



Sermon Tidbits

JANUARY 12, 2015

Parashat Vaera

Compromise

And Pharaoh's heart was hardened (Exodus 7:12)

ויחזק לב פרעה (שמות ז:יב)

Compromise represents an essential value rooted in Jewish law and practice. Rather than demanding strict justice, with a winner and loser, Jewish law prefers reaching a middle ground amenable to both parties. Rabbi Yosef Karo, writing about the laws of courts in the Shulchan Aruch - Code of Jewish Law (Choshen Mishpat 12:2) writes that, "there is a mitzvah [for judges] to ask litigants whether they wish to compromise. If they are willing, then [the judges] suggest a compromise... [and] every court that encourages compromises is worthy of praise." Compromise also represents a critical tool we all utilize in our interpersonal lives. What marriage could survive without compromise? What family? What synagogue or community? We compromise with our children and parents, with our business partners and our neighbors because we recognize that we must concede, and make room for other to live, function and thrive together.

Pharaoh didn't believe in compromise. It simply wasn't part of his culture. So, when Moses demanded that Pharaoh release the Israelites from bondage, Pharaoh didn't simply reject Moses' position. Rather, he rejected the notion that Moses had a right to negotiate with him at all. Describing the nature of ancient Egyptian culture, Rabbi Oren Duvdevani [writes](#) that, "the pyramid is the best representation of the world of social conventions of ancient Egypt. Egypt was, in its entirety, a hierarchal, inflexible structure divided between masters and their servants, while above them all of course stood the Pharaoh... This was a society that not only had no place for protest, but also left no room for differences of opinion or theological dispute." Rabbi Duvdevani explains that the Ten Plagues, which begin in Parshat Va'era and culminate with the Plague of the Firstborn in Parshat Bo, were imposed not simply to punish Egypt, but "to collapse, stone by stone, that ideological Egyptian pyramid. Each succeeding plague illustrated that there is no longer a place for the worldview of ancient Egypt..."

The Palestinians suffer from a similar cultural malady, viewing compromise not as a positive and important tool to reach a negotiated settlement, but instead as a symbol of weakness and capitulation. Writing in the New York Times last week, Dennis Ross, a former Middle East advisor during both Republican and Democratic administrations, described the failure of the last three serious efforts to reach a lasting peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA), where in each case Israel made an offer, but the Palestinian's either responded "no" or offered no response at all. [Writes Ross](#), "Palestinian political culture is rooted in a narrative of injustice; its anti-colonialist bent and its deep sense of grievance treats concessions to Israel as illegitimate. Compromise is portrayed as betrayal, and negotiations — which are by definition about mutual concessions—will inevitably force any Palestinian leader to challenge his people by making a politically costly decision."

Both Israel and the United States have long rejected Palestinian one-sided efforts, such as the PA's recent application to join the International Court of Justice, insisting that true peace can only come to the Middle East through a negotiated settlement between the two parties. In fact, the Obama Administration recently [announced](#) that it was "reviewing its annual \$440 million aid package to the Palestinians because of their effort to join the International Criminal Court (ICC) to pursue war-crimes charges against Israel." The Palestinians will only be able to achieve their goals by embracing compromise and returning to direct, bilateral negotiations with Israel rather than taking actions such as joining the ICC. ■

Compassionate Aid

Very grievous hail (Exodus 9:18)

ברך כבוד מאד (שמות ט:יח)

In a quiet meeting in Yad Mordechai just north of the Gaza Strip late last month, a group of thirty Israeli produce growers and Gazan produce importers met for the first time since the recent summer conflict, [Walla News reported](#). Yitzchak Cohen, executive director of an Israeli produce cooperative, said that the meeting was an opportunity to raise issues that might prevent the flow of goods and maintain a good connection between the two groups. “We don’t deal with security issues,” Muhammad Utman, the director of trade for produce in Gaza said. “We deal with issues of trade, and leave politics for the politicians...I am happy to see [the Israeli] growers—some of them even feel like members of my family.” Between 10 and 15 percent of all Israeli produce is sold in Gaza, representing important income for Israeli farmers, as well as a significant source of sustenance for the people of Gaza.

Yet, despite the good feelings, Israelis recognize that their goodwill carries a heavy price. According to the Israeli newspaper [Mekor Rishon](#), Hamas levies a tax on every truckload of goods that passes into the territory. The farmers report that Hamas demands between 1,800 (canned goods or potatoes) to 4,000 shekels (clothing) per truck, depending on the nature of the goods. Uri Medar, an agricultural coordinator in Israel, acknowledges the profit to Hamas, saying that Israel knows exactly how much Hamas benefits from the goods. Yet, he says, “My job is to strengthen and preserve farming in the Gaza Strip. I want there to be an agricultural structure in Gaza capable of providing the nutritional needs of the residents of the Strip so that they should benefit from the produce grown in Israel and our advanced technology, to give them greater capabilities.”

Why does Israel help the people of Gaza when the assistance directly benefits Hamas? One could argue that these Israeli farmers have taken a lesson from Parashat Vayeira.

While Pharaoh refused to capitulate to Moses’ demands to free the slaves, his people and country bore the brunt of the damage that the plagues inflicted upon Egypt. While the first three plagues caused suffering, they inflicted no permanent damage. Yet, the seventh plague of hail threatened to kill any livestock or slaves left in the fields and destroy all trees throughout the land. Ultimately, the plague drastically altered the landscape of Egypt, causing lasting and permanent damage to the Egyptian economy. Yet, before meting out the plague upon the country, Moses warned Pharaoh about the plague and encouraged him to take action to avoid unnecessary damage. “Now therefore send quickly in your cattle and all that you have in the field.” (9:19) The verse notes that those who “feared the word of the Lord” (verse 20) saved their property, but those that did not left their property out in the open and lost everything. Why did Moses warn Pharaoh about a punishment intended to inflict pain and induce the Egyptians to free the Israelites? The Midrash (Shemot Rabbah 12:3) comments: “Come and see the compassion of the Holy One blessed be He. Even in the hour of wrath, God was compassionate on the wicked ones and their livestock. For the plague of hail was not set upon them, but only on the produce of the land, and they were warned to guard themselves and their animals so that they would not be struck by the hail.” Compassion reigned even during a plague intended to inflict pain and induce Egypt to change its ways.

While Israel imposes an embargo intended to prevent Hamas from rearming itself and rebuilding the terrorist infrastructure it used to attack Israel both from above ground and below, it too chooses to act with compassion to alleviate the suffering of the Palestinian people. Arab countries have paid only a tiny fraction of the billions of dollars they pledged for the reconstruction of Gaza, but Israel has facilitated the transfer of more than 61,000 truckloads, totaling more than 1.3 million tons of goods, into Gaza last year through the Kerem Shalom Crossing. This aid did not stop even during Operation Cast Lead, as Hamas missiles, rockets, and mortars rained down on Israel’s citizens.

Uri Medar notes another recent benefit for Gaza’s citizens: “Recently we opened markets from Gaza to Judea and Samaria - which means a 2.5 million shekel gross for the Gazan farmers. From our perspective, this is a significant success and we’re closing the year (2014) with reason for optimism.” ■