

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Yitro)

In general, I prefer to stay away from politics in these articles, but I am going to make an exception this week (while attempting not to take sides). For nigh on a year, Israel has been politically paralyzed. Be'ezrat Hashem, in a few weeks Israelis (those still willing to vote :) will go to the polls for a third time. And yet, on a news program the other day, two well-known Israeli political commentators agreed they would not be surprised if we need yet a fourth election!

Try as they might, the political parties do not seem to be able to move the needle and polls still suggest the breakdown of votes, assuming no political party radically changes its position, will remain basically as it is now with no party or position gaining a clear majority. What is going on? And how can we break this stalemate?

Many will suggest, more or less, that three parties are responsible:

The current Prime Minister facing a trial who some feel should step down and put the country first (though others suggest his refusal to step down *is* how he is putting the country first).

The current head of the opposition for his refusal to put the country first and form a broader coalition with a clear majority, with the current Prime Minister and his party. (Though others suggest his refusal to join forces is how *he* is putting the country first).

And the King-maker who refuses to choose a side unless both agree to join forces, with the same divergence of opinion as to whether what he is doing is good for the country or a disaster.

How did we get here? What is really going on? And can anything be done to get Israel out of this quagmire?

This week, we read the portion of *Yitro*, most famous for the mass revelation at Sinai, when the Jewish people received the Torah (actually the Ten Commandments, though they may *represent* the entire Torah).

There is an underlying question that needs to be asked here: why did we need this mass revelation; this wondrous spectacle? The Torah tells us the mountain was filled with thunder and lightning, and the Jewish people somehow saw sound. Moshe, who ascends the mountain and gets lost in the clouds, adds to the power of the experience, culminating in the people directly experiencing G-d's voice when the Commandments are given.

But why did we have to wait so long to receive the Torah? Why couldn't we get it in Egypt? In fact, why didn't Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov receive it as individuals, centuries earlier? Hard to imagine they were less worthy than even the simplest individual who stood at Sinai...

It is also interesting to note that before Hashem gives the Jewish people the Torah, they accept it, sight unseen, famously saying:

"All that Hashem has spoken we will do!" (Shemot (Exodus) 19:8)

Why was the giving of the Torah dependent upon its acceptance sight-unseen? Why in Hashem's plan were we meant to accept His authority even before receiving the Torah?

There are two magnificent dimensions to what is really behind the scenes of the giving of the Torah at Sinai, both of which were not just about the Jewish people but rather crucial steps in world history.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks loves to quote John Stuart Mills who points out that the greatest danger in any Democracy is "The Tyranny of the Majority". Specifically, what happens when the majority are wrong? When they tyrannize the minority?

Adolph Hitler was originally elected in a democratic election. And Hamas came to power in the same way. Before we can apply the value of the democratic process, the people need to be ready for democracy, so the adage goes.

But who decides what that readiness means? Many Israelis have accepted by now that as long as our enemies are educating their children to hate, there can be no real hope for peace, and the current reactions in most of the Arab world to President Trump's most recent peace proposal, is a case in point.

Though we may have signed peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan, a very simple perusal of the textbooks employed in these countries' grade schools, along with Saudi Arabia, Syria, Lebanon and the Palestinian Authority, quite obviously espouse anti-Semitism and a profound hatred of Israel. Clearly, an overhaul of these children's educational system is in order. But who gets to decide what that education will be? How do we decide objectively what is right and what is wrong?

Perhaps this is why, before the Jewish people can begin their journey, Hashem needs to establish an objective moral code. Ancient Egypt represented the idea that *might makes right*; the Torah wants to teach the world that only *right* can make might.

This indeed is one of the existential challenges of atheistic and human philosophy as noted by John Paul Sartre, a self-proclaimed atheist, who understood there could be no true objective morality once morality is considered a man-made invention. Human beings are of their very nature, subjective.

Bertrand Russel, who also defined himself an atheist agreed that:

"To believe that the only thing wrong with cruelty is that I don't like it, is to believe the absurd."

In ancient Egypt, something was right because the Pharaoh said it was right, and he ruled because he was the strongest and most powerful force in society. Hence Pharaoh's fear that the Jews would outnumber the Egyptians and overcome them by force; if we were to become more numerous and stronger, we would be the '*new right*'.

