neighbour can be heard whispering of public opinion? These little things make all the great difference. When they are gone you must fall back upon your own innate strength, upon your own capacity for faithfulness.

Joseph Conrad (1857-1924), *Heart of Darkness* (1902)

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. – That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed...

From the *US Declaration of Independence* (1776)

Points to consider

According to Rabbi Hanina, what is the purpose of government? What is the source of its authority?

Do you agree that people need government in order to not be at each other's throats?

Why else might you be required to pray for the welfare of the government?