

## **The Kotel Wasn't Built in a Day**

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The Jewish Center

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These past few weeks have been difficult ones for the Jewish people. The Kotel – which should rightly symbolize history and eternity; hope and unity – has become a locus of hostility and antagonism. Just in time for the days leading to Tisha B'Av, divisiveness has become the watchword of the moment. Emails and op-eds are flying. Allegations and accusations are being cast. Fingers are being pointed and recriminations threatened.

Questions, long-since settled, have been re-opened:

- What stake do we in the diaspora have in the future of the country we've supported for decades?
- Does Israel's Chief Rabbinate represent the Jews of Israel or the Jews of the world?
- Do Jews in America have a say in the political and religious life of a country in which we're not citizens?

These are important questions and they deserve to be discussed and debated. We care deeply about the land of Israel and her people and decisions that could alienate thousands and thousands of Jews have to matter to us.

Yet we in the Modern Orthodox camp have perhaps the hardest time articulating a response. No one wants to be anything but tolerant and inclusive. But no one wants to go on record in support of avowedly un-Orthodox practices. And then our silence gets mistaken for apathy.

I don't want to minimize the complexity of these issues by creating the impression that we can satisfactorily address them in the course of a 12 minute sermon. We cannot.

But I do want to share with you a framework for how we might conceptualize what's happening here. And in the process, perhaps suggest how we might be able to make things a little better.

The 27<sup>th</sup> chapter of Sefer Bamidbar features three episodes. In the first, the daughters of Tzelofchad make their case for a share in the land. In the second, Moshe gazes upon the land on the other side of the Jordan. And in the third, Moshe taps Yehoshua to be his successor.

On their face, these three episodes have very little to do with one another. But taken together as a single unit, they actually highlight three values that I think need to be considered to make sense of the Kotel controversy.

What's the force that animates the daughters of Tzelofchad? They're actually quite explicit. They say: למה יגרע שם אבינו – why should the name of our father be diminished just by dint of circumstance? There is something unfair – unjust – about the members of one Jewish family being left out.

The daughters of Tzelophchad understand intuitively that Jews have a shared history and a shared destiny. To exclude entirely a particular group on the basis of a choice made by a member of that group – is to violate a basic tenet of our faith: That we are all one people.

The underlying value of this first story is a sense of shared humanity. Being included matters.

Second, the Torah gives us a shorthand version of the story of Moshe going up the mountain to see the land he would never enter. In the longer version in פרשת ואתחנן, we're privy to Moshe's prayer:

אֶעֱבְרָה-נָא, וְאֶרְאֶה אֶת-הָאָרֶץ הַטּוֹבָה, אֲשֶׁר, בְּעֵבֶר הַיַּרְדֵּן: הֲהִרָה הַטּוֹב הַזֶּה, וְהִלְבֵּנִי.

Please, Hashem, let me cross over so that I can behold the land – as Rashi says – I want to be able to go to Yerushalayim – to the Beit Hamikdash.

It's the dream of every Jew to be able to come home – to be at the religious and political capital of our people and our nation. Israel is not just the Promised Land. It is our Homeland.

The underlying value of this second story is a sense of national identity: The land and its people matter.

And finally, Moshe asks Hashem to provide a future leader for the people. They need a guide, he says – lest they become כצאן אשר אין להם רעה – like a flock without a shepherd. As Chazal say, they need someone who will help them know right from wrong – who will teach and model for them the Mitzvot of the Torah.

Recognizing that the Israelites were often willful and disobedient, Moshe wanted to be sure they would have someone who would help them observe the commandments of Hashem. למען ישמעו – so that they will listen to the words of the Almighty.

The underlying value of the third story is a sense of obligation: The Torah matters.

Rabbi Abraham Isaak HaCohen Kook – the first Ashkenazic chief rabbi of mandatory Palestine – once wrote that these are the three forces that wrestle within all people: humanity, the nation, and the holy.

The daughters of Tzelofchad taught us about the first; Moshe taught us about the second; and the appointment of Yehoshua taught us about the third.

As Yehuda Mirsky writes so beautifully, in the modern word, each has become the province of a respective party: liberalism, nationalism and Orthodoxy. But each fails to understand the importance of the other.

