

# CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP

Center for Modern Torah Leadership



חרות ואחריות

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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

## TWO CHEERS FOR TRIBALISM

Rabbi Aryeh Klapper, Dean

Defenses of particularism generally take one of two forms.

In the first, particularism is a necessary precursor for universalism. Human beings can escape the gravitational pull of self-love only through love of family, and love of humanity can be achieved only by expanding the definition of family.

In the second, particularism is necessary for diversity or pluralism; without particularism, societies that officially value diversity and pluralism rapidly, inevitably, and ironically become monolithic hybrids.

This week's *parashah* suggests a third ground of defense.

When Mosheh saw the Golden Calf, he stood at the gate and cried out in a great voice: "Whoever is for Hashem, to me!" That is the dramatic scene as Ramban tells it, and as I suspect most of us envision it.

But the Torah does not say ויקרא בקול, let alone ויקרא בגדול. It says rather ויאמר "and he **said.**" Mosheh our Teacher spoke; he did not shout.

"All the Children of Levi" then assemble to Mosheh. Perhaps they were moved by the quiet intensity of his speech, or inspired by his iron self-control. But I prefer a different explanation. The Torah tells us that Mosheh "stood/stopped in the gate of the camp" when he spoke. Biblical gatesmanship can refer to mass gatherings, but it can also mark the quiet deliberations of tribal elders. Perhaps Mosheh had a "ground game" in Levi, a network of leaders who each swung their precincts/clans behind him. He did not need to shout, because he did not need to reach the masses directly.

Why Levi? Rishonim offer two basic approaches.

In the first, the Levites had in some way maintained a more pristine connection to Torah than the other tribes. They flocked to Mosheh because of a shared ideological vision.

The second, I confess, is hard for me to read, let alone accept. Here is Chizkuni, following Ibn Ezra:

לפי הפשט:

ע"י שהיו בני לוי קרוביו של משה

לא הסכימו להעמיד מנהיג במקומו

*According to the peshat:*

*Because the Children of Levi were Mosheh's relatives, they did not agree to set up a leader in his place.*

The Levites flocked to Mosheh unanimously out of tribal political self-interest. Had Mosheh been from Gad, it would have been the Gadites who were with him unanimously, and Tribe Levi would have had its representative share of idolaters. Had Mosheh been a genetically Egyptian convert, no tribe would have stayed fully loyal.

What are we to learn from this?

I suggest, very tentatively, that the Torah may be warning us that reason and moral passion, separately and together, are inadequate to consistently protect us against universal catastrophic error. Their arguments are inherently hegemonistic; by appealing to humanity in general, they seek to eliminate dissent. Not so self-interest, which almost inevitably generates conflict.

The arguments for making the Calf, risible as they appear in retrospect, must have made lots of sense in the

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overall cultural environment of the Ancient Near East. But Levi was immunized against the abstract power of those arguments and appeals, because of their concrete implications for its tribal political position.

Now it must be acknowledged that loyalty and terrifying zealotry can be closely related. Mosheh sends the gathered Levites out to commit a massacre. This massacre in some sense atones for their tribe's eponym's role in the massacre of Shekhem. Tribe Levi therefore (unlike Tribe Shimon) receives a blessing from Mosheh at the end of the Torah. But the Levite tribe is still 'scattered in Jacob and dispersed in Israel,' with no hereditary land. A balance of massacres is not a tolerable prospect going forward.

I want to expand on that claim briefly, because I think it may be of help in some very challenging contemporary situations. We are often tempted to engage in moral utilitarianism; in other words, to tolerate the evils a person commits on the ground that they accomplish even greater good. X is *mekarev* many Jews who (we believe) would otherwise assimilate, and so should be given a Torah platform despite theological monstrosities and practical errors. Y attacks many (we think) necessary targets, so we will overlook the occasional innocent victim and consistent delegitimization of worthwhile Torah interpretations and approaches. These justifications are most often deployed on behalf of zealots who advance the perceived interests of a community we identify with.

The opposite approach is problematic as well. Except in extreme cases, the wrongs human beings commit should not blind us to the good they accomplish, and I think preferably should not prevent us from acknowledging those goods. Teachers who are desperately cruel to some students may have positively transformed the lives of many others, without ulterior motives. Leaders and mentors who succumb to *yitzrei bora* for sex and power in some relationships may have shared great wisdom with selfless integrity in other relationships. This is true *kal vachomer* when the right and wrongs are on different axes entirely.

The Torah's presentation of Levi sets out a challenging middle ground: Moral utilitarianism is much more valid retrospectively than prospectively.

This is particularly true with regard to zealots. I suggest that a generally endemic feature of קנאות = zealotry, which is closely related to the Rambam's conception of הסידות, is the inability to keep perspective, to see things in proportion. The moral balance of a zealot's life is often the result of luck, and their past performance has little predictive value. This is why G-d reacts to even Pinchas' plague-stopping act of zealotry by seeking to impose a *berit shalom* on him.

Tribalism is also a moral wild card. But I suggest that it provides a vital insurance policy against unregulated spiritual passion and reason run amok. "The threefold cord cannot be broken rapidly."

*Shabbat Shalom!*

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