



YOUNG ISRAEL OF GREAT NECK

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The Parsha in Practice

Whataboutism



I'm not an expert on much, if anything. There are greater Talmidei Chachamim than myself and better speakers and teachers abound. And that's my chosen profession. My personal life isn't any more impressive. There are better parents than me and certainly better spouses. It goes without saying that I am certainly no expert in my hobbies. I don't run or bike that fast, play guitar all that well, and definitely could tell better jokes.

One of the areas I am least expert in is politics. I often need to hear and process both sides of the argument before I can come to a conclusion that's my own. Sometimes I can't even do that. We live in a complex world, where arguments are never black and white, platforms never as binary as they propret to be and the hard work of nuance isn't the exception, it's the rule. Sometimes both sides of the argument have merit, and we need to rely on other factors to use to help us decide. It's really hard to keep up.

Within Jewish practice and interpretation, there is also much argument and clarity is difficult to achieve on many issues. Machloket permeates so much and so often, it might seem that everything is debatable.

Occasionally though, things are definitive. There are clear lines crossed and we do build the courage to speak out. But when we do, we are often called out for showing up too late and, "If you really believe that, where have you been in the past?" We are either accused of offering too little, or of being too late.

This past Wednesday's events were exactly what R' Chanina Sgan HaKohanim referred to in the Mishna in Avot when he enjoined us to pray for our local governments, wherever or whenever we find ourselves in our centuries-long diaspora for if these governments would not exist, "lawlessness would reign, and people would swallow each other alive." Oh, and take selfies in the process.

What happened in at the Capitol was frightening to watch. Lives were tragically lost, but in the moment, before the extent of the human tragedy was known, I couldn't shake the overwhelming absurdity of it all. "Am I really seeing what I am seeing?" In a year where we've asked ourselves that question so many times, this seemed to take the farcical cake. An impromptu Purim party in the Capitol. What. Is. Happening? Indeed, this is what swallowing each other alive must look like.

We know only a little about Moshe before he has his encounter at the burning bush. He's described as one who left his sheltered position in the palace of Pharaoh to be the one who would "go out to his brethren and witness their labors." He saw suffering, and on that day described, he witnessed the abuse of a single Jew at the hands of an Egyptian. We know what happens next.

The next day we follow another of Moshe's journeys outside the palace and his encounter with two Jews who are fighting. The Gemara infers from the language that their fight had not yet become physical and when Moshe sees that the fight is about to escalate to that level, he stops the man and without equivocation, Moshe declares that the one with his fist outstretched a Rasha, is "wicked" and faults him.

The wicked one responds with a “who do you think you are?” and proceeds to threaten Moshe to reveal to the authorities what he had done to the Egyptian the day before.

Many have pointed out that Moshe’s empathy for his brethren, his willingness to protect his fellow Jew from the oppressor and his willingness to step in and get involved in the fight filled the resume that G-d needed to see to confirm that Moshe would be the one destined to lead the Jews. Empathy and the courage to do and say hard things are the critical elements of a leader and so Moshe’s behavior exhibits his qualifications for this job.

How did Moshe know that the Jew was in the right and didn’t deserve the beating? How did he know that the Jew in the punching motion wasn’t defending himself? How dare he speak up now if he hadn’t before and suddenly insert himself into a dispute that wasn’t his to adjudicate? Where had he been all this time? How could he, as someone who grew up with palace privilege speak for the subjugated Jews?

So much counter argumentation is possible to Moshe’s behavior and yet the Torah is unequivocal in supporting Moshe’s strong reaction in defense of one brother and criticism of another. In fact, this is what gets Moshe his job as leader of the Jewish people. There is much to consider here. Leaders (and we are all leaders if we choose to be) all need to answer the question of “Who do you think you are?” We all need to justify why what we are saying should matter to others and why our perspective is worthy of following. We all need to anticipate the criticism and the other side of the argument and come to a conclusion worth sharing.

Many legitimate perspectives exist to many important questions and sometimes it can be difficult to be sure about important things. There are no perfect choices and weighing between the imperfect requires a more sensitive scale. We second guess ourselves and worry too much about people’s (entirely predictable) reactions. We do not want to start a fight. This is all understandable. To a degree.

There comes a point when our lack of clarity and rejection of arguments isn’t about uncertainty, but about forgetting core principles of how to engage with other people. We may utilize irrelevant argumentation known as “Whataboutism” that goes as follows: “Yeah I know what happened was terrible, but look at the other side has done! What about them?” These are “But he started!” playground-level arguments that we were supposed to grow out of but haven’t yet. Or worse, we criticize the messenger, despite the validity of the message. These arguments aren’t persuasive and are only evidence that we simply just don’t want to listen and that we’ve already made up our minds.

Occasionally we witness things that remind us - viscerally - that there are lines that just cannot be crossed and arguments that simply fail. Where we MUST listen and attempt to understand and reflect on how we arrived here. I believe that this week was one of those times. These moments should have us pause and evaluate.

In a few days, a new presidential term begins. For some it’s the end of the world, for others, it’s a refreshing return to politics as usual. As with every new term, while we never know what the future brings, we are supposed to know Who brings it. As the pasuk in Mishlei reminds us *פְּלִגְמִים לְבַמְלֹךְ בְּיַדָּהּ עַל־כָּל־אֲשֶׁר יִחַפֵּץ יִטְנוּ* “Like channeled water is the mind of the king in the LORD’s hand; He directs it to whatever He wishes.” The King of kings is ultimately the One who sets the course of the waters, as troubled as they might seem.

Let us have the humility to admit what we don’t know, and the courage to stand up when we do, and as the old prayer wishes: may G-d bless us to know the difference.

Shabbat Shalom,

Shmuel Ismach