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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

ONE AND A HALF CHEERS FOR TRIBALISM

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Defenses of particularism generally take one of two forms.

In the first, particularism is a necessary precursor for universalism. Human beings can escape the gravitational pull of self-love only through love of family, and love of humanity can be achieved only by expanding the definition of family.

In the second, particularism is necessary for diversity or pluralism. Without particularism, societies that officially value diversity and pluralism rapidly, inevitably, and ironically become monolithic hybrids. Universal multiculuralism causes its own extinction.

This week's parashah suggests a third ground of defense.

When Mosheh saw the Golden Calf, he stood at the gate and cried out in a great voice: "Whoever is for Hashem, to me!" That is the dramatic scene as Ramban tells it, and as I suspect most of us envision it.

Amad b'sha'ar hamachaneh vayikra b'kol gadol.

But the Torah does not say *vayikra*, let alone *vayikra b'kol gadol*. It says rather *vayomer* = "and he **said"**. Mosheh our Teacher speaks; he does not shout.

"All the Children of Levi" then assemble to Mosheh. Perhaps they were moved by the quiet intensity of his speech, or inspired by his iron self-control. But I prefer a different explanation.

The Torah tells us that Mosheh "stood/stopped in the gate of the camp" when he spoke. Biblical gatemanship can refer to mass gatherings, but it can also mark the quiet deliberations of tribal elders. Targum "Yonatan" here describes Moshe as coming to the Gate of the Sanhedrin. Perhaps Mosheh had a "ground game" in Levi, a network of leaders who each swung their precincts/clans behind him. He did not need to shout, because he did not need to reach the masses directly.

Why Levi? Rishonim offer two basic approaches.

In the first, the Levites had maintained a more pristine connection to Torah than the other tribes. They flocked to Mosheh because of a shared ideological vision.

The second, I confess, is hard for me to read, let alone accept. Here is Chizkuni, following Ibn Ezra:

לפי הפשט:
ע"י שהיו בני לוי קרוביו של משה
לא הסכימו להעמיד מנהיג במקומו
According to the peshat*:*
Because the Children of Levi were Mosheh's relatives,
they did not agree to set up a leader in his place.

The Levites flocked to Mosheh unanimously out of tribal political self-interest. Had Mosheh been from Gad, it would have been the Gadites who were with him unanimously, and Tribe Levi would have had its representative share of idolaters. Had Mosheh been a genetically Egyptian convert, no tribe would have stayed fully loyal.

What are we to learn from this?

I suggest, very tentatively, that the Torah may be warning us that reason and moral passion, separately and together, are inadequate to consistently protect us against universal catastrophic error. Reason and moral passion are inherently hegemonistic; by appealing to humanity in general, they seek to eliminate dissent.

Not so self-interest, which almost inevitably generates conflict. An appeal to self-interest is almost always particularistic.

The arguments for making the Calf, risible as they appear in retrospect, must have made lots of sense in the overall cultural environment of the Ancient Near East. But the Levites were immunized by self-interest against the abstract power of those arguments and appeals. Nothing would budge them if it meant that a member of their tribe would no longer be Supreme Leader.

Now it must be acknowledged that loyalty and terrifying zealotry can be closely related. Mosheh sends the gathered Levites out to commit a massacre. This massacre in some sense atones for their tribe's eponym's role in the massacre of Shekhem. Tribe Levi therefore (unlike Tribe Shimon) receives a blessing from Mosheh at the end of Chumash. But it is still 'scattered in Jacob and dispersed in Israel', with no hereditary land. A balance of massacres is not a tolerable prospect going forward.

I want to expand on this claim briefly, because I think it may be of help in some very challenging contemporary situations.

We are often tempted to engage in moral utilitarianism, in other words to tolerate the evils a person commits on the ground that they accomplish even greater good. X is *mekarev* many Jews who (we believe) would otherwise assimilate, and so should be given a Torah platform despite theological monstrosities and practical errors. Y attacks many (we think) necessary targets, so we will overlook the consistent delegitimization of worthwhile Torah interpretations and approaches, and the occasional innocent victim. These justifications are most often deployed on behalf of zealots who advance the perceived interests of a community we identify with.

The opposite approach is problematic as well. The wrongs human beings commit should not blind us to the good they accomplish, and except in extreme cases should not prevent us from acknowledging those goods. Teachers who are desperately cruel to some students may have positively transformed the lives of many others, without ulterior motives. Leaders and mentors who succumb to *yitzrei hora* for sex and power in some relationships may have shared great wisdom with selfless integrity in other relationships.

The Torah's presentation of Levi sets out a challenging middle ground: Moral utilitarianism is much more valid retrospectively than prospectively. We can sometimes say post facto that a person's transgressions were outweighed by their good deeds, even of especially when we recognize that both the transgressions and the good deeds were natural products of a coherent moral character. But we cannot enable present transgressions in the hope and expectation of future good deeds, especially when those transgressions are claiming innocent victims.

All this has particular relevance to zealots. Zealotry, or *kanna'ut*, is closely related to the Rambam's conception of *chassidut*. The Rambam defines the *chasid* as one who strays from the Golden Mean to exaggerate a particular virtue or eliminate a particular vice. The *chakham*, by contrast, understands that all virtues become vices when taken to extremes, and that all vices have some positive outlet. Successful *chasidim* find ways to anchor themselves on that slippery slope, while zealots cannot see things in proportion and lose all traction.

Maimonidean Chasidim often become tribalists – their cardinal virtue is *ahavat Yisroel*. Or religious zealots, who often end up rebuking *chakhamim* for maintaining a sense of proportion. Each of them can provide a vital insurance policy against universalist reason and ethical passion run amok. But they need the balance of appreciating the *tzelem Elokim* in every human being in order to stay healthy, and their balance is generally precarious.

The Tribe of Levi is rewarded with the priesthood, which sublimates violence into animal sacrifice. G-d reacts to even Pinchas' plague-stopping act of zealotry by seeking to impose a *berit shalom* on him. The moral balance of a zealot's life is often the result of luck, and their past performance has little predictive value.

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