

Yitro 2017 / 5777
On Power and Love
Rabbi Sherril Gilbert

In this week's installment of our people's story, we find the Israelites and those travelling with them have crossed the Sea of Reeds over to the other shore and they have begun to accommodate to desert life. Moses' father-in-law Yitro gives Moses some wise advice on leadership and conserving energy by mastering the art of delegation.

The people receive instructions to wash up and prepare for something special and gather around the mountain in three days. A combination lightning storm, earthquake, and volcano occurred over, around and under them. And in the middle of all this noisy activity, everything became utterly still - until even the animals and birds were silent, and God's voice was heard. This event has come to be called the *matan Torah* – the giving of the ten commandments. Through this event, “right living” became part of religion for the first time.¹

As I read this week's parsha, and thought about this notion of the ten commandments being a meta-blueprint for “right living”, I couldn't help thinking about some of the events of the past few weeks, and wondered how far we have *actually* come in our ability to make “right living” manifest in the world.

I thought about the McGill student who advocated “punching a Zionist” last week. I thought about the swastikas that were drawn on car windows in Outremont during last week's snowstorm. I thought about yesterday's press conference where President Trump silenced a religious Jewish reporter by ordering him to sit down and then calling him a liar.

There is no doubt in my mind that we are entering one of the most reactionary periods of our lifetime. Many of us here are elders in this community, experienced in life and hopefully more the wiser for it. The times we live in now require of us to become more profoundly radical, strategic and visionary than we have ever been and to become ever more mindful as we serve and take action.² Our community depends on it, on us. Because each of us is already on the path, we have seen a lifetime of sorrow and violence and suffering and yet – and yet! - we are still here, still gathering in prayer, still holding onto hope, still believing there is good to be found in the world.

¹ R' David Wolfe-Blank, Meta-Parshiot 5757

² Barry Barkan, The Elders' Guild

Rav Naftali, the Ropshizer Rebbe, told his Hasidim that before he was born an angel appeared and showed him a tablet divided into two columns.

On the right side it said, from Talmud Ta'anit: "The learned man should be a fiery furnace."

On the left side it quoted Talmud Sanhedrin: "The meek and lowly shall inherit the world to come."

On the right side from Talmud Brachot: "Man should be wise in his fear of God."

And on the left side from the Yalkut (midrashic anthology of Torah): "You should be simple-hearted in your love of the Lord."

On the right side from the Talmud: "God wants the heart."

And on the left side, from the Prophet Jeremiah: "The heart of His people is corrupt and wayward."

And the Rebbe pondered the contradictions. Until he heard the voice of the angels announcing, "You are now to be born." Whereupon he resolved in his heart to follow both columns no matter the contradictions.

To be Jewish is to live both columns. It is to live with tension, ambivalence, and paradox. "Polarity," wrote Abraham Joshua Heschel, "is at the heart of Judaism."

The philosopher Isaiah Berlin taught that every difficult, complex problem – in politics, life, or thought – always has a simple answer, which is always wrong. Not just wrong – deadly. You just cannot solve a complex problem with a simple solution. This is why extremism of any kind makes us so anxious. It is what scares us about fundamentalism and simplistic moralism. We respond viscerally. Whatever reduces truth to a simple absolute reduces us.³

One of the most important books I have ever read is called *Power and Love*, by Adam Kahane. I was friends with his mother Naomi, zichronah livrachah. I always have several copies of this book on hand, and give it out to others to read. Adam writes that our two most common ways of trying to address our toughest social challenges are the extreme ones: aggressive violence and submissive peace. And he also says that neither of these ways works. He calls these *degenerative* forms of war and peace. So, in order to co-create new social realities, we need to work with two distinct fundamental forces that are in tension with one another: one is *power* and the other is *love*.

But power and love are notoriously difficult to work with because each of them has two sides. Power has a *generative* side and a *degenerative* side, and love also has a

³ Rabbi Edward Feinstein, <http://www.torahcircle.org/torahblog/?p=353#comment-271>

generative side and a *degenerative* side. Love is what makes power generative instead of degenerative, and power is what makes love generative instead of degenerative. Power and love are therefore completely complementary. In order for each to achieve its full potential, it needs the other.

The events of the past weeks, along with the surreal freakshow that we are witnessing in Washington, are evidence of the dangers of disconnecting power from love. Martin Luther King emphasized this essential complementarity between power and love, when he said, “Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic.”

If those of us engaged in social change act to realize ourselves without recognizing that we and others are interdependent, the result will be at best insensitive, and at worst, oppressive or even genocidal.

In his speech, Martin Luther King went on to say, “This collision of immoral power with powerless morality constitutes the major crisis of our time. This *collision* continues because our *polarization* of power and love continues. If we are to succeed in co-creating new social realities, we cannot choose between power and love. We must choose both.”

And that is why, when we read the Ten Commandments, we cannot read it as ten simple prescriptions for living. There is nothing simple about this life. That is why I see it as something much bigger, a meta-blueprint for “right living”. Our Sages taught that contained within those ten utterances is the *whole* of Torah, in all its complexity and contradictions, not just ten disparate instructions. It is not simple and it is not straightforward.

But I believe that, because it is a blueprint of a higher order, it calls us to remember what is required of us for right living. It is the balancing of the two qualities of love and power, *chesed* and *gevurah*. It is the emulating of the qualities of compassion and mercy, of kindness and goodness. Never forget that we have all these qualities available to us in every moment. If we become very still, amidst all the commotion taking place around us, if we become still and listen carefully, then in the silence we will find those qualities. And then, when we find them, we are also required to act. For even though we are not required to complete the task of helping to repair and heal the world, as our wisdom literature (Pirkei Avot 2:21) teaches us, neither are we free from beginning the work. What is the first thing you are ready to commit to to begin?

Shabbat shalom.