

COVENANT & Conversation

A STUDY OF LEADERSHIP IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS

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Against Hate

Ki Tetzei - 6 September 2014 / 11 Elul 5774

Ki Tetzei contains more laws than any other parsha in the Torah, and it is possible to be overwhelmed by this *embarrass de richesse* of detail. One verse, however, stands out by its sheer counter-intuitiveness:

Do not despise an Edomite, because he is your brother.
Do not despise the Egyptian, because you were a stranger in his land. (Deut. 23: 8)

These are very unexpected commands. Understanding them will teach us an important lesson about leadership.

First, a general point. Jews have been subjected to racism more and longer than any other nation on earth. Therefore we should be doubly careful never to be guilty of it ourselves. We believe that God created each of us, regardless of colour, class, culture or creed, in His image. If we look down on other people because of their race, then we are demeaning God's image and failing to respect *kavod ha-briyot*, human dignity.

If we think less of a person because of the colour of his or her skin, we are repeating the sin of Aaron and Miriam – “Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married, for he had married a Cushite woman” (Num. 12: 1). There are midrashic interpretations that read this passage differently but the plain sense is that they looked down on Moses' wife because, like Cushite women generally, she had dark skin, making this one of the first recorded instances of colour prejudice. For this sin Miriam was struck with leprosy.

Instead we should remember the lovely line from The Song of Songs: “I am black but beautiful, O daughters of Jerusalem, like the tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Solomon. Do not stare at me because I am dark, because the sun has looked upon me” (Song 1: 5).

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to] correct others,” says the Talmud.¹ Tanakh contains negative evaluations of some other nations, but always and only because of their moral failures, never because of ethnicity or skin colour.

Now to Moses’ two commands against hate,² both of which are surprising. “Do not despise the Egyptian, because you were a stranger in his land.” This is extraordinary. The Egyptians enslaved the Israelites, planned a programme against them of slow genocide, and then refused to let them go despite the plagues that were devastating the land. Are these reasons not to hate?

True: but the Egyptians had initially provided a refuge for the Israelites at a time of famine. They had honoured Joseph and made him second-in-command. The evils they committed against them under “a new king who did not know of Joseph” (Ex. 1: 8) were at the instigation of Pharaoh himself, not the people as a whole. Besides which it was the daughter of that Pharaoh who had rescued Moses and adopted him.

The Torah makes a clear distinction between the Egyptians and the Amalekites. The latter were destined to be perennial enemies of Israel, but not the former. In a later age Isaiah would make a remarkable prophecy, that a day would come when the Egyptians would suffer their own oppression. They would cry out to God, who would rescue them just as he had rescued the Israelites:

When they cry out to the Lord because of their oppressors, he will send them a saviour and defender, and he will rescue them. So the Lord will make himself known to the Egyptians, and in that day they will acknowledge the Lord. (Isaiah 19: 20-21)

The wisdom of Moses’ command not to despise Egyptians still shines through today. If the people continued to hate their erstwhile oppressors, Moses would have taken the Israelites out of Egypt but would have failed to take Egypt out of the Israelites. They would still be slaves, not physically but psychologically. They would be slaves to the past, held captive by the chains of resentment, unable to build the future. *To be free, you have to let go of hate.* That is a difficult truth but a necessary one.

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No less surprising is Moses’ insistence: “Do not despise an Edomite, because he is your brother.” Edom was, of course, the other name of Esau. There was a time when Esau hated Jacob and vowed to kill him. Besides which, before the twins were born, Rebecca received an oracle telling her, “Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the elder will serve the younger” (Gen. 25: 23). Whatever these words mean, they seem to imply that there will be eternal conflict between the two brothers and their descendants.

At a much later age, during the Second Temple period, the prophet Malachi said: “Was not Esau Jacob’s brother?” declares the Lord. ‘Yet I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated ...’ (Malachi 1: 2-3). Centuries later still, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai said, “It is a *halakhah* [rule, law, inescapable truth] that Esau hates Jacob.”³ Why then does Moses tell us not to despise Esau’s descendants?

