

SENSITIVITY TRAINING

After the plague of locusts, Pharaoh calls Moses and Aaron in and in exasperation says to them, לכו זבחו זאלקכס בארץ, "Go and sacrifice to your God in the land." He is anxious to rid himself of the plague, and in return he is willing to grant freedom of worship to the Israelites -- but only on condition that they practice their religion and worship their God here, in Egypt, and not leave the country.

But Moses will not have this. His response is, לא נכון לעשות כן כי תועבת מצרים זבחה לה זאלקכו, הן נזבחה את תועבת מצרים לעיניהם ולא יסקלנו
"It is not right to do this, for we will be sacrificing the gods of Egypt to the Lord our God, and if we sacrifice the god of Egypt before their very eyes, will they not stone us?" Moses was concerned because the worship of the God of Israel included the sacrifice of animals, and animals were the idols of Egypt.

Now, one wonders why Moses was so frightened. Surely he could not have used the excuse of fear that the Egyptians would stone the Israelites as a reason for having to stay in Egypt. Pharaoh was a tyrant, an all-powerful despot, and he simply could have responded that he will command his troops to keep order and prevent the masses from stoning the Hebrews.

A very beautiful answer is offered by Rabbi Yaakov Moshe Charlop, of blessed memory. Moses, he says, was not afraid of stoning. Not at all. Indeed, the Aramaic translator, Onkelos, renders the end of our verse as: --הלא "מרון למרגמא: זאלקכו למרגמא"
"Will they not want to stone us?" In other words, Moses was not afraid that the Egyptians would attack him, but he simply did not want to outrage the Egyptians' religious sensibilities. His response to Pharaoh was לא נכון לעשות כן,
"It is not right to do this." He did not want so to offend the Egyptians' feelings that they would want to stone the Israelites. That is why he insisted that the Israelites would have to perform their worship outside of Egypt.

Consider the moral stature and ethical nobility of Moses. Here he was, leading a revolution against Pharaoh and his whole political system; undermining the entire culture of Egypt; undertaking, on behalf of monotheism, a broadside attack against the whole system of paganism and heathenism that had dominated Egypt since time immemorial. And yet -- לעיניהם, before the very eyes of the Egyptians, he will not do anything to offend their deepest feelings!

So the Torah is teaching us a lesson of the utmost importance: that, except where the Halakhah clearly defines the Mitzvah as such, even the greatest commandment -- such as the service of the Lord, -- זבחה לה זאלקכו -- may not be achieved at the expense of the anguish of others, even if that anguish is a result of beliefs which we know to be empty and foolish and false.

Within the Orthodox community we must learn this lesson in sensitivity training. We are often asked to be tolerant of our fellow Jews who are non-Orthodox. That is right -- we certainly should. Where no diminution of our own belief or practice is concerned, insulting others and wounding their feelings is wrong. However, we must point out that true tolerance (which, as is well known, is a very poor word), true magnanimity of spirit, is not identical with a spineless lack of conviction. Too often, those who most boast about their tolerance are merely displaying a lack of concern or care. There are too many people who mistake lack of commitment for great tolerance, and empty head for an open mind.

When Moses, according to this interpretation, respected the feelings of the Egyptians, he did not fail to identify the gods of Egypt as תַּשְׁמַת אֱלֹהִים, literally, "the abominations of Egypt!" To be sensitive to others does not mean to conceal or curb your own commitments.

So, without wavering or compromising our own principles, we must always understand and be sensitive to others. We must not yield on any significant or even insignificant Halakhah, we must not participate in non-Orthodox services, but never must we denigrate or offend others.

But at least equally important is to be sensitive to those to the right of us. If we are asked to be patient with those who are less observant, so much more so with those who are more observant. It does not mean that we must agree with those who wish to impose upon us standards with which we do not agree, and which we do not believe are required by the Halakhah. But if others think that certain things are right, then צַדִּיקִים, in their presence, we must respect them.

It is for this reason that I have asked our people to abide by a special condition concerning the Eruv in Manhattan. As you well know, I completely and fully agree to the validity and authoritativeness of the Eruv. It is permissible to carry in Manhattan. However, it should not be done demonstratively if unnecessary. The reason for this is not that the Eruv does not cover open carrying -- baby carriages certainly may be used -- but since there are many people who do not recognize the validity of the Eruv, carrying in their presence without cause would be an unnecessary offense to them; מִפְּנֵי דַרְכֵי שָׁלוֹם, for reasons of communal harmony and peace, we ought to refrain from gratuitous provocations.

