

Must You Protest?

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Judaism places on us the obligation of speaking out if we see injustice or wrongdoing.

For example, the Maharal of Prague, the famous 16th century sage associated with the Golem, taught that individual righteousness does not outweigh the sin of not protesting against an emerging communal evil, and that a person will be held accountable for not preventing wickedness when capable of doing so.

But what if we know that our objecting will have no impact. Are we still required to speak out?

There are two famous places in which this question is addressed.

The first is a midrash about the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah:

A man stood at the entrance of Sodom crying out against the injustice and evil in that city. Someone passed by and said to him, "For years you have been urging the people to repent, and yet no one has changed. Why do you continue?" He responded, "When I first came, I protested because I hoped to change the people of Sodom. Now I continue to cry out, because if I don't, they will have changed me."

We might apply this to the person who works in a setting where wrongdoing is taking place routinely. It seems unlikely that their complaint will have impact, but our tradition fears that if they do not speak out, they will come to accept what is happening as necessary, as just the way it is. According to Rabbeinu Yonah, a medieval sage, sinners may think to themselves, "Since others are neither reproving nor contending against us, our deeds are permissible." Thus he concludes that silence in the face of evil is dangerous in that it implies acceptance or possibly even support.

Similarly, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, a leading 20th century philosopher, wrote that "indifference to evil is more insidious than evil itself" and that silent acquiescence leads to evil being accepted and becoming the rule.

A few years ago, the investigation of a death at the Santa Clara County Jail led to the uncovering of racist, anti-Asian, anti-Semitic, and anti-immigrant tweets and emails proliferating among sheriff's deputies, including in the email of the leaders of the sheriffs' union. For a member of the department, it might have seemed that any complaint would go nowhere. Yet not speaking out is accepting what is wrong as normal. One of the most meaningful comments on the situation with police in our country right now was this plaintive question: Where are the good police officers, the ones who will complain when they see their fellow officers mistreating and even killing members of the community?

A second text from the Talmud appears in the context of a discussion of limitations on the commandment not to stand idly by the blood of our brothers:

R. Acha ben R. Chanina said: Never did a favorable decree go forth from the mouth of the Holy One which He withdrew and changed into an unfavorable judgment, except the following: "And the Lord said to His angel: 'Go through the city, through Jerusalem, and put a mark upon the foreheads of the men who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed there'" (Ezekiel 9:4). [Thus, they will be protected from the angels who are slaying the wicked.]

At that moment, the indignant prosecutor came forward in the Heavenly Court.

Prosecutor: Lord, wherein are these (marked ones) different from those (the rest)?

God: These are wholly righteous men, while those are wholly wicked.

Prosecutor: But Lord, they had the power to protest, but did not.

God: I knew that had they protested, they would not have been heeded.

Prosecutor: But Lord, if it was revealed to You, was it revealed to them? Accordingly, they should have protested and incurred scorn for thy holy Name, and have been ready to suffer blows . . . as the prophets of Israel suffered.

God revoked his original order, and the righteous were found guilty, because of their failure to protest (*Shabbat* 55a, *Tanchuma Tazria* 9).

We might feel certain that our protest will do no good, but really we can never be totally positive. The Talmudic sage Rabbi Zera states, "Even though people will not accept it, you should rebuke them," as we can never be sure that our words and actions will be ineffective. Just as many drops of water can eventually carve a hole in a rock, many small efforts can eventually have a major impact.

This seems relevant to me, regarding the situation with the current government of Israel and the issue of annexation. When I first began to get messages asking me to object to what seemed to be Prime Minister Netanyahu's plans, that looked like a pointless effort. The Prime Minister has not shown himself particularly influenced by the objections of American liberal rabbis. But then others became involved—with even AIPAC recognizing the seriousness of the situation—and loosened their normal objection to criticism of the Israeli government, at least if leaks are to be believed.

Israel's security apparatus spoke out, as did potential Arab partners. At the end of this week, the situation seems more fluid, with commentators noting that the Prime Minister has no map, no concrete plan for annexation and no promise of support from his coalition partners, the Blue and White Party. Everyone across the spectrum, from left to right, including Daniel Pipes, has pointed out weaknesses in this plan.

Our Union for Reform Judaism, in conjunction with the Central Conference of American rabbis, made a statement on Wednesday criticizing annexation as well, in strong words. Annexation would:

1. **jeopardize American strategic interests and American political support for Israel.**
2. **jeopardize Israel's security.**
3. **create significant diplomatic risks for Israel in the Arab world, with Western Europe, and in general with the world community.**
4. **have a negative impact on the Palestinians and be seen by them as a total repudiation of the two-state solution.**
5. **have negative effects on the relationship between Israel and Diaspora Jews.**

Annexation, or as it is sometimes called, the “extension of Israeli sovereignty,” would bring in two and a half million Palestinians, or even in a more moderate plan, several hundred thousand, presenting challenges with no happy solution. Giving these Palestinians full rights as voting citizens, as other Arabs who live within the Green Line have, would change Israel's demographic balance, but keeping them as a disenfranchised second-class minority opens Israel even further to the accusation of maintaining a system of apartheid. Without American leadership, it will have to be cooler heads within Israel that can recognize the risk of this unilateral action.

That is what brought me to this question. This sermon started out with some thoughts on the Haftarah about Samuel. Samuel knows that there will be a king; the people demand it, and God has bought into the plan. Yet even as he anoints a king, Samuel speaks to its dangers at great length. Why? Because speaking out against wrongdoing is a core Jewish value to be pursued even when it seems to have no impact.

Lo elecha hamlacha ligmor—ours is not to complete the work, but neither are we free to desist from it. Our obligation to speak out is paramount, even when its impact is unclear and even when we ourselves cannot see the value of our actions.