¹ Baba Metsia 107b.

² Whenever I refer, here and elsewhere, to “Moses’ commands,” I mean, of course, to imply that these were given by Divine instruction and revelation. This, in a deep sense, is why God chose Moses, a man who said repeatedly of himself that he was not a man of words. The words he spoke were those of God. That, and that alone, is what gives them timeless authority for the people of the covenant.

³ Sifri, Bamidbar, Behaalotecha, 69.

The answer is simple. *Esau may hate Jacob. It does not follow that Jacob should hate Esau.* To answer hate with hate is to be dragged down to the level of your opponent. When, in the course of a television programme, I asked Judea Pearl, father of the murdered journalist Daniel Pearl, why he was working for reconciliation between Jews and Muslims, he replied with heartbreaking lucidity, “Hate killed my son. Therefore I am determined to fight hate.” As Martin Luther King said: “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.” Or as Kohelet said, there is “a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace” (Eccl. 3: 8).

It was none other than Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai who said that when Esau met Jacob for the last time, he kissed and embraced him “with a full heart.”⁴ Hate, especially between brothers, is not eternal and inexorable. Always be ready, Moses seems to have implied, for reconciliation between enemies.

Contemporary Games Theory suggests the same. Martin Nowak’s programme “Generous Tit-for-Tat” is a winning strategy in the scenario known as the Iterated Prisoner’s Dilemma. Tit-for-tat says: start by being nice to your opponent, then do to him what he does to you (in Hebrew, *middah kneged middah*). Generous Tit-for-Tat says, don’t always do to him what he does to you or you may find yourself locked into a mutually destructive cycle of retaliation. Every so often ignore (i.e. forgive) your opponent’s last harmful move. That, roughly speaking, is what the sages meant when they said that God originally created the world under the attribute of strict justice but saw that it could not survive. Therefore He built into it the principle of compassion.⁵

Moses’ two commands against hate are testimony to his greatness as a leader. It is the easiest thing in the world to become a leader by mobilising the forces of hate. That is what Radovan Karadzic and Slobodan Milosevic did in the former Yugoslavia and it led to mass murder and ethnic cleansing. It is what the state controlled media did – describing Tutsis as *inyenzi*, “cockroaches” – before the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. It is what dozens of preachers of hate are doing today, often using the Internet to communicate paranoia and incite acts of terror.

This was the technique mastered by Hitler as a prelude to the worst-ever crime of man against man. The language of hate is capable of creating enmity between people of different faiths and ethnicities who have lived peaceably together for centuries. It has consistently been the most destructive force in history, and even knowledge of the Holocaust has not put an end to it, even in Europe. It is the unmistakable mark of toxic leadership.

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In his classic work, *Leadership*, James MacGregor Burns distinguishes between transactional and transformational leaders. The former address people’s interests. The latter attempt to raise their sights. “Transforming leadership is elevating. It is moral but not moralistic. Leaders engage with followers, but from higher levels of morality; in the enmeshing of goals and values both leaders and followers are raised to more principled levels of judgement.”⁶

Leadership at its highest transforms those who exercise it and those who are influenced by it. The great leaders make people better, kinder, nobler than they would otherwise be. That was the

⁴ Sifri ad loc.

⁵ See Rashi to Genesis 1: 1, s.v. *bara*.

⁶ James MacGregor Burns, *Leadership*, Harper Perennial, 2010, 455.

achievement of Washington, Lincoln, Churchill, Gandhi and Mandela. The paradigm case was Moses, the man who had more lasting influence than any other leader in history.

He did it by teaching the Israelites not to hate. Hate the sin but not the sinner. Do not forget the past but do not be held captive by it. Be willing to fight your enemies but never allow yourself to be defined by them or become like them. Learn to love and forgive. Acknowledge the evil men do, but stay focused on the good that is in our power to do. Only thus do we raise the moral sights of humankind and help redeem the world we share.

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Jonathan Sacks

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