

Israel at an Impasse

3 Iyar 5781

Yom Ha'Atzamaut

Israel finds herself, on her seventy third birthday, at a tragic impasse.

We do not dare to presume to criticize from six thousand miles away. We would not appreciate that ourselves if the shoe was on the other foot, and, as Hillel famously distilled the entire Torah, “that which you find displeasing, do not do to another¹.”

And yet, we have an equal responsibility to express concern, heartfelt concern, not as “wise” men and women from afar, but as those whose hearts are perpetually occupied with Zion, and her wellbeing, as those who live and breathe the mandate Rabban Yochanan b. Zakkai, the great shepherd of the Jewish people who saw us through the destruction of the Second Temple, “tziyon hi, doresh ein lah”, *mi'klal di'ba'aya derisha*, we are obliged to seek her welfare². For, it is not only the Lord's eyes that are perpetually on Zion, but, in light of the overarching obligation of *imitatio dei*, our eyes, and hearts, as well.

It would once have been deemed unfathomable, utterly risible that Israel might be headed for a fifth election in two years time. And yet, as we stand here today, this is a very real prospect. The fact that there have already been four elections in that time is inexcusable.

It requires all of us, not only those who dwell there, a *chesbon ha-nefesh*, a soul searching, regarding the welfare of Zion, and of the Jewish people in all parts of the world. We all bear responsibility for creating a climate of zero sum, winner take all, ruthless politics that is predicated on demonization of alternative point of view.

Let us not be naive: simply acknowledging the problem is not a solution, but, conversely, a solution is not possible without acknowledging the problem.

¹ *Talmud Bavli Shabbat 31a.*

² *Talmud Bavli Rosh Ha'Shanah 30a based on Yirmiyahu 30:17.*

For some, an election, or series of election, may seem an abstract, political manner, but it is far from that. In the absence of a functioning government, lives are disrupted, and people suffer. Just before the pandemic, I was approached after Ma'ariv one night in shul by a gentleman collecting funds. He had a rare form of cancer and was seeking funding for treatment.

After discussing his situation with him, I expressed surprise that in Israel's system of socialized medicine, that he could be facing such astronomical out of pocket expenses. He told me, with more than a small measure of exasperation, that government approval was, for some reason, necessary for insurance to cover his treatments, but that approval could not be granted as the subcommittee responsible for those decisions could not meet in the context of the political gridlock.

Let us return to the aforementioned figure of R. Yochanan b. Zakkai. R' Yochanan b. Zakkai lived at a time when Jerusalem was bitterly divided between the peace camp and the war camp. Members of his own family, his nephew, Abba Sikra, led the war camp³.

R' Yochanan, leader of the peace camp, spoke with the leaders of the war camp. He engaged them. He did not refuse to "sit" with those with whom he disagreed. Ultimately, the extremists burned the stores of Jerusalem, people starved, and the Beit HaMikdash was destroyed.

One could have said that the moderate path of R. Yochanan b. Zakkai was fully vindicated. He successfully spared the city of Yavneh, and reconstituted the Jewish community around the study of Torah. He built a culture not only of tolerance but of abiding mutual respect, predicated on the universal code of *tzelem elokim*, and, within our fraternal order, of *ahavat Yisrael*.

His students used to say, I am a creature of God, and so is my friend. And, rather than say that I have engaged in a great amount of Torah study, and he has only engaged in a minimal amount, we have learned, one who has done a great deal, and one who has done a little, the

³ *Talmud Bavli Gittin 56a.*

important thing is that one's heart is directed to Heavens, "*echad ha'marbeh v'echad ha'mamit u'vilvad she'yechaven libo la'shamayim*".⁴

And yet, R. Yochanan b. Zakkai⁵, to quote another statement of his, never engaged in self congratulation, *lo hichzik tovah l'atzmo*. On the contrary, on his dying day, as the Talmud teaches us, he wept out of concern that those who felt his leadership had erred, those who believed that the policy ought to have been built around averting the destruction of the Beit HaMikdash, might have been correct. His students were in disbelief that the great R. Yochanan b. Zakkai was capable of such self doubt, of such humility. It was the ultimate reflection of his greatness.

R. Yochanan came by this honestly. His illustrious Rebbe, Hillel, was of the same orientation. He trained his students to first intensively review the positions of Beit Shammai before arriving at any conclusions. For this reason, the Talmud tells us, we rule, in general, in accordance with Beit Hillel. A position which is taken only after serious and thoughtful consideration of opposing views is a qualitatively stronger position⁶.

This is the need of the hour. Ego and hubris must be put aside. No matter how deep one's convictions, we are not wiser than R. Yochanan b. Zakkai. If he was capable of questioning his own decisions, we all should be, and therefore, be prepared to sit with those with whom we disagree.

Compromise, in our tradition, is a virtue, not a vice. Unsurprisingly, it was the same Hillel who so admired the persona of Aharon, his conciliatory approach, and his indefatigable pursuit of compromise⁷. Even though Moshe took a more purist approach than his brother, *yikov ha-din et ha-har*⁸, Rambam codifies Aharon's approach as normative⁹, and praises all Batei Din which constantly engage in *peshara*, principled compromise.

⁴ Talmud Bavli Brachot 17a.

⁵ Talmud Bavli Brachot 28b.

⁶ Talmud Bavli Eruvin 13a. This was no idle exercise: Beit Hillel did retract views and concede to the view of Beit Shammai. See Mishnayot Eduyot, Chapter 1.

⁷ Avot 1:12.

⁸ Talmud Bavli Sanhedrin 6b.

⁹ Rambam Sanhedrin 22:4. Rambam's view is accepted by Shulchan Arukh, Choshen Mishpat 12:2.

For the vast majority of her existence, the State of Israel's most acute threats were from without. While she has yet to know the full measure of peace, it seems to me that Israel's most existential threats come not from without, but from within. It wasn't Lincoln who first realized that a house divided against itself cannot long stand. The Sages of the Talmud, millenia prior, that challenges from within exceeded, as threats, even the most frightful of external challenges, *kasbeh tarbut ra'a b'toch beito shel adam yoter mi'milkhemet Gog U'Magog*¹⁰. And, of all of these threats, the greatest internal threat is the inability to speak with each other, to talk to each other, to engage in the responsible business of self government.

The Sages long ago taught us that those who involve themselves in public service, *tzorkhei tzibbur*, must do so, not for their own sake, but only, *l'shem shamayim*, for the sake of Heaven¹¹.

We have no illusions. It is grueling work, and to speak of, and pray for, true compromise and conciliation is one thing, while achieving it is quite another. And yet, those who do engage this labor, in service of the community, and in this case, the Jewish state, are achieving things of great importance. As the mishnah goes on to say, *v'tzidkatam omedet la'ad*, their righteousness is everlasting.

May the spirit of humility spread through the Holy Land, to the point where those with different views can acknowledge that absolute purity and truth is to the Lord alone. For we mortals, no matter how deep our convictions, the greater virtue rests in modesty and compromise.

¹⁰ Tamud Bavli Brachot 7b.

¹¹ Avot 2:2.