

What Have We Won at the Western Wall?
Parashat Terumah
February 12, 2016

Things are not always what they seem to be! I learned something yesterday, which was very different than what I had imagined the situation to be. I learned...well, how old do you think, in this, the world's oldest democracy, how long do you think our elections have featured... a secret ballot? Any guesses? Do you imagine it goes back to the founding of the republic?

It does not. Secret voting was not the way elections were conducted in this country at its inception. In fact, the open, visible to your neighbors setting of the Iowa caucuses is a more accurate historical inheritance than is the secret ballot. People supporting one candidate moved into a corner, or to one side of a town square, and a public figure literally counted heads – the word “poll” literally means a person's head.

And how, when, and why did we wind up with a secret ballot? The sanctity of privacy? The sacred privilege of individuality? Hardly! The first presidential election entirely conducted by secret ballot was in 1896. And the initial reason? Because to cast a written ballot... one had to be able to read. Which, of course, many of the former slaves in the south, or the uneducated lower classes in the North, could not do. Astonishingly, then, to me, a defining feature of our democratic society, a bedrock principle in my mind, originated as anything but what it seems to be today.

A strange and seemingly long-awaited development took place in Israel over the past several weeks, emerging, it appears, out of the convoluted corridors of Israeli democracy. Except that, as it turns out, I am not sure that story is quite what it seems to be either.

Before we get there, though, travel with me, if you will, even further back, to a world lost in time, actual history shrouded behind the veil of sacred story and pious preconception. Come with me to the founding of our own sovereign state, the first one, to the reign of David, in the book of Samuel. It is there we hear told the tale of an illicit census, commissioned by the king without divine decree, meant, perhaps, merely to count the heads, to line up his toys, to puff up his own pride at how powerful he was. The punishment for such an unauthorized poll, as it were, was a plague on the population. Add up your forces without God telling you to do so! Look, God will intervene, and render such a tally immediately inaccurate! A culling following a counting is actually a direct response, measure for measure of what was seen as encroachment upon a divine prerogative.

And so, humbled, David knows he must retreat, and recant. At first he comes before God, but still seeks to avoid direct punishment. Even though he admits to doing wrong, he pleads not to be captured, not to “fall to the hands of men.” But as the plague goes on, David finally turns inward, acts as the leader of the people, and takes upon himself responsibility for others. Standing in a field in a farm in Jerusalem, by the threshing floor of one Arauna the Jebusite, David utters words that matter. “*Hinei anochi chatati*. I alone am guilty,” he

finally says. “*V’anochi he’eviti*; I alone have done wrong; but these poor sheep, what have they done? Let Your hand fall upon me and my father’s house.”

And it is then, only then, when David offers himself up, when he acts on behalf of others and not for his own sake... it is then, and it is there, that the plague finally breaks.

And David... David arranges to purchase that field, that threshing floor. Offered to him for free, he pays a full price for it. And it is there, we are told, at that very place of owning up, and standing down, of turning inward, and reaching out... it is there, we are told... that is the site upon which... at the hands of David’s son...the Temple is built.

Later on, I believe, with the Temple standing before them... later on the people imagine the Temple to have had roots and antecedents even in the Wilderness. Later on, I believe, our Torah portion for this week found its final form, with its description of the Tabernacle... at Moses’ time, it claims, but shaped in how it is shown, I believe, by the reality of a much later shrine. And it is in this week’s portion that we read, then, the famous command from God: “*v’asu li mikdash, v’shachanti b’tocham*; let them make Me a Sanctuary, that I may dwell amongst them.”

Almost every commentary about this verse from Exodus notes the odd ending. It does not say “make me a Sanctuary, that I may dwell in it!” No, of course not. Our God has no corporeal form, we are told, and has no physical

need of a house. God dwells not in a building, we are taught, but among us. And that is a powerful reading, and usually one I find immensely satisfying.

But this year I hear something else in this ending. I hear not the contrast between “*v’shachanti b’tocham*; that I may dwell amongs them,” as opposed to the expected “*v’schachanti b’tcho*... that I may dwell in it!” No, instead of the immediately obvious and grammatically correct third-person contrast, I hear a different one. I hear a third-person plural, instead of a possible second-person singular. I hear “*v’shachanti b’tocham*” instead of “*v’shachanti b’tochecha!*” Let me dwell amongst them, plural, instead of “let me dwell in you,” in the singular.

Well, as the Talmud might say, *mai nafka mina?* What is the practical difference between these two? Actually, it is quite a lot. Because, I believe, God dwells with us... in many different ways. Not just in one way. To put it more plainly: *Yesh yoter m’derekh echad lihiyot Yehudi!* There is more than one way to be a Jew!

