

Torah Thoughts Regarding January 6, 2021

Shalom Baum

With the start of the Book of Shemot, we will be introduced this Shabbat to a despotic ruler. The Talmud in Sotah (11a) tells us that Pharaoh had three advisors with whom he consulted to develop his plan for violence against the innocent. Balaam actively encouraged Pharaoh in his nefarious plan. Later, in the Book of Bamidbar, Balaam continued to oppose peaceful coexistence with the Jewish nation, leading to his just killing by them. In contrast, Yitro opposed Pharaoh's tactics, and he had to flee for his life to a secure location. He was later rewarded, as his descendants became prominent judges in Israel. Iyov, who opposed Pharaoh's plans, remained silent as he likely realized that speaking up wouldn't accomplish any change. Yet the Talmud tells us that, because he remained mute, he was afflicted with a life of suffering. Why was he punished if, as proven with Yitro, protesting would have not only been useless, but would have endangered his life? The Griz, Rabbi Yitzchak Zev Soloveitchik, explains that Iyov should have spoken up because, when we have an opportunity to scream in dissent and are silent, we have done wrong. It isn't only about the result – silence in the face of incitement and violence is not an option. Silence is unacceptable.

I thought about this while at shul (in the tent minyan) on Wednesday night, just hours after the violence in Washington. Although our shul is a politically free zone, we added a chapter of Tehillim in prayers for peace and clarity. However, prayer, although a fundamental resource, is limited if it is not accompanied by human action and reflection. While everyone is responsible for their own behavior, especially crimes, both Jewish and American law have categories of speech that are deemed provocative and hurtful. A sitting President, or any other politician or person, with a pattern of disparaging and demeaning people, even patriots and those closest to him, combined with speeches that can incite or inflame, plays a role in what the country experienced this week. We should never become immune to insults and provocations by speech, writing, tweets or other forms of communication. It is crucial that we educate ourselves, our families and our communities about this tragedy and its use as an opportunity to speak out against the perpetrators of these and other crimes and against those who fan the flames of frustrated agitators. We should find balance and non-duplicity in this approach and spend as much time and energy evaluating our own behavior and words as we do in assessing others. We should recommit ourselves to being models of good behavior, refined speech and servants of Hashem in every sphere of divine and human interaction. Hashem should give us the insight to cultivate the discipline to be modest in our victories, humble in our disappointments and peaceful in our disagreements.