

Parashat Shleach-L'cha 5777

P'SHAT

Num. 14:11 And the LORD said to Moses, "How long will this people spurn Me, and how long will they have no faith in Me despite all the signs that I have performed in their midst? ¹² Let me strike them with pestilence and disown them, and let me make of you a nation far more numerous than they!"

¹³ But Moses said to the LORD, "When the Egyptians, from whose midst You brought up this people in Your might, hear the news, ¹⁴ they will tell it to the inhabitants of that land. Now they have heard that You, O LORD, are in the midst of this people; that You, O LORD, appear in plain sight when Your cloud rests over them and when You go before them in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night. ¹⁵ If then You slay this people as a single man, the nations who have heard Your fame will say, ¹⁶ 'It must be because the LORD was powerless to bring that people into the land He had promised them on oath that He slaughtered them in the wilderness.'

¹⁷ Therefore, I pray, let my Lord's power be great, as You have declared, saying, ¹⁸ 'The LORD! slow to anger and abounding in kindness; forgiving iniquity and transgression; yet not remitting all punishment, but visiting the iniquity of fathers upon children, upon the third and fourth generations.' ¹⁹ Pardon, I pray, the iniquity of this people according to Your great kindness, as You have forgiven this people ever since Egypt."

Num. 14:20 And the LORD said, "I pardon, as you have asked.

11 וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה עַד־אֵנָה יִבְאֲצְנִי הָעָם הַזֶּה וְעַד־אֵנָה לֹא־יֵאֱמִינּוּ בִּי בְּכֹל הָאֵתוֹת אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי בְּקִרְבּוֹ: 12 אֲכַנּוּ בְּדַבָּר וְאוֹרְשָׁנוּ וְאָעִשָׂה אֹתָךְ לְגוֹי־גָדוֹל וְעָצוּם מִמֶּנּוּ: 13 וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־יְהוָה וְשָׁמְעוּ מִצְרַיִם כִּי־הֵעֲלִיתָ בְּכַחֲךָ אֶת־הָעָם הַזֶּה מִקִּרְבּוֹ: 14 וְאָמְרוּ אֶל־יֹשְׁבֵי הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת שָׁמְעוּ כִּי־אַתָּה יְהוָה בְּקִרְבָּם הָעָם הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר־עָלוּ בָּעֵין נִרְאָה וְאַתָּה יְהוָה וְעַנְנְךָ עֹמֵד עֲלֵהֶם וּבַעֲמֹד עֵנָן אַתָּה הַלֹּךְ לִפְנֵיהֶם יוֹמָם וּבַעֲמֹד אֵשׁ לַיְלָה: 15 וְהִמַּתָּה אֶת־הָעָם הַזֶּה כְּאִישׁ אֶחָד וְאָמְרוּ הַגּוֹיִם אֲשֶׁר־שָׁמְעוּ אֶת־שִׁמְעָה לֵאמֹר: 16 מִבְּלֹאֵי יָכַלְתָּ יְהוָה לְהַבִּיאַ אֶת־הָעָם הַזֶּה אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר־נִשְׁבַּע לָהֶם וַיִּשְׁחָטֶם בַּמִּדְבָּר: 17 וְעַתָּה יִגְדֹל־נָא כֹּחַ אֱדוּנֵי כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתָּ לֵאמֹר: 18 יְהוָה אֲרַךְ אַפָּיִם וְרַב־חֶסֶד נִשְׂא עֲוֹן וְנָשַׁע וְנִקְהַל לֹא יִנְקָה פֶלֶאֶד עֲוֹן אָבוֹת עַל־בְּנֵי עַל־שְׁלֵשִׁים וְעַל־רַבְעִים: 19 סֶלַח־נָא לַעֲוֹן הָעָם הַזֶּה כְּגֹדֶל חַסְדְּךָ וּכְאֲשֶׁר נִשְׂאָתָה לְעָם הַזֶּה מִמִּצְרַיִם וְעַד־הַנְּהַי: 20 וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה סֶלַחְתִּי כְּדַבַּרְךָ:

KEY KOSHI: What does Moses' behavior teach us about the prophetic voice and posture? What does Moses teach us about raising questions or challenges?

