



## WHAT YOU CALL POLITICS, WE CALL TORAH

Parashat Sh'lah 5777

Rabbi Sharon Brous

Twelve leaders were sent to spy the land. Ten returned reporting fortified cities and giants. They warned that entering the land would be dangerous, even deadly. They spoke the truth, but they were punished severely, leading generations of Rabbis to try to determine where exactly they went wrong. Commentators claim they were tasked only with reporting, not editorializing, that their fault was in worrying how they were perceived by the inhabitants, that they should not have included any negative perceptions in their report, since the land was promised to the people as an inheritance by God. That they were driven by fear.

But R' Jonathan Sacks brings a compelling read from the Lubavitcher Rebbe: The spies' mistake was not that they were "afraid of failure. They were afraid of success."

Very little time had passed since they left Egypt. These men held the immediate and recent memory of the plagues, of the miraculous split sea. God's cloud of Glory protected them by day and they were guided by a pillar of fire at night. They ate manna from heaven. They embodied spiritual intimacy with God.

The spies knew what would happen if they entered the land. They'd be forced to fight battles, to sustain an army, to establish an economy and build out agricultural systems and establish rule of law. In Sacks's words, they were afraid of what would happen were they confronted with the challenge of "mundane and material pursuits." In the desert, "they could spend their entire lives learning Torah, lit by the radiance of the Divine. There they would be one more nation in a world of nations with the same kind of economic, social and political problems that every nation has to deal with" (Sacks, *Covenant and Conversation: Numbers*, 150).

This, then, is their crime: fear of success. They were holy men who didn't want to get caught up in the affairs of marketplace.

I recall the words of Abraham Joshua Heschel, who equates the Israelites' kvetch for water just days after the majestic miracle of the split sea with the black community's insistence on housing without vermin, adequate schools and decent jobs in the aftermath of the great achievements of the March on Washington and the Civil Rights Act: "[Those] prosaic demands... seem so trite, so drab, so banal, so devoid of magnificence."

And yet:

The teaching of Judaism is the theology of the common deed. The Bible insists that God is concerned with everydayness, with the trivialities of life. The great challenge does not lie in organizing solemn demonstrations, but in how we manage the commonplace. The prophet's field of concern is not the mysteries of heaven, the glories of eternity, but the blights of society, the affairs of the marketplace.

*Abraham Joshua Heschel, from The White Man on Trial, February 1964*

Throughout the Torah and the Prophets, God's central preoccupation is the treatment of the poor and most vulnerable; it is honesty in business transactions and fairness in judgment. "The predominant feature of the biblical pattern of life," according to Heschel, "is unassuming, unheroic, inconspicuous piety, the sanctification of trifles, attentiveness to details."

This past week, a dispute erupted in the rabbinic community when a colleague of mine, a brilliant and respected friend, issued a public call for keeping politics from the pulpit: "All we hear all day long is politics. Can we not come to shul for something different, something deeper? I want to know what my rabbi thinks of Jacob and Rachel, not of Pence and Pelosi" (Rabbi David Wolpe, *Why I Keep Politics Off the Pulpit*, June, 2017).

Tell me this: can one really claim that Torah is not an inherently political document? This sacred scroll recounts the story of a band of slaves rising up before the most powerful and iconic ruler of the ancient world and demanding freedom and dignity. Is that not a political message? Four of the five books of Torah tell the story of the journey our people took from slavery to freedom, from degradation to dignity. And lest we think that is an abstract, theoretical or one-time journey, along the way, they are commanded to establish a society that would be the *antithesis* in social policy and political reality of Egypt. We are charged to build, in the Promised Land, what Michael Waltzer calls a *counter Egypt*. A place in which human beings are free and tasked to honor their neighbor's dignity through impartial laws, fair judgment, and acts of compassion and love that reach above the letter of the law.

Why do we unroll the sefer Torah and parade around the sanctuary every week, reciting these words and repeating these stories? For nostalgia sake? To recall old family tales?

We read these sacred narratives to discern what it means to be Moses, Aaron and Miriam in a world of Pharaohs. What it means to be Tamar, when you are invisibilized by a misogynistic legal system that undermines your very humanity. How to hold grief and anguish, like Hannah; how to fight back against injustice like Abraham, even when you are but dust and ashes.

I understand why we might be supremely suspicious of religion on the public stage. For many years in this country and around the world, public discourse has been tainted by the most extreme and regressive version of religion. Religious leaders have used sacred texts and their understanding of the will of God to justify racism and white supremacy, environmental destruction, attacks on women's

bodies, women's health, women's rights and discrimination against LGBT people. The public face of religion has too often been hypocritical, exclusive and oppressive.

But we must not abdicate religion to religious extremists.

The answer is not to decouple religion and politics. To claim that the affairs of the market, the cost and nature of healthcare for the poor, the heartless treatment of the immigrant and refugee, the fact that yet another police officer who shot black man (this time Philando Castile) was found not guilty, the reality that thousands of mostly people of color are stuck in jail because of a broken and discriminatory cash-bail system, the fact that after a mass shooting, like the two this past week, gun laws are more likely to be loosened than tightened... to suggest that all of that is outside the scope of religion *is to strip religion of its essence.*

Instead, we must reclaim religious leadership as moral leadership. It is faith leaders who can bring inclusion, forgiveness, equity and equality, justice and love to the forefront of the national conversation.

A living wage? That is the business of the faith community. Mass incarceration? That's our business too. State Legislatures disenfranchising black voters with "surgical precision?" That, too, is our business. The promise to strip twenty-four million people of their healthcare? Yes. That, too, is the business of people of faith.

Religion means nothing if not a response to the greatest moral crises and challenges of our day. As my friend, R' Shai Held, wrote this week: "Demanding that politics be kept out of shul is like demanding that Torah be kept out of shul."

Remember Dr. King's piercing critique of the God-fearing ministers among whom he expected to find support for the civil rights struggle? Instead, he wrote:

...Some have been outright opponents, refusing to understand the freedom movement and misrepresenting its leaders; all too many others have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained glass windows.

Hear his words:

In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro, I have watched white churchmen stand on the sideline and mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard many ministers say: "Those are social issues, with which the gospel has no real concern." And I have watched many churches commit themselves to a completely other worldly religion which makes a strange, un-Biblical distinction between body and soul, between the sacred and the secular.

Rev. MLK, Jr., Letter from Birmingham Jail, April 16, 1963

King spoke of the church: “archdefenders of the status quo.” We know the same is true of the synagogue-- it was then, and it is now. For every rabbi who went down to Selma, hundreds more remained silent behind anesthetizing security of stained glass windows.

Perhaps some of us, and our leaders, would prefer the path of the ten spies, who would rather dwell in the desert than dirty our hands with the business of building a just society. Perhaps we’d rather ruminate on Jacob and Rachel than be distracted or burdened by gross abuses of power, systemic racism, misogyny, lies and hypocrisy emanating from the highest offices. Perhaps we’d rather not engage a growing authoritarianism that today threatens to undo our democracy.

But there is another way. Two spies, Caleb and Joshua, defied the majority. They saw exactly what the others saw, but called the Israelites to face the inevitable challenges of a complex society with the spiritual tools of faith, hope, and love. We honor them not by telling their stories as entertainment, but by letting their stories guide and strengthen our own resolve to fight for what is right today.