

ESTORIL POLITICAL FORUM 2018: PATRIOTISM, COSMOPOLITANISM AND DEMOCRACY

Amichai Magen

Thank you Mr. Chairman.

Thank you the organizers of the Estoril Political Forum – and especially Professor Joao Espada – for inviting me to address this most distinguished forum. It is a true honor.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

The 26th Estoril Political Forum is dedicated to the exploration of the relationship between patriotism, cosmopolitanism, and democracy; to the tensions between particularism and universalism; and to the role of democracy in managing those tensions.

Since our time is short, let me cut to the chase and offer the following 2 propositions:

First, that Political Freedom – as well as the key to long-term human wellbeing – exists in the space between patriotism and cosmopolitanism.

And second, that Modern Liberal Democracy can be understood as a living-system for nurturing, managing, and protecting that space.

To be clear: when I say that Political Freedom resides in the space between patriotism and cosmopolitanism – in the space between what is sometimes referred to as "particularism" or "nationalism", on the one hand, and "universalism" or "progressivism", on the other hand – I do NOT mean that it is a simple balance between "two extremes", or that Political Freedom arises from "splitting the difference" between them.

Instead, I argue, there is something almost magical about the emergence and maintenance of Political Freedom. It is not the "natural" state of affairs. Quite the opposite. It is a delicate condition that can only be created, and can only be sustained, by the constant choice of free and responsible individuals – a choice to become free and to remain free, by fending-off pure particularism and pure universalism.

Political Freedom, in other words, can be established and maintained only in a normative and institutional space that manages to escape "closed-Tribalism", but at the same time avoids succumbing to pure cosmopolitanism, which is ultimately empty and nihilistic.

It is only by understanding the terrible dangers posed by both tribalism and pure cosmopolitanism, and establishing robust normative and institutional structures that can successfully fend-off the powerful temptations posed by them, that Political Freedom can survive.

The idea that Political Freedom – or Political Liberty – lies in the space between patriotism and cosmopolitanism – is not new.

Neither is the understanding that that space is inherently delicate and in need of continuous nurturing and protecting if we are to avoid the dual-catastrophes of xenophobic-tribalism, on the one hand, and empty-nihilistic-universalism, on the other hand.

Indeed, in some respects, these ideas are as old as the human preoccupation with Freedom itself.

We find a beautiful allegory capturing these ideas in the Book of Exodus – the Biblical text in which Moses leads the Hebrew Slaves out of the Land of Egypt to become a Free Nation after many trials and tribulations in the Sinai desert.

In the Book of Exodus, God first reveals himself to Moses in the presence of *Ha'Sneh Ha'bo'er* – a Bush that burns with light, but is not consumed by fire!

The scene is full of symbolism that will later be picked-up and interpreted by generations of Reformists of the Church, as well as by early Republican thinkers in England, the Dutch Republic, and by the Founding Fathers of the United States of America.

The story of the Burning Bush is a National Story, but it has a profound Universal Message:

It is here that God first tells Moses that he must go to Pharaoh (-☺ Pharaoh was the Vladimir Putin and Kim Jung Un of the Ancient World rolled into one nasty character) and tell him that God himself will turn Oppressed Slaves into a Free Nation.

But there is more to the story than meets the modern eye:

In the Hebrew Bible the phrase "The Land of Egypt" is "*Eretz Mitz'raim*" – it literally means the Land of Narrowness, Superstition and Ignorance.

By taking a group of Slaves out of "*Eretz Mitz'raim*" we find not only the prospect of National Liberation for one Nation, but a Universal promise of human escape from narrowness, superstition and ignorance - from material, intellectual, and spiritual slavery.

The ideal of Political Freedom – the Book of Exodus seems to tell us – is to be found neither in closed-tribalism, nor in pure cosmopolitanism.

The Formula for Freedom lies in the constant human striving for a set of values and institutions that reflect the ideal captured in the image of the Burning Bush – in the vision of a coherent, national society that brims with creativity and vitality, so that it radiates light, but which avoids being consumed into nothingness –

either by the fires of hatred, xenophobia, irrationality and aggression; or by the loss of its core-internal identity and unique, particular-self.

Fast forward 3000 years, and we find the same essential ideas in Karl Popper's argument about the nature of the Open Society.

Indeed, for Popper, the Open Society is to be found in the space between what he calls the closed "Tribal way of life", and the empty "Abstract Society" – which we risk whenever we lose the organic character of our particular collective-identity, our national history, our national political traditions, institutions, and laws.

We find the same essential ideas in Ludwig von Mises's plea for peaceful, Liberal Nationalism, and in Hannah Arendt's warning that unless we manage to nurture – generation after generation – an active, engaged population that will reject the dual-tyrannies of tribalism and universal-totalitarianism, we are doomed to return to slavery.

And of course, in our own time, we find the temptations of chauvinistic-nationalism, on the one hand, and of the empty promise of so-called "progressive cosmopolitanism", on the other hand, defining many of our most heated and important contemporary political debates.

We find it in the Brexit Debate, and in the toxic American struggle over the question of how to best "Make America Great Again".

We find it in the return of the German Question – in the great difficulty modern Germany has encountered in trying to define a German brand of Liberal Nationalism that is patriotic but not xenophobic or aggressive.

Indeed, this German difficulty has infected the whole of the European Union – which currently risks being torn apart under the strain of incompatible visions: one populist and illiberal, the other even more-centralized in Brussels and lacking democratic legitimacy.

Which brings us to the question of Democracy.

Given time constraints, I cannot begin to do this vital and complex topic justice. I will confine myself to two short remarks, more as a provocation for discussion than a coherent argument:

First, in some important respects (which are seldom fully appreciated) Modern Liberal Democracy can be thought of as a living-system for establishing, managing, and protecting the space between tribalism and cosmopolitanism.

So, for example, a functional Liberal Democracy maintains an effective sovereign state: it defends a certain territory, defines and promotes distinctive national symbols (and sometimes a state-religion) and controls borders, rights of citizenship, and immigration. All these are hallmarks of particularism.

At the same time, Liberal Democracies uphold and promote certain universal rights, and develop international organizations and international law. (Until recently this cosmopolitanism even extended to belief in the benefits of Free Trade! –☺)

How to manage the space and tension between particularism and universalism, is a defining feature of modern Liberal Democracies, and as we have seen, it defines many of our most acerbic current political debates.

The second and final observation I'll make is that it is the Liberal component in Liberal Democracy that is essential for us to successfully fend-off the dual-threats of Tribalism and empty universalism.

An illiberal-democracy may or may not be able to avoid the worst of Tribalism, but one thing is for certain – an illiberal-democracy cannot carry a positive universal message.

It is only a high-quality Liberal Democracy that can be a "New Jerusalem" and a true "City upon the Hill"!

Thank you very much!