

**Society Built by Torah**  
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Separation of “church” and “state” was unknown in Ancient Israel, and not only because there was neither a church nor the concept of statehood. Yes, ancient Israel saw tension between kings and priests, and even more when a prophet arose. Still, nobody even considered that God’s will ought not guide the kingdom.

An excellent illustration is found at the outset of this week’s Torah portion. “You shall be holy,” Torah proclaims, “for I, Adonai your God, am holy.”<sup>i</sup> The word “you” here is plural: “Y’all shall be holy.” The people are addressed as a collective, not as individuals. The commandment to be holy may seem purely spiritual, even ethereal, but we immediately learn that’s not the case, as Torah goes on to tell us **how** to be holy. Instructions about how to live an ethical life—for example, by honoring parents—are intertwined with rules that strike the modern reader as strictly religious, observing Shabbat and then some very specific regulations about what not to do with a sacrificial offering: Eat the sacrificial animal the day it is offered, or the next day, then burn what is left. The punishment for eating any of the leftover sacrifice on the third day: excommunication.<sup>ii</sup>

In the very next breath, though, the subject turns to the responsibility to care for the poor. Israelite farmers are required to leave the corners of their fields for the poor and the stranger<sup>iii</sup>—that is, the needy Israelite and non-Israelite.<sup>iv</sup> That may sound like advice for ethical living: Those who are materially blessed must provide for those who are less fortunate. Instead, it’s a divine commandment, sealed with the sentence, “I am Adonai your God.” It’s also a civil law of the kingdom, Torah to shape society. Providing for the poor is a law of the kingdom attributed to divine command.

Our commentators note that the injunction to leave the corners of the fields for the poor is stated first in the second person plural, “When **y’all** reap the harvest of y’all’s fields...,” and then in the second person singular, “you (singular) shall not reap all the way to the edges of your field,” all in one verse. The law is for the society, binding every individual, for an important reason: An Israelite with small farm might think there’s no point in leaving the corner of their tiny field, since that would not provide enough crop to sustain even a single impoverished household. A large landowner, by contrast, might consider the amount of crop they would have to leave to be an onerous tax. “The Torah therefore addresses each farmer individually to tell them that [whether] their individual contribution is minimal [or excessive,] they must abide by this legislation.”<sup>v</sup>

We may ask the relevance of this kind of ancient legislation for contemporary American Jews. We are guided by the Torah in our individual lives, but we are bound by the laws of our nation and state. We jealously guard the separation of church and state. We are not tempted to impose Jewish law upon our society, and we often resist White Christian Nationalist efforts to enshrine a particular brand of Christianity in both American and Arkansas law. We rightly recoil at initiatives aimed at prohibiting *Sharia*, Muslim law, from becoming American law, and not only because those efforts are both grounded in bigotry and a solution in search of a problem. We are repulsed when a majority that seeks to impose their version of Christianity upon us attempts to divert attention to a nonexistent American Muslim attempt to do the same.

This year, by contrast, James Talarico, the Democratic nominee for United States Senate in Texas, articulates a case for embracing legitimate religious values that may guide our nation's direction. He insists that Torah—and for him, Jesus's teachings in the Christian Scriptures—have always been intended as guides for establishing societies grounded on kindness, compassion, equal rights, and opportunity for all.

Talarico describes the faith that motivates him, and it isn't about imposing Christianity on all Americans, explaining: "Matthew 25 tells us exactly how we're going to be judged and how we're going to be saved by feeding the hungry, healing the sick, by welcoming the stranger, by visiting the prisoner. Nothing about being a Christian. Nothing about going to church. Nothing about saying the Lord's Prayer. Nothing about reading the Bible. Just helping others, just loving." Talarico does understand, as our Torah portion insists, that God's teaching requires a systemic approach to the problem of poverty, noting that "economic justice is mentioned 3,000 times in our scriptures," Hebrew and Christian scriptures alike.<sup>vi</sup>

Talarico is quick to criticize Christian Nationalists, saying that "these politicians want a Christian nation unless it means providing health care to the sick or funding food assistance for the hungry or raising the minimum wage for the poor. It seems like they want to base our laws on the Bible until they reach the words of Jesus. Welcome the stranger, liberate the oppressed, put away your sword, sell your possessions and give money to the poor...I'm not exactly sure a Christian nation is really what these people want."<sup>vii</sup>

Any time a politician seeks to guide American law by biblical precepts, we ought to be wary. The risk of a religious majority imposing its will upon minorities was as concerning to America’s founders as it is to those of us who find ourselves a subject minority in the United States today. So yes, Talarico is skirting a fine line.

America, though, never sought to **exclude** religious people from public service or high office. Throughout our history, presidents and members of Congress have considered their own consciences alongside the Constitution in determining the direction of this nation. Being led by officials whose values are grounded in their faith is neither new nor necessarily bad.

Moreover, our Torah portion reminds us that it’s a millennial ideal. While ancient Israelites would not have known what could be meant by deploying those principles outside a religious context, we do. In March 1865, President Lincoln utilized distinctive religious words to describe the society he hoped to reshape: “Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled up by the bondsman’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said ‘the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.’”<sup>viii</sup>

Even as we seek to unburden our nation of religious coercion and of cruel and discriminatory laws born of perverse readings of scripture, let us pray and work toward the day when Americans of every religion and none will come together to reshape our society in a way that reflects the highest ideals of Torah—and, James Talarico would add, of Jesus. Then, will America be holy, as the God of Israel is holy.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Leviticus 19:2.

<sup>ii</sup> Leviticus 19:3-8.

<sup>iii</sup> Leviticus 19:10.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibn Ezra to Leviticus 19:10

<sup>v</sup> Or HaChaim on Leviticus 19:9.

<sup>vi</sup> “Can James Talarico Reclaim Christianity for the Left?” *The Ezra Klein Show*, January 13, 2026.

<sup>vii</sup> “Can James Talarico Reclaim Christianity for the Left?”

<sup>viii</sup> Second Inaugural Address of Abraham Lincoln, March 4, 1865.