Liberals need to understand that “the narrowness of nationalism comes from real love of one's community, and the zealotry of the Orthodox is rooted in a flaming desire for God. Liberals and the Orthodox will see that nationalist's placing solidarity above broader aspirations... arises from powerful, loving attachments to people and fellow feeling. Nationalists and the Orthodox in

turn will see that liberal's preference for humanity over nationalism or religion is rooted in an ultimately divine perspective."

The goal, writes Rav Kook, is to synthesize all three elements: religious commitment, national identity and ethical universalism.

In 1961, Rabbi Riskin was a student at Hebrew University. He was studying the Gospels in ancient Greek and there were four students in his class: Rabbi Riskin, an Egged bus driver, a nun from Germany, and Brother Yohanan – a monk from the Terra Sancta church.

These were the days before 1967. Mandelbaum Gate was the closest any Jew could come to the Kotel. And Rabbi Riskin writes, "I would often confide to my Christian friend how anxious I was to pray at the Wall, to kiss its stones, to recite the priestly blessing in the protection of its shade. One day after class, he asked me to meet him the next day, with my passport, in front of the Terra Sancta church. He had some papers for me to fill out and, once the bureaucracy had been taken care of, he could arrange for me to visit the Wall along with the Easter pilgrims from the church.

"My heart was thumping. I barely slept that night. I arrived even before the appointed time, almost afraid to anticipate the impending fulfillment of the dream that had given me no rest since I had come to Israel: to actually pray at the Western Wall of the Holy Temple. Brother Yohanan quickly perused my passport to ascertain that nowhere did it state that I was a Jew. He gave a form to fill out with my birth details, American address, and my parents' names. I then came to the final line: 'I hereby declare that I am a believing Christian,' above room for my signature. My heart fell. 'This I cannot fill out,' I heartbrokenly told him. 'And why not,' he asked. 'It's not like you have to become baptized. Just sign it.'

"With tears in my eyes, I blurted out the whole history of Christian anti-Semitism in Europe, the autos-de-fe, the Crusades and their destruction of entire Jewish communities; the fact that we are forbidden from learning Torah on Christmas Eve, lest we congregate in a synagogue or study hall and serve as easy targets for Christian pogroms.... He returned my passport and I tore up the entry form."

A leopard doesn't change its spots. We're not going to move anyone off of the first principles that guide their lives.

- Charedim will never be sanguine with egalitarianism.
- Liberal Jews will never be sanguine with a group of people who don't subscribe to the notion of pluralism.
- And nationalists will never understand why people can't just compromise in pursuit of Jewish unity.

We can't ask people to pretend to be something they're not. And so it's complicated and messy and seemingly without resolution.

Yehuda Mirsky may have put it better than any other student of Rav Kook, when he put it this way: “His political credo was something along these lines: I should always recognize not only that my opponent is human, but also that he has a piece of the truth that is unavailable to me. Secure in the rightness of my calling and in the inevitable partiality of my vision, I proceed with faith in the struggle itself and in its ultimate, harmonious resolution.”

I think we’ve always needed Rav Kook. It’s just hard to imagine needing him more.

Imagine if each of us understood that all the other parties at the table have a role to play – not just in the advancement of the Jewish people – but in the advancement of our individual Jewish lives.

It’s particularly easy for our community to slip into the trap of triumphalism. After all, we live at the intersection of these three axes: We are liberally-minded, religious-Zionist, Orthodox Jews. We care deeply about inclusiveness, we maintain an abiding loyalty to the land and the state of Israel, and we believe unwaveringly in our sacred duty to observe the Mitzvot and uphold our tradition.

But we, too, have so much to learn from our friends to the right and left.

- We’re so quick to dismiss the Charedim because we disagree with them; but where is our shared sense of humanity? The value they place on Torah and Tefillah is extraordinary. Are we so sure they have nothing to teach us?
- We’re so confident about our political views; but can’t we acknowledge that the men and women who put their lives on the line to live in and defend the state should be entitled to shape its political future?
- And while we can never condone the violation of halacha, we can certainly search for ways to be more inclusive and embracing – an ethic at which our more liberal brothers and sisters have excelled.

We’ve waited too long for Israel, Jerusalem and the Kotel to surrender to petty politics.

Many of these conflicts may in fact be irreconcilable. But that doesn’t mean they are without meaning. We may not always be able to make it into the Promised Land, but we have to be willing to see what’s on the other side. No Jewish conflict was ever resolved in an editorial. We should remain fully prepared to hold tightly to our most deeply held convictions and then to express our views. But before and after we do, we should be equally prepared to listen.