

## Rendering & Over-Rendering – The Relation of the Believer & Government

Rabbi Adam J. Bernay

Before I begin, I want to say that this was a tough teaching for me to write. I spent quite some time studying, thinking, and praying about it... so much so that I didn't sit down to actually WRITE it until about two hours before the service began. And then when I sat down to write, I could not find the three pages of notes I had made based on a speech I had taken a whole day to listen to and dissect! But maybe that's better. I have a tendency to overthink some things. This might've been an hour-long sermon with all of that.

I want to start this teaching by saying it's not my intention to offend anyone. I am trying to keep the spirit of Galatians 6:1 – “Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted.” When I say things in this teaching, I do not mean to sound accusatory. In truth, if there is “guilt” in this, I have been as “guilty” as anyone else.

The name of this teaching is “Rendering and Over-Rendering: The Relation between the Believer & Government.” This was inspired by that speech I told you about, the one I took a day to listen to and dissect, given by a late mentor of mine, Marshall Fritz, the founder of – among other things – the Alliance for the Separation of School and State. And while I may not have a lot out of that speech, this key idea that really inspired my thinking on this was stated by him this way:

When the Pharisee admitted the coin was made in the image of Caesar, Jesus told him to render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's. I ask my fellow Christians, 'Are your children made in the image of Caesar? If not, why do you render these innocents to Caesar for six hours per day, 180 days per year, for 13 years? [**Marshall Fritz** *Plano Star Courier*, February 21, 1999]

I got to thinking... If there's a danger in over-rendering with our children and the State... is there a similar danger with over-rendering in other aspects of our lives? What in our lives belongs to Caesar, and what belongs to God? How do we determine how far to go? Many people cite Romans 13:1-7 and believe it settles the matter:

Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil. Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor.

The perspective that this settles the matter – that we are simply to obey the government – assumes this passage is all about civil governing authorities. That is not necessarily the case. In the Greek manuscripts, the word translated as “rulers” is “archone,” which is more often a reference to the religious authorities – rabbis, synagogue officials, members of the Beit Din or Torah Court system, all the way up to and including the

Sanhedrin – then it is civil government authorities. Read this way, the passage in context makes much more sense, because, going back to chapter twelve, the passage is all about spiritual government and not about civil government, and it says the rulers are appointed by God, they are servants and ministers of God, and whomever resists them resists also the ordinance of God... and we know that many times – possibly most times – civil governing authorities are not servants of God and do not rule according to the ordinance of God.

In fact, the only time civil government is mentioned in this passage, it really backs up the position that the “rulers” mentioned are the religious and not civil leaders, because it says “For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing.” It is a different thought, because paying taxes would already be a part of obedience to the rulers if the rulers were the civil government officials... and the civil government officials didn’t pay taxes to themselves, and yet the text says that the rulers, as servants of God, devote themselves or stand ready to do this.

It is a sign that the “rulers” are not the civil government. We then read, “Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor.” This indicates that more than one kind of leader is being discussed here, because taxes and customs are not given to the same leaders as fear – only the LORD shall we fear, or awe – and honor.

At least, that is another way to interpret this passage. Whether or not it is the absolutely correct way is not the primary issue. The point is, we cannot simply take this as it is commonly interpreted, to mean obedience, fear, and honor is due to our civil government authorities, that they are appointed by God and are servants and ministers of God.

Certainly, in the ideal case, our civil government authorities would be appointed by God, would be servants of God and ministers of God. But that is hardly the case. To avoid getting into current politics at this point, let me ask you: was Constantine appointed by God, a servant of God, a minister of God? Was Adolf Hitler? Josef Stalin? Chairman Mao? Pol Pot? Do I need to come up with other historical examples? Let’s discuss Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany for a minute. Many good Christians in Germany did not resist the Nazis until far too late for this exact reason, that they had been told that our civil government authorities are appointed by God and are servants and ministers of God.

We must be careful to whom our allegiances are given. This is not to say we should flout the laws of the lands in which we live, that we should not have loyalty to the country in which we live, or even that we should not serve in a capacity that would require us to swear – as in the case of our military – to uphold and defend the Constitution of the United States of America or – as in the case of law enforcement officers – take an oath to fairly and impartially enforce the laws under your jurisdiction.

But loyalty and allegiance are not the same thing. The root of the word allegiance is the same root as the word “liege,” as in “our liege lord,” meaning that you are a vassal, an absolute servant, to the personage to whom you have allegiance. There is only One to Whom we may have allegiance, only one is properly our liege... and that is the Most High God.

Royalty – and, really, all civil government – has always been a substitution for or an impediment to our allegiance to God, which is why He cautioned us so fully against taking on such in:

### **1 Samuel 8:4-8**

Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah; and they said to him, “Behold, you have grown old, and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now appoint a king for us to judge us like all the nations.” But the thing was displeasing in the sight of Samuel when they said, “Give

us a king to judge us.” And Samuel prayed to the LORD. The LORD said to Samuel, “Listen to the voice of the people in regard to all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me from being king over them. Like all the deeds which they have done since the day that I brought them up from Egypt even to this day – in that they have forsaken Me and served other gods – so they are doing to you also.