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה, יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ, מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתַי וְצִוֵּנוּ לַעֲסוֹק בְּדִבְרֵי תוֹרָה.
Baruch atah, Adonai Eloheinu, Melech haolam, asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu laasok b'divrei Torah.
Blessed are you, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the universe, who hallows us with mitzvot, commanding us to engage with words of Torah.

REMEZ

Ex. 32: ⁹ The LORD further said to Moses, “I see that this is a stiffnecked people. ¹⁰ Now, let Me be, that My anger may blaze forth against them and that I may destroy them, and make of you a great nation.”

¹¹ But Moses implored the LORD his God, saying, “Let not Your anger, O Lord, blaze forth against Your people, whom You delivered from the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand. ¹² Let not the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that He delivered them, only to kill them off in the mountains and annihilate them from the face of the earth.’ Turn from Your blazing anger, and renounce the plan to punish Your people. ¹³ Remember Your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, how You swore to them by Your Self and said to them: I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven, and I will give to your offspring this whole land of which I spoke, to possess forever.” ¹⁴ And the LORD renounced [and felt sorry about] the punishment He had planned to bring upon His people...

Ex. 34: ⁴ So Moses carved two tablets of stone, like the first, and early in the morning he went up on Mount Sinai, as the LORD had commanded him, taking the two stone tablets with him. ⁵ The LORD came down in a cloud; He stood with him there, and proclaimed the name LORD. ⁶ The LORD passed before him and proclaimed: “The LORD! the LORD! a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, ⁷ extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; yet He does not remit all punishment, but visits the iniquity of parents upon children and children’s children, upon the third and fourth generations.”

J. MILGROM: In the two major demonstrations of apostasy, the incidents of the golden calf & the scouts, God asks Moses to intercede on behalf of Israel. Here, then, is a recognition that prophetic intercession can block divine retribution. This and more: God is actually cuing Moses in his role as intercessor & intermediary—perhaps even testing him—that by his intercession he may save his people.

A. ZORNBERG: The roots of the narrative therefore reach back into the past. Its impact is felt, moreover, far into the future. According to the classic Mishnah, this narrative is dated the ninth of Av, which is to become a fatal date in Jewish history...Far from being an isolated incident, then, this story gives expression to profound moments in the Israelite soul. It becomes the rootstock of many future national sorrows. On the face of it, this is a story about fear.

B. LEVINE (referencing work by Y. Muffs): Biblical literature conceives of the God of Israel as a deity who, if truth be said, favors individuals for the prophetic assignment who are not “yes men.” He chooses persons who dare to challenge him. Note that Abraham is called a prophet in Gen. 20:7, even though he was not sent to bear a message to a people. In part, Abraham’s relation to God seems to have been that of an advocate, negotiating with God over Sodom and Gomorrah, for instance...As a prophetic leader, Moses is fiercely loyal to Israel, and his major effort is aimed at persuading God to forgive his sinful people and to bring his plan for them to fruition. In both Exodus and Numbers, the liturgical invocation of God’s attributes of compassion serves to announce divine forgiveness.

DRASH

ALAN MORINIS in WITH HEART IN MIND (Ch. 42): There are, in fact, two different words for *question* in Hebrew, and each carries a different sensibility. A *she'elah* is a quest for information, whereas a *kushya* is a challenge, reflecting the difference between an ordinary question and one involving a difficulty that has no obvious solution. By asking a *she'elah*, a person seeks to fill in their factual understanding, whereas a *kushya* questions the truth or authority of a statement. Knowing which kind of question to ask, and asking it in the right way, requires training and effort. We have to learn how to ask questions with the purpose of drawing out truth and not as a way of disproving or arguing for the sake of arguing or, worse still, as a way to ridicule or mock or to glorify ourselves. There is a way to ask a question that reveals the very foundation upon which things are built.

...Absolute clarity in wisdom and in life is ultimately beyond us, it is still incumbent upon us to continue to ask. Hopefully, our teachers and our partners will appreciate our questions, but even if that does not happen, the questions need to be asked. Questions are wedges that pry open hearts and minds to all that the tradition has to offer us. "We are closer to God when we are asking questions than when we think we have the answers," said Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel.

