

Rabbi David Wolkenfeld
ASBI Congregation
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In History God Casts a Vote

Many years ago, when I was a college student spending Hannukah at my mother's apartment, we gathered together with some of her closest friends to light candles. One of them, who could have been an Upper West Side Jew ordered from Central-Casting turned to me, just before we lit candles and said, "when you think about it, Hanukkah is the celebration of the victory of people like you over people like me."

I was taken aback and did not quite understand what he meant. Some years later, the New York Times columnist and Conservative intellectual David Brooks published a column in which he said something somewhat similar. The Maccabees were bearded religious extremists from the mountains who waged a bloody civil war against their more cultured and sophisticated coreligionists and fought off a colonialist military power. As depicted by Brooks, the Maccabees were a sort of Jewish Taliban. I know that our family friend was not accusing me of violent extremism, but in his eyes my form of Jewish observance represented an insular and hyper-traditionalist approach to Judaism. The Hellenized Jews who embraced Greek culture seemed more sympathetic in his eyes and their lifestyle and worldview seemed more similar to his own.

I recently shared that story with a friend who responded, "Nah, I had you more pegged as one of those people described in the Book of Maccabees who refused to fight on Shabbat."

The Book of Maccabees describes a Jewish group, known as the Hassidim and allied with the Maccabees in their struggle, who refused to fight, even in self-defense on Shabbat. Needless to say, they were attacked on Shabbat and massacred and that is the last that we know of this group or their ideology. When halakhah become codified several centuries later, we understand that *piku'ach nefesh*, saving a life, overrides the prohibitions of Shabbat. But that particular halakhic detail must not have been as universally accepted at the time.

My friend was not suggesting that I am insensitive to the need to protect health and safety on Shabbat. He was suggesting that Orthodoxy is rigid in its embrace of certain religious ideals and does not sufficiently integrate them into a pragmatic and compelling holistic way of life. The Maccabees were flexible, forward thinking, and moderate. They did not attack on Shabbat but defended themselves on Shabbat. They fought against a great empire, but sent ambassadors to the Roman republic to secure an alliance with a rising power. They rejected Greek cultural hegemony, but asserted their own right to power through means of a thoroughly Greek plebiscite.

Is this critique valid? Does Judaism require mindless traditionalism and religious inflexibility? I do not think you will be surprised if I answer in the negative. And the story of Yosef is one ancient illustration of this dynamic.

At the beginning of our *parashah*, Yosef is raised to prominence and power and he does *not* send word to his father informing him that he is alive. Why does he delay? The twists and turns and plotting of the *parashah* could have been avoided if Yosef had sent a message home on the first day he was made second-in-command to Pharaoh. It is clear that Yosef is waiting to witness something from his brothers, or perhaps he wants to orchestrate or verify their regret and repentance for having sold Yosef into slavery. These answers are hard because they need to justify the additional years of anguish and grief that Yaakov endured thinking that his beloved Yosef was dead.

Ramban explains that Yosef felt it was necessary to actualize his dreams. He needed his entire family to come together in Egypt and bow before him as he had dreamed and shared with his family years earlier. Why? What

was so special about his dream? Many of us have dreams that are meaningful and compelling to us, but we don't try to make them come true in a concrete way in the real world.

Why was Yosef different? Thousands of years later, a different Yosef, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik delivered a lecture, in Yiddish to the American branch of the Mizrahi Religious Zionist movement. This lecture was called "Joseph and His Brothers" and explored the significance of Yosef's dreams and the significance of their actualization.

The controversial element of Yosef's dream was not his prominence over his brothers, but rather that Yosef and his brothers were harvesting wheat at the outset of the dream. With the notable exception of Yitzchak, our patriarchs and matriarchs were merchants and shepherds but not farmers. Yosef's dream of his family harvesting wheat tougher is a dream of a family that has had to exchange its traditional way of life for a foreign way of life. Agriculture was centered in Egypt. Yosef was hated by his brothers because he told them that they had to adopt significant change. They would need to become farmers, and the time was approaching when they would need to descend to Egypt (which had been foretold to their grandfather Avraham but was nonetheless a frightening change to contemplate).

