

“To Speak or Not to Speak: That is Netanyahu’s Question”

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Is chutzpah good or bad? Is it a positive trait or a negative one? Is it flattering to be called chutzpadik or insulting? Most of the time chutzpah is the kind of in your face, blatant disregard for social conventions, or manners, or other people’s feelings. It is brazenness, gall, gumption, nerve, moxie that often takes people aback...it is unexpected and often crosses the line of what’s considered polite or acceptable.

“Chutzpah is when a man kills both his parents and begs the court for mercy because he’s an orphan.

Chutzpah calling up tech support to report a bug in your pirated software.”¹

“Chutzpah,” writes the novelist and translator Michael Wex “is never a good thing in Yiddish.”²

My guess is that if you stood in the middle of Rockville Pike and asked the average passerby to tell you at least one Yiddish word they know, that chutzpah would top the list. The truth is, though, that chutzpah is not originally a Yiddish word...in fact it comes from ancient Hebrew and suggests a boldness that not only isn’t always bad, but in certain cases is considered very good. Consider, for example, Abraham’s classic argument on behalf of the innocent citizens of S’dom. He directly, brazenly confronts God saying, should not the judge of all the earth act justly?³ How can you destroy a whole city when there are innocent people living there?

Chutzpah! When God declares that He will destroy the Jewish people once and for all after they built and worshipped the Golden Calf, Moses gets up the nerve to confront God and tell him that he can’t go through with it! Consider the terrible PR, God, Moses counsels. The Egyptians will say that you only brought the Jewish people out of slavery so that you could annihilate them yourself...is that what you want? And God backs down.⁴ Chutzpah! And since Purim is just around the corner, wasn’t Queen Esther showing chutzpah by orchestrating and plotting the downfall of Haman and coming to King Ahashverosh unannounced to plead for her people? The truth is that chutzpah can be bad or good; nervy and impudent or courageous and heroic!

The 18th Century kabbalist Rabbi Natan Ha’Cohen Adler wrote⁵ that one place a person should never show chutzpah is in the synagogue. In this place of holiness and Torah there’s no room for brio or cheekiness. He understood this from this morning’s parasha. I’m not sure if you noticed

¹ <http://www.forbes.com/sites/crossingborders/2012/05/18/why-chutzpah-is-the-new-charisma-and-how-to-use-it-to-get-what-you-want/>

² Wex, Michael. *Just Say Nu*, page 131

³ Genesis 18:25

⁴ Exodus 32:11-12

⁵ As quoted by Dr. Norman Lamm in “Chutzpah-A Religious Analysis,” *Derashot LeDorot*, Exodus, p. 145

this but the Torah does not particularly like to round numbers. The ark in the Tabernacle is two and a half cubits long and a cubit and a half wide and a cubit and a half high. The acacia wood table is a cubit and a half high. The width of the planks of the tabernacle are a cubit and a half...you get the idea. Why did God ask for half units of measurement rather than whole cubits? According to Rav Adler, the idea is that when we enter a place like this we are to recognize that we are not whole or complete or sufficient. We are half, as it were, still yearning and growing and emerging as Jews and as human beings. That's one of the realities that coming into a place like this is supposed to make you consider. And you can't have chutzpah if you think you're only half-baked. Chutzpah is much more often displayed by people brimming with confidence and assuredness of their opinions about the world.

But there are definitely times when chutzpah is not only allowed, but imperative. When there is a case to be made for moral justice, to stand up for one's values, or to defend one's identity...that's when chutzpah is called for. The Midrash⁶ called the Jewish people the most chutzpadik nation in the world because of our insistence on surviving against all odds! Because of our refusal to assimilate; because of our loyalty to our traditions, beliefs, and practices, no matter how countercultural. This is the good kind of chutzpah, the brave kind of chutzpah, the kind of chutzpah that we should want more of in the world. And nobody has mastered the art of chutzpah better than Israelis. Unfortunately this chutzpah is often misunderstood by non-Israelis (including non-Israeli Jews) as being pushy and aggressive or intolerant or headstrong. But chutzpah is what Dan Senor and Saul Singer wrote about in their book *Start Up Nation*, a certain independent thinking and ambition and vision that has catapulted Israel into one of the world's leading entrepreneurial, high tech, pioneering nations in the world. It is that chutzpah that has allowed Israel to do the impossible—not only survive, but thrive even while surrounded by menacing enemies, even while occasionally having to fight wars with them.

