

Rabbi Noah Arnow
Kol Rinah
Parashat Vayishlach
12/17/16 – 17 Kislev 5777

What is a dialectic? The dialectical method is summarized in the *Encyclopedia of Sciences and Religions* as having (1) a beginning proposition called a thesis, (2) a negation of that thesis called the antithesis, and (3) a synthesis whereby the two conflicting ideas are reconciled to form a new proposition. Thesis, antithesis, synthesis. That's the dialectical process or method.

Today I want to offer an antithesis, a challenge, a push back, an alternative thesis to a thesis, to an idea, that we all are very familiar with.

The thesis I want to challenge is activism. Now, let me say, I believe in activism, in creating social movements and actions to improve our community, our nation, and our world. This is important work. I speak about activism and the kind of action I sometimes take, and that I sometimes encourage others to take.

But I want today to push back against that with a different thesis, an antithesis, so as to arrive perhaps at a more refined, nuanced, complex and thoughtful synthesis.

The antithesis, or competing thesis is that we cause more trouble than we solve, and endanger ourselves, when we try to save others, when we stick our noses into other people's business.

A story.

Once upon a time, the leader of a notorious and dangerous gang of thieves was sleeping at a crossroads. Someone, clearly not knowing who he was, saw him lying there and woke him up saying, "Wake up, I've heard there's someone dangerous around here!" The thief wakes up and begins beating the person who woke him. The victim says, "Has the evil woken up?" And the thief responds, "He was sleeping and you woke him up."

What's the moral of the story? Let sleeping dogs lie. Or in the words of Proverbs, *Like one who seizes a dog's ears, so is a passerby who meddles in a dispute that is not his [or hers]* (Proverbs 26:17).

It's a cute story, but the message is actually a little ambiguous. I understand the verse from Proverbs—don't get involved in other people's arguments. They're liable to bite you, like if you grab a dog's ears.

But in the story, the person who wakes up the thief doesn't want to get involved in an argument, but rather, wants to do good. The goal is to protect and save this person they see lying in a dangerous place.

But the problem is, we don't always know who is good and who is bad. Our instincts are to save someone and help them, but in our activist zeal, we may wake the sleeping giant, endangering ourselves as well as others.

It's really hard to know and to assess when we absolutely should intervene, or get involved, or protest, or take action. Because so often, there are very serious risks.

Unless we are absolutely certain, it would seem that the wisest action may be inaction.

Now, the story that I told you about the passerby who wakes the sleeping thief? That's from the midrash (Genesis Rabbah 75:3)—legends and interpretations, on Genesis, and comes particularly to comment on the very beginning of this week's Torah portion—

⁴ Jacob sent messengers ahead to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom, ⁵ and instructed them as follows, "Thus shall you say, 'To my lord Esau, thus says your servant Jacob: I stayed with Laban and remained until now;

בראשית פרק לב

(ד) וַיִּשְׁלַח יַעֲקֹב מַלְאָכִים לְפָנָיו אֶל עֵשָׂו אָחִיו אֲרֻצָּה שְׂעִיר שָׂדֵה אֲדוֹם :
(ה) וַיֵּצֵאוּ אֹתָם לֵאמֹר כֹּה תֹאמְרוּן לְאֲדֹנָי לְעֵשָׂו כֹּה אָמַר עַבְדְּךָ יַעֲקֹב עִם לְבָן גֵּרְתִּי וְנֹאחֵר עַד עַתָּה :

The midrash is a critique of Jacob. Everything was fine with Esau, Esau didn't know Jacob was there, Esau, 20 years later, had forgotten what Jacob had done to him, or moved on. Why did Jacob need to open that can of worms, wake that sleeping giant, pull that dog's ears, or whatever metaphor you prefer? And moreover, in doing so, Jacob calls himself Esau's servant, abases himself, and gives Esau so much more power and credibility and press. It's Jacob who brings the wicked Esau back into the story.

Here's the punchline of the midrash, and it's put in God's voice: "The Holy Blessed One said, 'Esau was going his way, (towards Seir and had no intention of attacking you,) but you sent messengers to him.'" Not only does the story critique Jacob, but so does the God, here explicitly.

If you're a good person, stay out of the gutter, and don't antagonize troublemakers, because if you do, it'll be your problem.

Ok. End of antithesis.

I want to step back now and do just a little synthesis, a little putting together. Of course, we shouldn't always be activists, and there are certainly times when we shouldn't take action. But of course, there are also times when it's appropriate and necessary to take action.

The challenge all of us, individually and as a community, and as a nation too, have, is knowing the difference between when activism or inactivism is best.

We will all make mistakes and have regrets, both about being active when we should have been quiet, and being quiet when we should have been active.

I don't always get it right, and I need and welcome your thoughts about how I do with this. Send me an e-mail, give me a call, meet me for coffee, and let's talk. Because the process of learning, of dialectics, is one of being reflective, thoughtful and evaluative, so that we don't rashly jump to action, but so that we also don't sit idly by, whether out of fear, ignorance or laziness, while injustice is done when we could have made a difference.

May our study of Torah help us see the world more clearly.

May our study of Torah remind us of the limits of our power, and the extent of our responsibilities.

And may we be guided in darchei noam, paths of pleasantness and darchei tzedek, paths of righteousness, all the days our lives. Let us say Amen, and Shabbat shalom.