

Truth isn't threatened by controversy

Thought for the Day

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Spring seems to have sprung, and snowdrops and crocuses have started to push through the soil, and the weather seems to have given way in the headlines to democracy.

Leaving aside our local preoccupation with what might seem to be the ultimate form of democracy – the referendum – and the elephant in the room – the Scottish election – in some ways, the most significant blossom may be a country that I don't think many people would put at the top of their list of democracies, but the results that are emerging from elections in Iran do seem to signify genuine change. In the United States, the results are still coming in from so-called Super Tuesday, and many Americans must be waking up to weepy Wednesday as they see their favourite candidate to be a candidate limp away from the contest on this morning after the night before. And closer to home, the Irish Republic is in political limbo after an election that everyone seems to have lost.

But the importance of the result seems to divert attention from something even more important. Democracy isn't just about casting our votes, and it's certainly not about which side can attract more celebrity supporters – unless they happen also to be experts. That's why, in a passage we read in synagogues a couple of weeks ago, the Torah warns against following the majority to do wrong. Democracy doesn't absolve us from making our own decisions – on the contrary, it requires us to listen to what both sides have to say, and then judge for ourselves which is wrong and which is right.

That's why I'm not just depressed but seriously troubled by the growing tendency, especially amongst some students, to try to silence those they disagree with, whether by shouting them down or refusing to debate with them. That's the very antithesis of what a university should be about – weighing and testing ideas, winning by reasoned argument, not by duress. Truth isn't threatened by controversy; truth is strengthened by controversy.