Indeed, when we are out in the Dispersion – as we are – and we find ourselves in trouble, it is not the civil governing authorities we are to turn to, but the Most High, as we read in:

### **1 Kings 8:46-53**

“When they sin against You (for there is no man who does not sin) and You are angry with them and deliver them to an enemy, so that they take them away captive to the land of the enemy, far off or near; if they take thought in the land where they have been taken captive, and repent and make supplication to You in the land of those who have taken them captive, saying, ‘We have sinned and have committed iniquity, we have acted wickedly’; if they return to You with all their heart and with all their soul in the land of their enemies who have taken them captive, and pray to You toward their land which You have given to their fathers, the city which You have chosen, and the house which I have built for Your name; then hear their prayer and their supplication in heaven Your dwelling place, and maintain their cause, and forgive Your people who have sinned against You and all their transgressions which they have transgressed against You, and make them objects of compassion before those who have taken them captive, that they may have compassion on them (for they are Your people and Your inheritance which You have brought forth from Egypt, from the midst of the iron furnace), that Your eyes may be open to the supplication of Your servant and to the supplication of Your people Israel, to listen to them whenever they call to You. For You have separated them from all the peoples of the earth as Your inheritance, as You spoke through Moses Your servant, when You brought our fathers forth from Egypt, O Lord GOD.”

Too many people – too many Believers – turn to our civil government as the arbiter of right and wrong, as if it were functioning as God called for the kings of Israel to function in:

### **Deuteronomy 17:14-20**

When you enter the land which the LORD your God gives you, and you possess it and live in it, and you say, “I will set a king over me like all the nations who are around me,” you shall surely set a king over you whom the LORD your God chooses, one from among your countrymen you shall set as king over yourselves; you may not put a foreigner over yourselves who is not your countryman.

Moreover, he shall not multiply horses for himself, nor shall he cause the people to return to Egypt to multiply horses, since the LORD has said to you, “You shall never again return that way.” He shall not multiply wives for himself, or else his heart will turn away; nor shall he greatly increase silver and gold for himself. Now it shall come about when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself a copy of this law on a scroll in the presence of the Levitical priests. It shall be with him and he shall read it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God, by carefully observing all the words of this law and these statutes, that his heart may not be lifted up above his countrymen and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, to the right or the left, so that he and his sons may continue long in his kingdom in the midst of Israel.”

Obviously, this is not the sort of civil government we have in the Exile. That is the sort of civil government we could bear allegiance to. But what we have in the Exile is something wholly different. We have governments we may bear loyalty to, but which we must be ever watchful of.

Because there will come a time when the governments of Exile will attempt to elevate itself over God in our lives. Oh, they may not say it, but the choice will be there. We will have to, one day, choose between our allegiance to God and His People Am Yisrael, and the country in which we find ourselves, when that country wants us to turn against Israel or the commandments of God. And here is where I may start to get political, some examples of this. Recently, as I've discussed, U.S. President Barack Obama said this about Israel:

We continue to call on Palestinians to end incitement against Israel, and we continue to emphasize that America does not accept the legitimacy of continued Israeli settlements. The time has come -- the time has come to re-launch negotiations without preconditions that address the permanent status issues: security for Israelis and Palestinians, borders, refugees, and Jerusalem. And the goal is clear: Two states living side by side in peace and security -- a Jewish state of Israel, with true security for all Israelis; and a viable, independent Palestinian state with contiguous territory that ends the occupation that began in 1967, and realizes the potential of the Palestinian people.

In other words, Palestinian terrorism is "incitement," but Israelis living in towns that are older than I am are committing illegal acts, and the Israelis must give up Jerusalem and return to the borders they held in 1967. And the official position of the U.S. government and the UN are continuing follow these ideas. Beyond making the State of Israel out to be an evil force and the terrorists out to be innocent victims, the U.S. government is moving towards forcing people to violate Torah, for example with requirements of certain vaccines which are made with human retinal cells, the injection of which is considered by many halachic authorities a violation under the rules against cannibalism.

The point is, we must render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's, and render unto God that which is God's. What is Caesar's? Obedience to all laws that do not conflict with Torah, loyalty up until the time that we are required to turn against Israel, and payment of taxes and fees. What is God's? Allegiance to Him and His People, Am Yisrael; keeping His Commandments; payment of His Tithes and required Offerings; helping the poor through His People and His institutions, as we read in Numbers 18 and Deuteronomy 14, 15, and 18.

I will be addressing that in some more depth next week in my teaching, "Who Stole Social Justice?" But the fact is, we have a tendency to render unto Caesar – the State – that which is God's. When we turn to Caesar as the arbiter of right and wrong, when we turn to Caesar as the power of our lives, when we turn to Caesar to do what God calls us to do through Him and His institutions, we are no longer rendering to Caesar but rather over-rendering. We must not over-render to Caesar, for our God is a jealous God, and He wants us to render unto Him that which is due to Him. We must be careful to walk the narrow path rightly, because it is far more important that we do not render unto Caesar that which is God's than not rendering unto God that which is Caesar's. For only God has the power over our souls.

Remember the Germans who did not turn away from Hitler and the Nazis because they thought they were rendering unto Caesar that which was Caesar's. They over-rendered, and that overtook them... and almost overtook the whole world.