

The Triumph of Principles over Politics

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The Jewish Center

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A number of years ago, I was discussing sermon topics with our rabbinic intern. And he asked, “Can you ever talk about politics from the pulpit?”

And I said, “It’s better to steer clear.”

“Really?” he asked.

“Look,” I said, “The rabbi’s job is to teach Torah, not wade into the muck.”

“But of what if something really big happens? There’s nothing that would justify the rabbi talking about politics from the pulpit?”

“Well,” I said, “maybe if they impeach the president....”

A few weeks ago I got an email from our former intern:

“Dear Rabbi Levine.... So when is the sermon?”

As a general proposition, I confess that I was largely unmoved by the recent impeachment proceedings in the US Senate. Putting aside the putative guilt or innocence of the President, I found it difficult to understand what could justify the investment of so much time and energy in a trial, the outcome of which was a foregone conclusion. But there was one moment by which I *was* moved and I want to share it with you this morning.

But before I do, I want to talk about Shabbat Shirah. And I want to wonder aloud with you about what Az Yashir is really all about. The Song at the Sea is certainly unprecedented in the Torah and – with the possible exception of the poem in Haazinu – it really has no analog. So what it is about and what is its meaning? Was it just a kind of spontaneous victory cheer on the part of the Israelite people or was it meant to serve a higher purpose?

What I’d like to suggest is that Az Yashir is functionally the conclusion of a subtle debate that’s been bubbling beneath the surface of the Exodus story since it began.

Of course we take for granted that Moshe and Pharaoh never really got along. They have different worldviews and different objectives. But even more fundamentally, I would submit that they can never really understand each other because they speak different languages. Pharaoh is a political leader and so his words are always motivated by political considerations.

Think of the first conversation in the palace. Moshe and Aharon approach the king and put forward their request for a three-day furlough.

And Pharaoh says

מי ה' אֲשֶׁר אֲשַׁמֵּעַ בְּקוֹלוֹ

I’m not taking orders from someone I’ve never heard of.

לָמָּה מִלְּשָׁה וְאַהֲרֹן, תִּפְרָיְעוּ אֶת-הָעַם מִמַּעֲשֵׂיוֹ

Your request is distracting. It’s affecting our bottom line. Our workers have a job to do.

Moshe talks about national celebration and service of the divine. Pharaoh talks about quotas and deadlines.

After the 8th plague, Pharaoh relents and asks just who's going on this journey to worship. And Moshe explains that everyone is going. בנערינו ובזקיננו נילך. It's a national holiday. Everyone is included. And Pharaoh says,

לכו-נא הגברים ועבדו את-ה' --כי אתה, אתם מבקשים

Just have the men go. They're the only ones you need.

Again – just as we would expect – where Moshe's emphasis is on the noble values of inclusivity and common cause, Pharaoh's approach is bureaucratic and transactional.

Or even in our Parsha, what's the conversation that leads Pharaoh to pursue his erstwhile slaves?

ויגד למלך מצרים, כי ברח העם

In Pharaoh's mind, the Israelites escaped!

On Moshe's telling of it, the Israelites were redeemed.

Time and again, Pharaoh speaks the language of politics while Moshe speaks the language of principle.

In fact, Rav Soloveitchik even writes that this was the basis for Moshe's objection to undertaking the mission in the first place when he says, "Who am I go to Pharaoh?" To which Hashem responds, with a reference to service on the mountain.

וזה-לך האות, כי אנכי שלחתיך : בהוציאך את-העם, ממצרים, תעבדון את-האלהים, על ההר הזה.

What does coming back to Har Sinai have to do with extricating the Israelites from slavery?

The Rav writes that Hashem was saying: "Know, Moshe, that the purpose of Geulat Mitzrayim is not political and social freedom. For that task, I would not have picked you. I did not pick you to be a diplomat or a king or political leader. Rather, the purpose of the Exodus is to create a holy nation, to make them a Torah nation. For this purpose, God says, I need a Rebbe, a teacher and mentor who will lead and guide this people. And for this role, you are the best candidate."

Moshe only accepted the task because Hashem reassured him that his was an apolitical mission.

So it's little wonder that Moshe and Pharaoh can never really understand one another.

The statesman and the rebbe share no common language.

And so as the last of the Egyptians meet their end at Yam Suf and as the Exodus concludes, Moshe leads the Jewish people in song. And he recasts the narrative once and for all in terms suited to serve a higher purpose. Yes there was a military conflict here, but ה' איש מלחמה – it was God who was victor. אריק חרבי תורישמו ידי. Our enemies were out to get us, but ה' ימלוך לעולם ועד. It they were a flash in the pan; it's Hashem who endures forever.

It's not just that the story can be told differently by the winners and the losers. It's that it can be seen through totally different lenses. This is the meaning of Az Yashir. Now that the story is over, Moshe seizes on the opportunity to consolidate the narrative and make politics subservient to principle rather than the other way around. Let the record show, Moshe insists, that this was not the story of a coup d'etat. It was the story of divine intervention to redeem a people destined for greatness.

And I think it's this message that can help us better understand the disconnect we often feel with our elected officials. Because by and large, theirs is a world of political expediency and ours is a world of principle – or at least it ought to be.

I'm not interested in the debate as to whether our President was guilty of high crimes and misdemeanors.

But I was moved this week by Mitt Romney's decision to break ranks and become the first senator in the history of our country to vote to remove a president of his own party.

It was one of those rare moments where principle triumphed over politics.

These were his words:

“[M]y promise before God to apply impartial justice required that I put my personal feelings and political biases aside. Were I to ignore the evidence that has been presented and disregard what I believe my oath and the Constitution demands of me for the sake of a partisan end, it would, I fear, expose my character to history's rebuke and the censure of my own conscience.”

Cynics will say that I'm being naïve. Just because a politician says he's acting out of principle doesn't mean he is. But to my mind, the recrimination Senator Romney will suffer vitiates such an argument. I believe his words were spoken with sincerity.

It was a welcome reminder that it's possible every now and again to voice a language of values – even amid the cacophony of partisan punditry and unending vapidness that sadly dominates our zeitgeist.

Amid all the rancor, it's easy to become discouraged or dispirited. But maybe there's also a little room to feel heartened. And so I leave you with one final thought.

After the Exodus, the Israelites were a very anxious people.

Every challenge set them on edge.

- When the Egyptians were in hot pursuit, they were terrified.
- When they had no water in the wilderness, their imaginations raced with images of certain death.
- When they ran out of provisions, they were gripped by fear.

And yet when Amalek attacks at the end of the parsha, there's no mention of any reaction: No fear, no anxiety, no desire to turn back. Here was a dangerous enemy that posed a credible threat to the safety of the Jewish people and yet they never say a word. What changed?

I think the only thing that changed was the immediacy of Moshe's response. As soon as Amalek appears on the scene, Moshe has Yehoshua spring into action and recruit an army. When everyone is aflutter with activity, there's no time for worry. So if there's a cause or candidate that we believe in, let's not sit around and stew; let's stand a post.

As Senator Romney said, we may all just be footnotes in the annals of history. But sometimes a footnote can change the world.