

Reason and Politics: Maimonides, Television and the Political Imagination

By Tsvi Blanchard

Recently, the New York Times (9/5/02) reported that political leaders and strategists in both the Democratic and Republican parties have signaled a shift in the role that network television advertising plays in election campaigns. Apparently, viewers have begun changing channels when political ads come on, if only to escape what the Times called their "anesthetizing frequency and similarity." Although television advertising will continue to play a significant role in political campaigns, there will be an increase in the importance of grass roots efforts such as issue oriented focus groups, door-to-door canvassing and get-out-the-vote efforts.

Politics-by-television-that is, politics driven by images and imagination-has many critics who will welcome this change. Such culture critics abhor political advertising because they abhor what they see as network television's replacement of serious political discussion with short, suggestive and high-impact visual images. Before we rush to celebrate the new emphasis on grass roots politics, however, we should ask ourselves whether grass roots campaign methods will actually restore any of the give-and-take of "reasoned" political debate.

After all, politicians are, or try to be, experts at harnessing and directing the political power that cultural images have already created. I think it far more likely that politicians will integrate the motivating influence of shared imagery into these grass roots efforts in order to increase voter "buy in" and consolidate their own power base. Grass roots politics may produce better, more democratic focus groups, but that will not necessarily make for a politics that will be more "reasoned."

Indeed, the absence of reasoned debate in American democracy did not originate with television. If there is a single source of the political "dumbing down" of America, it is our market driven culture of advertising. It should come as no surprise, then, that our candidates are marketed like any other consumer good -- by means of images that appeal to the imagination.

Maimonides, the foremost Jewish medieval thinker, discusses the problems a society will face if it employs imagination instead of reason to make its decisions. He notes the curious fact that, freed from rational scrutiny, the human mind can imagine the possibility of all sorts of human situations which, if we were thinking reasonably, we would know are actually impossible. In the world of our imaginings, we can eat as much as we like without gaining weight or developing

a stomachache. We can make and spend all the money we want without affecting anyone by our choices. We can vanquish evil without risking the loss of life and limb. Such fantasies may be harmless in themselves, but when the stuff of fantasy permeates the political process, the consequences are likely to be far from harmless. Intoxicated by image and fantasy, we may end up electing candidates and supporting policies that become our waking nightmares.

Political fantasies may be appealing to the imagination, but in practice they don't equip us to respond in an adequate manner to real domestic or international problems. Worse still, where the politics of fantasy prevails, political discussion ceases to be governed by shared standards of rationality and, in the end, the outcome is determined not by the most reasonable argument, but by the relative power of the contending sides. Coercion, not reason, prevails, becoming the real agent that turns our cost-free fantasies into real world social policies that have serious imperfections and high social costs.

Typically, the burden of bearing these social costs - of paying the price for having indulged in political fantasy - will not be equally borne by all. In politics, the unequal power of the parties usually determines the outcome - and the associated unequal distribution of costs and benefits - especially where reasoned discourse is lacking. To a large degree, those with sufficient power to determine political outcomes also enjoy the luxury of imagining what they like and of imposing the "unforeseen" costs of this fantasy upon those with less power. Consequently, those lacking in countervailing power will have the necessity of using their imagination to help them endure the costs that the political winners will have imposed on them.

A product of our all-pervasive consumer culture, the absence of reasoned democratic discussion will not be remedied by increasing the percentage of campaign dollars that goes to grass roots efforts instead of to television advertising. The way to control the expansive and ever-expanding imagination that emerges in a consumer society is to create public spaces in which reasoned argument prevails and the role of the imagination is clearly subordinated. Then, and only then, can the imaginative faculty play a constructive part in the service of soundly reasoned social policies by helping us to imagine creative but practical alternatives to our present socioeconomic arrangements and institutions. Despite his tendency to political elitism and rationalism, Maimonides would be pleased with such a development.