

Our Obligation at the ballot box



BY RABBI DANNY
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I REMEMBER standing with my wife (then my fiancée) in a queue for a polling station in Los Angeles 15 months ago. Although I could not vote in the Presidential elections on 4 November 2008, I felt like I was witnessing history, and I wanted to be there. There was an energy and excitement in that queue in West Hollywood. People wanted to be part of history, to have their voices heard and to vote. We lined up for almost one hour so that my wife could, literally, help write history. I was a spectator. I had no vote so I had no voice. While I shared the excitement as America elected its first black president, I was painfully reminded that I was merely a guest in the country. I could campaign and engage in political activity, but at the final hurdle I was silenced.

While no date has yet been set for our General Election, it seems that the campaigning and electioneering is already in full swing. Party leaders are all over the television, parliamentary candidates stare down at us from huge billboards and the media is gearing up for the forthcoming contest.

Yet, amid all the excitement, people appear more than ever to be disengaged, indifferent and apathetic about UK politics.

People have become disillusioned with the political process, and it is hardly surprising. As the scandal over MPs' expenses shows no sign of abating, it is little wonder that the electorate is cynical about the people who represent us in Parliament.

There can be a temptation to throw our hands in the air, give up and ask: what's the point?

While Britain may not have a law that compels us to vote, our Jewish identity, history and experiences should. It is easy to forget how hard our ancestors fought to have the right to engage in the political process and to be fully accepted members of British society. They fought to give us a voice, so we must fight to use it.

We may not always have the politicians we want, but if we don't use our "voices", not only do we lose the right to complain, but we also lose any influence we might have.

There are Jewish values that mandate our obligation to vote. In *Pirkei Avot* (the Ethics of the Fathers), Hillel cautioned us not to separate ourselves from the community (2:4). As members of British society, we have a Jewish responsibility to fully engage with the wider community, and that requires us to vote in the elections.

And while we may ask what influence we can really have, in the same text we are told: "It is not your duty to complete the task, but neither are you free to desist from it."

It is unlikely that, after a General Election, we will find a House of Commons with which we are completely satisfied, but that does not mean that we are entitled to give up on the system entirely. We can be active and vocal in our constituencies and communities, beginning a process of change. Moses knew he would never enter the Promised Land but, until his final day, he led the Children of Israel towards it.

Having once experienced the disempowerment of having neither voice nor vote, I am proud and excited about exercising my democratic privilege later this year. I cannot, and will not, tell you who to vote for. That is an individual choice. All I can do is urge everyone who is entitled to vote to take that hard-fought-for opportunity.

Voting in the General Election is not just a British privilege, it is a Jewish responsibility.

• *Danny Burkeman is the Rabbi of West London Synagogue*