I can't tell you how many times I have been asked in the past few weeks about what I think about Speaker John Boehner's invitation to Prime Minister Netanyahu to speak to Congress. I know that many people are concerned about the effect that accepting this invitation will have on U.S. Israel relations, or on bipartisan support for Israel in Congress. To be perfectly honest with you, I think the way this whole thing transpired was pretty tactless. Ambassador Ron Dermer told Jeffrey Goldberg of *The Atlantic*⁷ that when he received the invitation on Mr. Netanyahu's behalf, he was assured by Boehner's staff that *they were responsible* for the protocol issues and for informing the White House. Clearly partisan politics have gotten in the way of elegant diplomacy. The White House should have been informed of the invitation in the most courteous, considerate manner possible. The office of the American presidency deserves that sensitivity, regardless of the specific occupant of the Oval Office. I'm not sure where the break down occurred or who is responsible for the fall out that has occurred since, but that it should have been handled differently I think most everyone agrees.

⁶ Exodus Rabbah 42:9

⁷ Goldberg, Jeffrey. "Israeli Ambassador: Netanyahu Never Meant to Disrespect Obama," *The Atlantic*

The question is whether the Prime Minister is showing the good kind of chutzpah or the bad kind of chutzpah by going ahead with the speech. Should he yield to the polls which suggest he should back down, or to the Congressional Democrats who are threatening to boycott, or to his former ambassador Michael Oren who counsels him to rethink the speech, or to the opposition parties in Israel who believe he is damaging relations with the White House by circumventing the President's objections, or to J-Street which launched a recent "No Mr. Netanyahu, You Don't Speak for Me" campaign? My friends, you do not have to agree with me for what I am about to say, but since so many of you have asked, and so many of you are genuinely concerned about this situation, I want to share with you my heartfelt conviction that while I think this was so fecklessly handled, Prime Minister Netanyahu should speak to the United States Congress about the very real threat of a nuclear Iran. This is an occasion where chutzpah is called for and necessary and potentially life-saving. If I have to weigh on one side ruffled feathers, faulty protocol, and political theater and on the other, the opportunity for Israel's prime minister, who has for decades been the world's leading watchdog on the burgeoning Iran threat, to speak to the most powerful and influential congress in the world, I have to choose the latter. Friends, it is now 70 years since Auschwitz. Just 70 years since 6 million of our people were annihilated in the Holocaust. And now 70 years later there are another six million Jews in the State of Israel whose annihilation is once again threatened by an enemy every bit as violent and radical and hate-filled as Hitler—and it has vowed as a matter of religious conviction, as a matter of national ideology to eradicate the State of Israel. Back in 2007, Benjamin Netanyahu, then the opposition leader said, "there is only one difference between Nazi Germany and the Islamic Republic of Iran, namely that the first entered a worldwide conflict and then sought atomic weapons, while the latter is first seeking atomic weapons and, once it has them, will then start a world war." In the meantime Iran is the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism, and has instigated numerous attacks on Jews, Americans, and other Westerners; a regime that for the past two decades has been concealing its nuclear program from inspectors and has repeatedly lied to the international community about its nuclear ambitions. I know that many of you disagree with some of Prime Minister Netanyahu's policies...I have had plenty of disagreements myself with the current government in Israel. But the question is, given the opportunity to speak to the very Congress that created the sanctions that forced Iran to the negotiating table to begin with, how could the Israeli Prime Minister responsibly decline?

To be honest with you, these negotiations are frightening to me. There are a lot of items on the negotiating table that could leave Iran as a threshold nuclear power without sufficient inspections or guarantees. I don't like the breach of protocol any more than you do, but I am frankly much more concerned with the danger posed to the world by Iran. Members of Congress who boycott the prime minister's speech out for political reasons are missing the forest for the trees. This isn't only about Israel. It's about the safety and security of the entire world. There are few people who can speak to that with more authority than Benjamin Netanyahu. I am also not particularly swayed by the White House's concern for meeting with candidates up for election or reelection so close to when their citizens go to the poles. In 2008 then candidate Obama went on

a tour of Kuwait, Afghanistan, Iraq, Jordan, Israel, the West Bank, Germany, France, and Britain, meeting with Prime Ministers, Presidents, Chancellors, and Kings and Queens along the way just three months before being elected president. This isn't about posturing. This is about countering an existential threat to Israel and a menace to the world. Prime Minister Netanyahu's decision to speak, in my humble opinion, is an example of the positive, courageous, bold, intrepid kind of chutzpah that is called for in situations just like this. I hope his words are heard and internalized far and wide. And that the community of nations in this world find the chutzpah to stand united against a fanatical, extremist, terrorist regime coming into the possession of the most dangerous weapons ever known to mankind.

In Parashat Mishpatim we learned: *Lo tihyeh acharei rabim l'ra-ot*, don't follow the majority when the majority is leading you in the wrong direction.⁸ The polls may tilt the other way; certain members of Congress may absent themselves; the President and Vice President may be missing from the scene; but heeding the Torah's words that sometimes you have to have the chutzpah to stand up to unwise counsel, I say, 'Speak Mr. Prime Minister, and remind our lawmakers of the grave dangers we face. Speak with all the resolute, dauntless chutzpah that is so desperately needed in times like these.'

⁸ Exodus 23:2