That God dwells with us in many different ways is a lesson we may now take... from *the very place at issue* in the story in Samuel, alluded to in the portion in Exodus, in the remnant of glory left to us, at the edge of the ancient Temple, at the sight of the Western Wall.

After years of struggle, decades of hard work, court cases and horrid behavior, women in tallitot dragged off to jail and extremists hurling vicious insults and, literally, dirty diapers at any who dared pray in a non-ultra-

Orthodox way, late in January the Israeli cabinet approved a measure to create an expanded space for egalitarian prayer in the area next to the Western Wall plaza, known as Robinson's Arch. This area will be improved to make it seem like a similar kind of entrance to the sacred site. It will be administered with representatives of the Reform and Conservative movements, and marks the first time such recognition of different streams of Judaism comes from the Israeli government. By many measures this is a historic development.

And yet, and yet... One could still say that not all is as it seems to be. Here is how different headlines portrayed recent events. On the one hand, a press release put out by our own movement opens with: "North American Reform movement applauds plan to enhance egalitarian prayer space at Western Wall." On the other hand, on a different website: "Reform movement loses almost everything in new Kotel deal but declares 'historic victory.'" So, friends, what is going on here?

Just as polls on domestic politics show that we are pulled between pragmatism and idealism, between what can be achieved in the world as it is, and what we aspire to in the world as we want it to be.

Here are the problems with the recent decision. First of all, "separate but equal" is a phrase fraught with historical echoes, and a deeply problematic approach to anyone who has any background in American history. As we learned too well here, separate is rarely equal. In fact, the proposed new space is not equal in size or prominence. It is not contiguous with the current

Western Wall plaza; it is and will remain separated by the Mughrabi Bridge leading up to the Temple Mount, and the Dome of the Rock. If take the advice of any who look at the reality of power, to “follow the money,” we quickly discover that while funds for the Western Wall area as it currently functions come from the Ministry of Religious Affairs, this will not be the case with the new area. Maybe the construction funds will come from the Prime Minister’s Office? Perhaps, even, from the Ministry of Culture and Sport? Or perhaps from you, and from me, guilted into giving the gelt for something fully funded for all Orthodox streams of Israeli Jewish life. The plaza area outside the Kotel, outside the Wall, will be subject to *more* gender restrictions than is currently the case, raising questions even about state ceremonies or military functions that take place there now. And, most significantly, in my opinion, ultra-Orthodox custom and practice will now be firmly enshrined in the existing area. What this means, for example, is that the original goal of Women of the Wall – which, you may remember, *included Orthodox women*, who did not seek to pray together with men – their goal of praying in a fashion they believed in, but in the women’s section, will now be banned from that space altogether. They will be relegated to, perhaps, a designated time, when the new egalitarian area would agree to go non-egalitarian for a time, to accommodate their needs.

So is all this a step forward, a historic accomplishment, a cause for celebration? Or are we just kidding ourselves?

I am so very torn about how I feel about this. For guidance, I turn to an important part of the rabbinic tradition, and, then, back to the story from Samuel with which we began.

We read, in the Tosefta to Tractate Sanhedrin – a compilation of commentary that is contemporary with the Mishna, but was not included in it – the following debate about the nature of compromise: “*Rabbi Eliezer b. Rabbi Yossi HaGalili omeir: kol ham’vatzea harei zeh choteh* – Rabbi Eliezer the son of Rabbi Yossi the Gallilean said: ‘Whoever compromises is a sinner, and he who praises the one who compromises blasphemes before God... Rather, ‘let the law pierce the mountain.’” From this point of view, what is right is right, what is just is just, and giving up on anything short of what you think is right and is just is an affront to Truth, with a capital T, a surrender of principle, a fatal flaw and a religious failing.

But, of course, the passage goes on: “Rabbi Joshua ben Korcha said: ‘It is commanded to compromise, as it is said: ‘Execute a judgement of truth and peace in your gates.’ What kind of justice also contains peace? Let us say this is *bitzua*/compromise!’”

And I am reminded, finally, of the story with which we began. It was David letting go, it was his turning his prayer upon himself and not using others, rather, his defense of others... that led to the site at the center of this dispute in the first place. Not: it has to be all the way I want it to be. Not, it’s all about me. But, rather: I am going to worry about myself. And in so doing, I

make room for difference, make room for others, don't have to count them in my census – or worry about whether they count me in their minyan.

Soon, then, we will have a new place to stand, we liberal Jews. Despite my reservations, I am deeply grateful to all those whose advocacy, activism and sacrifice got us this far. Let us look homeward, look inward, dive deep inside ourselves... For all the very real flaws, this is a new stance, and a step forward. We can't have everything we want? Nor, all at once, everything we think would have been right. All right. Let that, itself, be a lesson that comes from the history and destiny, the site and the stance at the Kotel of tomorrow.

Shabbat Shalom.