

Empty Words, Empty Minds

Moshe Taragin

Throughout the initial years of our desert travels, Moshe's levelheaded and steady leadership stabilized the state of our Jewish nation. Our legendary leader had defied Pharo's tyrannical regime, liberated us from the slave houses of Egypt, quieted a riotous ocean, delivered divine tablets, and heroically, had fasted for forty days while spearheading our national penitence. Throughout all this tumult Moshe remained loyal and steadfast to our people and to our destiny. He was the solid ground upon which our wobbly nation teetered.

Astonishingly, Korach fomented a national insurrection against Moshe's authority, accusing our fabled leader of authoritarianism and cronyism. Inciting a mob against such a celebrated leader was a daunting task requiring vindictive hatred and skillful demagoguery. Korach possessed each.

His speeches were laced with inflammatory rhetoric, populist claims, and empty mottos, completely unanchored from the facts. His malicious campaign scapegoated Moshe for our extended delay in settling the magical land of milk and honey. Preying on public disillusionment in the aftermath of the scandal of the spies, Korach stoked irrational fears about the upcoming desert voyage, noisily drowning out any reasonable conversation about who or what was to blame for the detour. Presenting himself as a champion of the common man in an epic battle against the political and religious elite, he promised everything to everybody, blustering about the entire nation being holy and assuring his naïve followers that all would receive their fair share of power.

Rejecting Moshe's sincere attempts at reconciliation, Korach's partners, Datan and Aviram, evaded any serious conversation, choosing, instead, to accuse Moshe of self-interest and antagonism. In a shocking display of fear-mongering, they portrayed Moshe as poking out the eyes of the lower class.

Korach and his co-insurrectionists were expert orators who built their popularity by whipping up populist hysteria, exploiting national anxieties, and manipulating the angry mob for their own selfish agendas. They provided a master class in Demagoguery 101.

Sadly, failing democracies and growing public disillusionment have empowered modern demagogues to portray themselves as champions of the underclass and to subvert established aristocracies and public institutions. Marshalling modern technologies such as social media, their psychological manipulation and aggressive tirades have poisoned our social and political discourse. Even after these cheap demagogues are exposed and fade from the public arena, their noxious impact causes lasting damage to the social fabric.

Empty sloganeering

In Israel, over the past few months we have all suffered the draining effects of hollow sloganeering. Opponents of judicial reforms have falsely labeled the proposed changes as anti-democratic, parroting unreasonable claims that this process is upending our democratic republic. In truth, the current coalition is employing democratically licensed legislative tools to, in their view, better calibrate our democracy and make it less prejudicial. Durable democracies depend upon a carefully balanced division of powers and judicial reformers aim to improve the current balance. Disagreement with these policies or with their manner of implementation is legitimate, but labeling them anti-democratic is intellectually foolish and dishonest, rouses mass hysteria, and foments public outcry.

Similarly, the protesters who accuse the government of Fascism, are also generating unhealthy emotional frenzy. The past century demonstrated the horrors of actual Fascism, as nations violently discriminated against outliers and mobilized their citizenry toward war, either literal, cultural, or ethnic. Thankfully, there are no fascists in Israel who are forming ethnic hierarchies nor are our personal liberties being sacrificed for the perceived greater good of our nation state. We are far from a fascist regime, but smart people say very silly things when their judgement is tainted by ideological passion. Empty mottos and exaggerated truths quickly follow in the wake of unrestrained political fanaticism.

Protesters, not anarchists

By the same token, supporters of reforms who tag protesters as rioters or even as anarchists, are also peddling empty slogans. Anarchists are people who lose faith in social and political institutions and seek to

violently eliminate social hierarchies or any other conventions of political coercion. Israeli protesters against government reform are working within the democratic system by expressing their legitimate right to protest, and they are certainly not actively or intentionally dismantling any institutions. Ironically, the protesters who are being falsely dubbed as anarchists are desperately trying to maintain conventional social and political hierarchies which, in their opinion, are currently under siege. It could be rightly reasoned that opponents of judicial reform are the furthest thing from anarchists.

Protests often inconvenience us, sometimes disrupt the public order, and always frustrate those who don't endorse the protests. However, that is the price we pay for democracy and for freedom. Freedom isn't free.

Dishonoring Holocaust Victims

Uninhibited and empty sloganeering also leads to grotesque misrepresentations. Applying the term "Nazi" to anyone other than the genocidal criminals of the past century or their wannabee Neo-Nazi successors is a horrific crime which disrespects Holocaust victims. It is difficult to imagine a more despicable and historically revolting offense than referring to another Jew as a Nazi. This perversion of the term "Nazi" should serve as a "conversation-ender": calling any Jew a Nazi is such a grave moral offense that, out of respect to actual Holocaust victims, the conversation must be immediately halted. Nothing is as important as maintaining moral clarity and clearly demarcating between the ghastly crimes of the Nazis and dissenting opinions of political, ideological, or even religious adversaries. Hearing one Jew call another Jew a Nazi is horrifying, and immediately discontinuing the conversation is the best way to demonstrate the gravity of this distortion.

Polarized Truth

Empty sloganeering unleashes polarizing terminology which paints our adversaries in extreme and fanatical terms. Exaggerated slogans create false polarities between ourselves and those who differ with us, causing us to deny merit in any opposing viewpoint. By vilifying our opponents rather than simply disagreeing with them, we mindlessly affirm our own positions, acquitting ourselves from any introspection or self-examination. Stupefied by the delusion that we, alone, possess absolute

truth, we lazily adopt simplistic and imbalanced positions. Truth is never as binary as polarized politics suggests, and supreme confidence in our own exclusive truth locks us into the intellectual darkness of our own narrow positions.

Cheap and shallow

Slogans also cheapen our experience and hollow out our identity. Just as emojis are cheap replacements for deeper emotional expressions, empty slogans are shallow substitutes for nuanced beliefs and for complex ideas. Too much sloganeering, and our lives become driven by shallow catchphrases, rather than by values and identity. How often have you heard people utter mindless phrases such as "turning over a new leaf" or "sealing the deal", rather than carefully describing their experiences or intentions? Words clothe our thoughts and expressing ideas through shallow slogans rather than through actual feelings or sentiments causes us to become superficial one-dimensional silhouettes. Tragically we have become cardboard cutouts of ourselves.

Slogans or truth

Empty slogans and simplistic labels also obscure truth, and, gradually, we lose the ability to discern the inner truth about our own personal lives. Without a compass for truth, we become lost in a fog of uncertainty and apathy about our own lives and our own values.

We also lose the trail of Hashem. In a false world of half-truths the only absolute truth is Hashem himself. People who lead lives of truth are close to Him, while those who veer from truth cannot stand in His presence. As Dovid Hamelech: who ascends the mountain of Hashem and who stands in His holy presence? Only those clean of hand and true of heart. The worst fallout of empty sloganeering is that we lose truth, and without truth we lose Hashem.

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