

CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP



VAYIKRA: CENTER, CENTRAL, AND CENTRIST

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

When Rabbi Norman Lamm z”l coined the phrase “Centrist Orthodoxy”, many people – myself included – objected that religion should not set out to be a plaything of the prevailing political winds. A consistent centrist must constantly adjust their course to stay equidistant from the extremes. I identified more with William F. Buckley’s vision of a firmly anchored conservative movement that “stands athwart history, shouting: Stop!” Many of my friends preferred a progressive movement shoving history forward regardless of what happened to those who stood athwart.

The thing is that extremism is also a relative and complex term. Barry Goldwater campaigned on the slogan that “Moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue. Extremism in the pursuit of liberty is no vice”. I was astonished when Deborah quoted Goldwater to me in the context of a discussion about how we should respond to deportations carried out without due process. Surely a moral insistence on due process for green-card holders is not an extreme political position, even when it is not a consensus legal position! Obviously it isn’t a consensus political position.

But we need to distinguish between a. holding extreme positions; b. holding positions extremely; and c. willingness to act with “firmness in the right, as G-d gives us to see the right”, which means recognizing that we may be wrong. Rabbi Lamm argued for a stance of “passionate moderation”. He leaned into the oxymoron, but I was never sure whether he succeeded in overcoming it. As a purely intellectual matter, there is no reason for moderates to hold their positions less passionately than extremists hold theirs. But I’m not sure it works emotionally. I hope we can hold them as firmly.

I wonder whether the primary danger of extremism isn’t the strength with which a position is held than its substance. Extremism is the antithesis of deliberation. The person who insists on a high marginal tax rate is no more amenable to deliberation than the person who abhors all taxes, or the person who believes in confiscatory taxation. We just hope that positions closer to each other will have less reasons to resort to violence because the cost of compromise is objectively lower for them.

Alternatively, we suspect that moderate positions are arrived at by a recognition that both extremes have a point and are intrinsically compromises. But that may not be the case; a moderate may see the alternatives on both sides as evil and destructive. Democracy is perhaps the midpoint between anarchy and totalitarianism.

There are also two very different kinds of dangers in extremism. One is the risk that a society will become polarized; deliberation will become impossible; and working for the common good becomes impossible because there is no shared concept of the common good. A second is that society will become unipolar; deliberation will seem pointless, because the common good is so obvious.

Jewish tradition is well aware of both these issues. The Talmud decries a polarized society in which “the Torah becomes two Torahs”. In such a society, deliberation is impossible, and no single beit din can make decisions for people on both sides of the divide. But a unipolar society will inevitably turn into the totalitarian Babel of the Tower. Or if Netziv is correct: must already be totalitarian.

We have found workarounds, though. Ashkenazim and Sefardim literally have different primary codes of law. But we very cleverly meld them into one book and just treat different strands as authoritative.

I think the hope was and is that if we stay formally in conversation, over time we’ll grow back to substantive conversation. We’ll come to realize that whether you eat rice on Pesach is less relevant than whether you care about whether you ought to eat rice on Pesach. So when it comes to whether we should take strategic risks for the sake of retrieving hostages or fight to preserve the rights of people who wish us harm, we might start from a commonality of values even though our practices conflict.

That’s the hope that led Beit Hillel to keep quoting Beit Shammai long after they stopped really understanding them, and that eventually led the law to be decided in accordance with Beit Hillel. But the utter rejection of Beit Shammai from Halakhah also tells us something. Was it their unwillingness

to quote Beit Hillel, perhaps because they were correctly confident of their intellectual superiority? Or were Beit Hillel right not to understand too much?

In his superb video message preambing the Smol Emuni conference this week, Rabbi Yosef Blau argued that extremists are not more rooted than moderates, and moderates are more rooted than they seem.

“We’re living at a time where extreme opinions are dominating. One extreme always leads to a response on the other. But the fact of the matter is [that] the vast majority of people are not on extremes. We have to create a venue where they can express opinions in the middle.”

I’m not fully convinced of either hypothesis.

It can’t be that extreme opinions always yield counterextreme responses, or every society would long since have been ripped apart. There must be both centrifugal and centripetal forces.

But I don’t know that the vast majority of people are in the middle. Another possibility is that most people are not deeply rooted in either extreme, and are easily swayed from one to the other. Or a little more optimistically: most people are not deeply rooted anywhere, so that determined moderates can sway them as much as extremists can. If moderates can find a way to be heard, as Rabbi Blau so masterfully did.

Sefer Vayikra is the book of sacrifices, and also the book of commands defining ethical character. It contains a detailed list of restrictions on lustful behavior, which inevitably intrude on love; and an economic vision (*yovel*) intended to prevent permanent concentrations of wealth and hereditary poverty.

Throughout the poetic prophets we learn that G-d cares more about social justice than He does about sacrifices. But Shmuel also tells Shaul that G-d cares more about obedience than sacrifices.

It’s nice to think that there’s never a conflict between obedience and social justice, even if the context of Shmuel’s statement is failed genocide. For example: Rav Aharon Lichtenstein and the Chofetz Chaim independently argued that killing Amalekites is murder unless the killer is motivated exclusively by obedience to G-d’s Will, and in practice, that should mean that it is always murder, because what sane person is capable of that kind of singlemindedness?

The problem is that people can get the command wrong, and obey it anyway; or they can be incorrectly certain of their own

pure motives, or of their own sanity. So we need to teach people how to handle what they experience as conflicts.

Maybe relating to Sefer Vayikra holistically can become a way to accomplish that. If we start from the premise that ethics and morals and justice and holiness and Divine service are all important, but that at least as a practical matter, no single one of them is all-important. All the standard sacrifices are brought during *yovel*.

Shabbat shalom!

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