The destiny of the Jewish people required our sojourn in Egypt, that had been known since the *berit ben habetarim* when Avraham was told:

וַיֹּאמֶר לְאַבְרָם יְדַע תְּדַע כִּי גֵר אֶהְיֶה זָרְעֲךָ בְּאֶרֶץ לֹא לְהֵם וְעִבְדוּם וְעָנּוּ אֹתָם אַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת שָׁנָה: וְגַם אֶת־הַגּוֹי אֲשֶׁר יַעֲבֹדוּ דָן אֲנִי וְאַחֲרַי־כֵּן יֵצְאוּ בְרַכָּשׁ גָּדוֹל:

And He said to Abram, "Know well that your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs, and they shall be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years; but I will execute judgment on the nation they shall serve, and in the end they shall go free with great wealth.

Yosef understood that it was time for this process to begin. At a minimum, he intuited that the basic short-term survival of his family required abandoning Eretz Yisrael as it was stricken by famine, and becoming Egyptian farmers.

Rabbi Soloveitchik, as the paradigmatic *Isb HaHalakhab*, Halakhic Man, sympathized with Yosef's brothers. They were the majority and they represented tradition and status quo. The Talmud teaches that *כל המשנה* *ידו על התחתונה*, the one who comes to change something has the burden of proof. Furthermore, the Torah instructs us to follow the majority in halakhic adjudication, *אחרי רבים להטות*, incline after the majority. And even if there is some sort of prophetic insight into God's will, we are not allowed to permit God's intervention into halakhic debate. "It is not in heaven," Rabbi Yehoshua declares during his famous confrontation with Rabbi Eliezer indicating that once the Torah was given to human beings to interpret and develop, God no longer has a vote, we ignore heavenly voices, we ignore a bat-kol that offers an inappropriate intervention into the human task of debating and voting upon matters of Jewish law.

However, Rabbi Soloveitchik taught, God is not only the Giver of Torah, God is also the God of history. And in history, as nations rise and fall, and empires spread and crumble, God does sometimes cast a vote. Yosef's brothers' were correct to be ambivalent about his call for dramatic change. And according to the normal laws by which Judaism develops and unfolds, Yosef's brothers were correct. But the God of History intervened and Yosef's belief in his own dreams saved his family.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik's own life displayed a similar dynamic. When he joined the Mizrahi and publicly affiliated with Zionism in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, he was not only going against the overwhelming near-consensus of Orthodox rabbinic opinion, he was going against a family tradition of opposition to Zionism that had stretched back three generations and he was switching his own personal religious allegiance from the non-Zionist Agudath Yisrael to the Mizrahi.

This was a transition that would haunt the remainder of his life. He never again enjoyed the full fellowship of other American *rashei yeshiva*, the yeshiva deans who were uniquely qualified to understand him and appreciate his scholarship. He was never again considered fully reliable by his former “brothers” in the camp of the non-Zionist Orthodox. But Rav Soloveitchik did not submit to majority rule. He understood that sometimes God casts a vote in the realm of history. Sometimes it is necessary to take risks in order to preserve the future of Judaism. Sometimes survival requires moving to Egypt and learning how to farm. Sometimes survival requires taking up weapons in self defense on Shabbat. Sometimes survival requires returning to Eretz Yisrael through our own human efforts and building a secular state that can defend Jewish life.

Judaism is protected and nurtured by cautious decisions that preserve precedent and build consensus. We follow the majority, seek out support from our existing leaders, and tenaciously embrace the ways of our ancestors. But sometimes, Jewish survival requires listening to the dreamers and being sensitive to the occasions when the God of History casts a vote.