

Geulas Yisrael #67

Shoftim : The Moral Tradition

Moshe Taragin

Chazal appended a nickname to each of the five books of the Torah. For obvious reasons, Breishit is often dubbed the "Book of Creation". It is also referred to as the "Book of Yesharim" or the book of kind and moral people.

Before our avot arrived on the scene, humanity was trapped in a violent nightmare of savagery and bloodshed. Conditions for survival were harsh and the human mind could not imagine a gentler world of kindheartedness and compassion. Avraham intuitively sensed that there was something more to this world than power and might. He detected a moral energy which orchestrated life and prosperity. He didn't detect Hashem through cold and impersonal science, but through the moral pulse he sensed coursing through our universe. He identified an intelligent Creator who was also compassionate, a grand architect who also cared lovingly for His creatures.

Avraham craved to discover this Being, and to spread knowledge of His presence, but, most of all, to mimic His moral behavior. Avraham introduced a brave new concept into the theater of human ideas - a world driven by charity, generosity and kindness was more sustainable than one ruled by iron fists of violence. Avraham launched the great moral tradition of humanity.

A Higher Morality

We, his children were tasked with aspiring to an even higher standard of moral behavior – one framed by the directly-revealed word of Hashem. During our formative years in Egypt, we endured terrible slavery, in part, so we would witness first-hand, the horrors of dehumanizing another human being. We would never sink to that level and would always provide a moral lighthouse for humanity.

Even before the directly revealed word of God at Sinai, we dreamed of an ethical society. Parshat Yitro portrays the Jews seeking moral instruction from Moshe *even before Sinai*. Torah had not yet been delivered and, still, we sensed that, in the word of God we could

discover a higher moral code. In the divine will we sensed a blueprint for a society of equality and justice.

Jews have always possessed that "inner voice" urging us to act moral and to model a society of ethics and sympathy. We are ambassadors of divine morality, and we must answer to a higher standard.

The modern shift

For centuries we "lost" this moral tradition. We were pushed to the margins of history, persecuted, and often relegated to second class status. The notion of "ambassadors to humanity" was absurd, when more frequently we were hunted as victims. We almost forgot our assignment as moral role models for society. Society, for its part, wasn't interested in receiving moral instruction from a people they viewed as outcasts and religious infidels.

Moreover, for much of our exile, the world was stuck in a dark abyss. Humanity was terrorized by violence and endless war, and the belief that a tiny nation possessed a moral code to advance the world to a better place was farfetched at best. Our moral tradition was silenced.

But we persisted, and finally history began to catch up with us. We tenaciously upheld the notion that that God loved every one of His creatures and that this divine interest made every individual deserving of freedom, opportunity, and dignity. We upheld the notion of a compassionate God who wanted his subjects to behave morally like Him.

Slowly but surely the world came around and has begun to transform into a more civil, and less brutal society. Against all odds, our moral message has begun to sink in.

Modern society has achieved moral sensibility and is ripe for moral improvement. Once again, Jews have ascended to the world stage, and we now possess a nation-state capable of broadcasting Jewish notions of society and or morality. Additionally, Jews across the globe have achieved positions of influence. After two thousand years of moral irrelevance the world is searching for identity and moral guidance.

Are we capable of appreciating the shift in history and resuming our moral tradition? Can we act up to this historical shift? It isn't easy to live through historical revolutions, it takes imagination and adaptation.

Have some shifted too far?

Sadly, there are many who adamantly maintain the moral tradition of Avraham, but now face a thorny dilemma. Our return to Israel hasn't been universally welcomed, and we have been vilified as "immoral colonialists" administering a racist and bigoted state. The correlation of these claims to fact and truth is irrelevant to many. The world has spoken, and we have been found guilty of moral crimes. None of this is new and, throughout our tortured history, we have withstood far more outrageous accusations. To paraphrase Yeshayahu (54:17) the "tongues which rise up against you will themselves be indicted". Jewish history and prophecy provide the backbone and courage to weather this type of aggression.

However, the worldwide swell in anti-Israel opinion has taken a heavy toll on many Jews. Unable to reconcile modern conventions of morality with our Biblical right to this land, many have, themselves, become outspoken opponents of Israeli policies, or even the state of Israel itself. As we struggle with the final chapters of history, it is difficult to imagine a situation more painful than Jews who stand opposed to our biblical return and sometimes, inadvertently aid our enemies by providing a "Jewish voice" for these spurious accusations.

Though this situation is infuriating, and these anti-Israel efforts must be blunted, it is still crucial to appreciate that this voice is, ironically the voice of *our* moral tradition. It may be a garbled voice, but it is part of the moral voice of Avraham. From their perspective, these Jews are upholding the moral values of Avraham, which are being trampled under our nationalistic agenda.

Sadly, they may not be sensitive enough to the Messianic nature of our return, or to the surpassing divine code of morality which supersedes human moral conventions. Behavior should be judged as moral if it conforms to divine prophecy, and not if it adheres to prejudicial UN resolutions.

However, despite these shortcomings, Jewish opponents of Israel largely view themselves as preserving the moral tradition of Avraham. This moral tradition is our common legacy, and as exasperating as it may be to watch it wielded against our national return to Israel, it is still our shared spiritual commonwealth.

Redemption isn't always smooth. More often, its course is jagged, and its texture uneven. Redemptive courage demands imagination, equanimity, and patience.