It is true that some of those who have condemned the Eruv have not always acted with admirable restraint, and have expressed themselves too strongly even for a polemical issue. But זֶה נִכּוֹן / צַדִּיקִים כֵּן, "It is not right to do this," and two wrongs do not make one right...

Such sensitivity is also needed in interreligious relationships, between Jews and non-Jews. Even as Moses was considerate of the Egyptians' feelings, so must we be sensitive to Christians' feelings. In dealing with Christian groups, especially Protestants, I have never insisted that they give up their evangelical functions, their missionizing. Unlike a number of my fellow Jews, I recognize that for many Christians this is an integral part of their faith. I do lay down certain conditions, namely, that their missions to Jews not be disguised as "dialogue"; that they not exploit, as they so often have, the poor and the sick and the ignorant; and that they keep hands off Israel, the first Jewish commonwealth in two thousand years which is still seeking its own soul. On the human level, and by this term I intend a moral statement exclusive of any religious content, I think that the whole idea of sending a mission to the Jews is horrendous. The sordid Christian record of two thousand years in dealing with Jews, and especially Christian passivity and even complicity during the Holocaust, have forever after deprived Christians of whatever moral justification they may ever have had for proselytizing the Jews. Their greatest need is to send a mission to Christians, not to anyone else. Nevertheless, if a Christian feels that such proselytizing is a basic principle of his faith, and he is willing to do it honestly and honorably, I will not object to it, and I will try to understand him. Quite frankly, my sensitivity is in this case abetted by a practical consideration. That is, if a Christian genuinely believes in evangelical activity, and I deny it to him, then one of two things will happen, neither of which is good. Either he will go underground, and he will seek the same conversionary goals indirectly and subtly, in a manner which will make it impossible for us to successfully resist; or else he will demand of us a quid pro quo, that we give up some basic element of our faith in turn. There are, unfortunately, some Jews who are willing to "negotiate" such deals, but these are

people whose faith has long since evaporated, and we ought have nothing to do with them.

But sensitivity is a two-way street. And if we are to be sensitive to the Christians' self-definition, they must be equally sensitive to us. That is why I frequently find myself exasperated in conversation with Protestants. I speak of people who are moral, cultured, and well-intentioned, and yet have difficulty appreciating the depth of Jewish feeling about the State of Israel and the significance of Eretz Yisrael in Judaism. They cannot empathize with the Jewish post-Holocaust condition and thus they are insensitive to our feeling about the State of Israel; and they look at Judaism with Christian eyes, and imagine that we must pattern our religion on theirs, and that is why they occasionally express such derisive comments as, "Why must you get involved in sacred real-estate?" But such misunderstanding simply will not do. Even if they do not agree to the policies of Israel, or policies of Jews in the Diaspora about Israel, certainly we ought to expect some sensitivity. Surely the Jewish "obsession" with Israel is no worse than the תועבת מצרים, the abomination of Egypt, for which Moses demonstrated such delicate understanding.

But whatever complaints we may have against the Protestants, there is far less mitigation for the Catholic Church and its leader. For a while, the noises coming from the Vatican were appealing, and indicated a new orientation. But the longer this Pope stays in office, the less credible the Catholic openings to the Jews become. For the Pope to shed corcodile tears, as he did several years ago when Israel bombed Lebanon's Beirut airport with no loss of life, but with damage only to hardware, and remain silent when Arabs kill Jews -- men, women, and children; for the Pope to rush to condemn Israel's recent raid into Lebanon and so haughtily to recommend that Israel deal with the PLO, and to maintain strict silence at the murderous provocations which resulted in these retaliations, namely, the attacks by the PLO within Israel -- these are instances of insensitivity so crude, so callous, and so calculating as to tax credibility! לא נכון לעשות כן!

So we Jews learn from today's Sidra a principle which must guide us in inter-religious relations, in relations amongst Jews, and for ourselves in our relations in our own families and societies. לא נכון לעשות כן, it is not right to be insensitive.

And as a complementary principle, we must pray for that which is right and sensitive. In the words of the Psalms, בְּטָהוֹרָה בְּרָא לִי אֱלֹהִים, "Create for me a pure heart, O God," וְרוּחַ נָכוֹן חֲדָשׁ בְּקִרְבִּי, "And a right spirit renew within me."

That is something worth praying for -- that which is right, that which is sensitive.