

# TIMES COLONIST

## Protest is an Act of Jewish Faith

Lincoln Z. Shlensky / Times Colonist

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My family and I joined thousands of others on January 21<sup>st</sup> in Victoria's Women's March and "Solidarity Trumps Hate" demonstration protesting the inauguration of U.S. President Donald Trump, a man who has disparaged women, immigrants, the disabled and others who oppose him, and who has sought to impose an indefensible religious litmus test on vulnerable refugees. As we marched, I asked myself whether by protesting I was acting in accordance with my Jewish faith.

Acts of protest, a careful reading of Jewish tradition suggests, serve to remind the powerful of the needs of the vulnerable, and thereby to maintain a healthy community devoted to the wellbeing of all. "Whoever can protest the transgressions of the people of his community but does not do so is punished for the transgressions of his community," the Babylonian Talmud (*Shabbat* 54b) explains. This axiom is not simply an articulation of the Golden Rule of reciprocity. It is, more importantly, a key recognition that responsible action in the Jewish tradition includes a willingness to publicly speak out.

The textual basis for the tradition of protest in Judaism first emerges in Genesis. Upon learning of God's intention to destroy the sinful cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham protests to God, humbly yet forcefully, that the cities should be saved for the sake of even a few righteous people.

"Wilt thou indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?," Abraham asks. "That be far from Thee to do after this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked . . . that be far from Thee; shall not the Judge of all earth do justly?"

Abraham notably frames his objection in terms of the obligations conferred by the premise of divine authority. He does not seek to undermine authority, but to remedy it. Were God acting in a truly godly way, Abraham protests, there would be no injustice.

This passage also reveals an extraordinary aspect of the Israelites' biblical worldview: God may be considered the ultimate authority, but God is not beyond reproach—and God's mind can change. Humans, weak and error-prone though we may be, harbour a vital perspective God cannot possibly have: our mortality. But this awareness of our mortal vulnerability is meaningless if we do not, at moments of crisis, raise our voices in protest.

Acts of protest recur throughout the Hebrew Bible: Moses protests to God on behalf of the Israelites, while the biblical prophets openly chastise them.

The post-biblical rabbinic tradition may be considered, in a nutshell, one long howl of protest at the downfall of the Hebrew nation. How do the early Talmudists lodge their protestations? By spending their lives intellectually working out the moral

practicalities of a biblical socioeconomic world that, even in their own day, no longer exists. This is a project of extreme spiritual imaginativeness—an existential protest lodged against the world as they know it.

In more recent history, Jews have engaged in powerful public protests as a form of spiritually inspired activism. In the U.S., young Jews formed half of the contingent of those who participated in the Mississippi Freedom Summer of 1964; and Jews played pivotal roles in founding the major American civil rights organizations.

During the U.S. presidential inauguration last month, a group of prominent rabbis and other Jewish community leaders, deeply distressed at the loss of rights threatened by the incoming administration, organized a fast “as a response to national calamity.” This is Jewish spirituality in action.

My family and I were participating, it turns out, in a long religious and secular Jewish tradition of protest.

**Lincoln Z. Shlensky** is an Associate Professor of English at the University of Victoria. He is a member of the Conservative Jewish synagogue Congregation Emanu-El and an activist with Victoria’s Jewish human rights group *If Not Now, When?* ([ifnotnow.ca](http://www.ifnotnow.ca) (<http://www.ifnotnow.ca/>)).

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