SOD

R' RICK JACOBS: Why my friend David Wolpe is wrong: A 'politics free' pulpit is an empty pulpit

There are few colleagues for whom I have more respect than Rabbi David Wolpe. His books, sermons, articles and his personal character and warmth show all of us what being a rabbi means. I count him as both a teacher and a friend.

Which is why I was struck by Rabbi Wolpe's recent op-ed in the Jewish Journal ("Why I Keep Politics Off the Pulpit," June 7). How could someone who is usually so right be so wrong on something so important?

Rabbi Wolpe is, of course, correct when he writes "You can love Torah and vote for Trump. You can love Torah and think Trump is a blot on the American system. What you may not do, if you are intellectually honest, is say that the Torah points in only one political direction." But I want to suggest that although one can certainly love Torah and follow different political paths, one cannot claim to be a lover of Torah and not care about how our society treats those in need, the weak, the vulnerable, the stranger and the oppressed.

Let me be clear: Our synagogues should never be places of partisanship. People of all political stripes should feel welcome within our walls. For that reason, I have argued against repealing the Johnson Amendment that bars clergy and houses of worship from endorsing or opposing candidates or parties. Repeal would turn synagogues into just another partisan tool, when in fact we should be moral goads, always free to speak truth to power and lift our voices to affirm our 3,000-year-old mandate to "Speak up, judge righteously, champion the poor and the needy" (Proverbs 31:9) as an expression of our care and concern for the world around us.

Sermons that “speak up” on the great moral issues of our world and our lives may address politics and policy as a means of addressing such moral issues but they are not about politics. On the contrary, they are about our Jewish values; the values we teach and the values we pass on to our children; the values that have kept us together as a people for centuries.

The role of the rabbi is not to eschew such issues in their sermons but rather to lift up the insights of our tradition that can illuminate these debates and model civil discussion in a manner that shows respect for differing views and avoids divisive language or *ad hominem* attacks on those who disagree.

The Judaism that I believe in does not limit Torah lessons to the parchment of our *sifrei Torah* (Torah scrolls), nor to the tables around which we convene for communal Torah study. The Judaism that I live compels me to use those lessons to understand the most urgent challenges we face. And since the beginning of the enlightenment, rabbis of all streams have felt compelled to use the evolving institution of the sermon to bear prophetic witness to pressing societal and communal challenges their congregants faced.

As Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, one of America’s most influential rabbis of the first half of the 20th century, responded to criticism by those who made the argument Rabbi Wolpe made, that he should not address political issues from the pulpit, such as the power of monopolistic corporations and the abusive treatment of their workers:

“If, however, there is a larger and a higher duty, it is the duty of the Synagogue pulpit. ... [T]he pulpit of the synagogue is charged with the responsibility of the prophetic memories and prophetic aspirations. If the Jewish pulpit ought to speak out at this time concerning the industrial situation, then upon the pulpit in which I stand, pledged to the truth-speaking under freedom, there lies a most solemn and inescapable duty. I could not with self-respect remain silent. ... ”

Now, more than ever, with millions of refugees suffering the crushing burden of wars and dislocation, the planet on the verge of confronting the irreversible, devastating consequences of climate change, Muslim and Jewish Americans fearful in the face of escalating hate crimes, and millions at risk of losing lifesaving health care access, rabbis cannot — nor should not — abdicate the call of the prophets and the teachings of the rabbis by “standing idly by the blood of our neighbor.”

Rabbi Wolpe refers to our “tradition of argument, debate and compromise.” Those are indeed core values of our tradition. While our sages welcomed the debate, ensuring that majority and minority opinion were respected, in the end, despite differing viewpoints, the decisions were made on what the law would be; guidance was given to the Jewish community, even when compromise and common ground were elusive. Our rabbis should do no less nor offer any less guidance regarding the urgent issues our communities, our nation, Israel and the world face today.

I am moved by Rabbi Wolpe’s referencing that the *mezuzot* at the very doors of our homes are hung not horizontally nor vertically but rather at “an angled compromise.” He is right about the importance of compromise, but we must not miss the key lesson here: the *mezuzot* are, in fact, hung!