Judaism wanted to teach the world that the source of morality was greater than any human being; hence the next stage after seeing mighty Egypt defeated at the splitting of the sea (proving that Egypt was not the greatest force in reality; rather, that title belongs to G-d) was the acceptance of an objective moral code. Precisely for this reason the Jewish people accept the Torah before even seeing its contents, they accept the covenant of the Torah not because it makes sense, but because it comes from G-d. The Jewish people accepted G-d before they accepted the Torah, because the world needed an objective right and wrong. Even future Jewish leaders: Kings and priests are bound by this code; no Jewish king gets to

decide what is right and what is wrong simply by virtue of their power; Mount Sinai was that point when the entire Jewish people accepted a higher code that cannot be impeached.

And that is actually the second thing that happens in this week's portion;

As the **Ramban** suggests, a revelation experienced by an entire people, 600,000 strong, is un-deniable. But more, Hashem seems to want us to accept His Torah before giving it to us because government can only be with the consent of the people. At Mt. Sinai Hashem is teaching the world a most critical lesson, the people need to accept governance for that governance to be meaningful. What would have happened if the Jewish people had not accepted Hashem's impending word? Perhaps the Sinai experience would have... stopped!

But this does not mean that the people get to decide what is right all on their own, they must start with the foundation of what Hashem tells us right. Murder theft, falsehood and adultery are wrong, and only a system based on an objective G-d-authored covenant can decide otherwise (such as killing in self-defense when there is no other choice).

Which brings us back to our current political quagmire here in Israel.

It is a blessing that with three elections in ten months, Israelis are still determined to arrive at a majority, because we value a governance that the people accept (i.e. elect) even at the risk of a government that might end up being not of all of our choice.

And at the same time, a growing portion of the population recognizes that said governance has to operate within the parameters of what is objectively right. Not as decided by the voters, nor as decided by the courts and legal system, but based on a moral code we established with no less than G-d Himself, at the foot of a lonely mountain in the desert three thousand years ago....

We have to ask ourselves: how did the lines become so blurred? There was a time when Israel did not negotiate with terrorists. In fact Israeli forces flew over 2,000 miles to Uganda mounting then most daring raid in modern military warfare for precisely that reason. And then in 1985 Shimon Peres traded 1,100 terrorists and security prisoners for three Israeli POW's (and three MIA bodies) in the Jibril exchange in 1985, and we lost that line.

And it used to be that we did not talk to terrorists, we hunted them down. In fact, Golda Meir sanctioned assassination squads to kill the terrorists responsible for the 1972 Munich Massacre in a highly controversial decision, believing otherwise they would never be brought to justice and Jewish blood would become cheap. And then we signed an agreement with Yasser Arafat, after he addressed the UN with a gun on his belt, and that too became negotiable.

Once, it was unthinkable that a leader could break the law and continue to lead; in fact, Israel sent a former Prime Minister (Ehud Olmert) to prison for bribery, and a serving president (Moshe Katzav) to prison for sexual harassment and (possibly) rape.

And yet, after America pardoned Nixon despite his corruption, and Bill Clinton was excused for his crass behavior while in Office, now one hears as well in Israel: 'should we really remove a Prime Minister over a few cigars?'...

Don't get me wrong: every person is innocent until proven guilty, and there is a legitimate debate concerning whether Prime Minister Netanyahu indeed committed any crimes. But the debate should be of substance, not of severity.

There is often a simple line between what is right, and what is wrong, and while politics is often all about the grey, perhaps we are in this quagmire because we have forgotten that there are lines that are not meant to be crossed. Perhaps we have become so comfortable, immersed even, in our ideologies, we have lost the ability to see another point of view.

I happened to fly to the US this week and discovered upon arriving at JFK that I was on the same flight as former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert who has come to NY to lobby against Trump's peace plan. To do this, he will go on tour if the media are correct with Mahmoud Abbas who is on record calling for days of rage and violence against IDF soldiers and Israeli civilians, and commits a major portion of his budget to supporting terrorist activity and honoring murderers by naming public squares after terrorists who murdered children...

When and where do we draw the line? Perhaps the stalemate we find ourselves in is actually an opportunity to take a pause and consider where we need to re-draw the lines we were never meant to cross. But as well, perhaps it is an opportunity to ask ourselves how it could be, whatever our point of view, that half the population of our country somehow sees things so differently?

Three thousand years ago we accepted a covenant as a people knowing there is an objective moral code that is not ours to debate. But Hashem did not end with that; we had to accept it, all of us, together.

Something to think about....

Shabbat Shalom, from Jerusalem,

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