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### Power Corrupts

There was a rabbinic conference in Europe last week featuring representatives from the Council of European Rabbis, the Rabbinical Council of America, and the Israeli Chief Rabbinate. This conference was the victim of some very unfortunate timing. Orthodox rabbis from three continents gathered and signed an agreement affirming the Israeli Chief Rabbinate as a moral “guiding light” of world Jewry.

Only days later, the former Ashkenazic chief rabbi was arrested for bribery. In fact, if you Google “*shochad*” – bribery in Hebrew, the name and picture of the chief rabbi show up at the top of the search results!

On one level, this is just an unfortunate coincidence and it’s unfair to point it out. The RCA, representing American Orthodox rabbis, and the Council of European Rabbis certainly didn’t know that the former chief rabbi was about to be arrested. And he too will have his day in court and the chance to clear his name. But – on another level, these two events are connected in a way that is worth reflecting upon.

One of the specific forms of corruption included in the chief rabbi’s indictment concerned selling certificates for conversion to Judaism. This is a form of corruption that is made possible by the trend in recent years towards greater standardization of conversion and centralization of conversion authority at the same time as conversion candidates are subject to increased scrutiny. The Israeli chief rabbinate has been promoting this agenda for the past decade, and one subtext of the rabbinic conference in Europe was an affirmation by diaspora rabbis that we fundamentally support this agenda and that we support the Israeli rabbinate in the face of growing opposition to the rabbinate’s conversion policies.

This increased scrutiny and the greater centralization in the process increases the power in the hands of all of the various “gatekeepers.” If every local rabbi and every local *beit din* performs conversion, the conversion candidate has a bit more power because he or she can more easily find a *beit din* that will be respectful. The more rigidity to the process, the more power in the hands of the gatekeepers.

It is not true that “power corrupts” as though that were a necessary outcome. But it is true that power creates the possibility of corruption. Inequality creates a power dynamic that a person with weak morals or someone susceptible to temptation will abuse.

I have worked well with the RCA’s centralized conversion process. I have heard nothing at all like the corruption in the case of the Israeli chief rabbi. But several people have confided to me about smaller episodes of abuse, like being asked to do favors for the rabbi overseeing the conversion. I tell conversion candidates that if they have the patience for the bureaucracy of the process, it’s in their best long-term interest to go forward with the centralized conversion process – indeed standardization and centralization is one of the hallmarks of modernity in all fields. But, I’m grateful that the International Rabbinic Fellowship provides a framework for a conversion process that leaves discretion in the hands of the local rabbi with room for flexibility and a less severe power dynamic between the conversion candidate and the supervising rabbi.

Joseph’s life is a story of how dangerous it can be when there are stark differences in power.

Yoseph is favored in his father's household. Not only is he the recipient of extra love from his father, but Yaakov also gives Yoseph responsibilities to supervise his brothers. This is why the brothers fear his dreams. Yoseph never tells his brothers what his own dreams mean – they are the ones who offer the interpretation that the dreams signify Yoseph's desire to rule them. But the brothers had that interpretation because Yoseph did in fact, at that time, exercise power over his brothers.

All of Yoseph's life can be seen as a reflection on the risks of wielding power over others. The peak of his power comes when Yoseph is made second in command to Pharaoh. He is able to use that power to save his family, and to save Egypt from famine. But, he also uses the power placed in his hand to accumulate more power for Pharaoh – taking the money and the land of the Egyptian people in return for feeding them. Ultimately, this power dynamic will explode in a storm of anti-Semitism, resulting in the enslavement of the Jewish people.

The antidote to concentrating power in the hands of a few gatekeepers is to diffuse it throughout a community. Not everyone is going to be equal. Some have more wisdom and experience; some earn respect through accumulating a track record of success and sound judgment. But, when those differences lead to dramatic imbalances in power, the risk for corruption or oppression, or alienation is significant. This was true for Yoseph and his brothers, this is true when it comes to conversion; and this is true when it comes to a shul or community.

Rambam's formulation in his Laws of Hanukkah – *Hilkhot Hanukkah* in Mishnah Torah is also a reflection on the meaning of Jewish sovereignty, its importance and the also the limits of power.

Because Hanukkah is the only holiday not mentioned in Tanakh, Rambam begins *Hilkhot Hanukkah*, the laws of Hanukkah with a brief synopsis of the “Hanukkah story.” After discussing the victory of the “many into the hands of the weak” Rambam mentions that the Maccabees, despite being kohanim took the kingship into their own hands and returned sovereignty to the Jewish people for more than two hundred years. This brief retelling of the Hanukkah story is, I believe, a subtle and sophisticated statement about Jewish sovereignty. The kingdom of the Maccabees was religiously problematic from the beginning. Kohanim are not supposed to be kings! “*lo tasur shevet miyebudab*” – kings are supposed to be from the tribe of Judah! And we know from the Talmud that, after only a brief amount of time, the Maccabee kings themselves persecuted Jews and executed rabbis.

Furthermore, the kingdom they established was not a Messianic kingdom that lasted forever. It lasted 200 years and then it too fell. And yet, Rambam tell us, we designate a holiday to celebrate a temporary victory that was itself religiously problematic. This is one of the most important sources for me in formulating a Religious Zionist philosophy. Jewish sovereignty is worth celebrating, even when it comes with problems.

But Rambam doesn't let his presentation of Hanukkah leave us with a worldview that valorizes power. The very last *halakhab* in Rambam's laws of Hanukkah – which is the final *halakhab* in Rambam's *Sefer Zmanim* – concerns a conflict faced by someone who only has enough oil to light a Shabbat candle or a Hanukkah candle but not both should light a Shabbat candle. Shabbat candles create light in our homes on Shabbat, enabling a harmonious and peaceful between the members of a household. And Rambam explains that it is more important to prioritize the light of peace over the Hanukkah candles. “*Gadol HaShalom*,” Rambam concludes- “Peace is great for the entire Torah was given in order to make peace in the world.”

The Hanukkah story is inescapably a story about civil-war and it's proudly a story that affirms the value of power and sovereignty. That message must be balanced and moderated by a statement that prioritizes peace and that reminds us that all of our involvement in Torah and Mitzvot must be about building peace and not about wielding power.

