

Crisis, Criticism, & Courageous Leadership

Parshat Vaeira
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At the conclusion of Parshat Shemot (last week's Torah portion), Pharaoh responds to Moses' and Aaron's request to allow the Israelites to serve God in the desert by drastically increasing the Israelites' workload. Frustrated by these additional hardships to Israel, Moshe offers a powerful example of bold leadership by challenging God and protesting God's plan:

"Moses returned to the Hashem and said, "My Lord, why have You done evil to this people, why have You sent me? From the time I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your Name he did evil to this people, but You did not rescue Your people." (Exodus 5:22-23)

God's response to Moshe's rebuke is found in the opening passages of Parshat Vaeira and includes God's promise of four stages of deliverance from Egypt ("I shall take you out," "I shall rescue you," "I shall redeem you," "I shall take you to Me for a people"). These four expressions are ritualized through the drinking of four cups at the Passover Seder.

The Torah begins God's response to Moshe with a seemingly redundant verse:

"God (*E-lohim*) spoke (*va'yedaber*) to Moses and said (*va'yomer*) to him, 'I am Hashem.'" (Exodus 6:2)

The verse notes that God spoke to Moses by first using the expression "*va'yedaber*." And yet even before God utters a single word, the Torah records God's mode of oral communication to Moses differently, this time using the verb, *va'yomer* ("and said"). A closer reading of the verse also reveals that at first God is revealed as *E-lohim* and in this mode, God is communicating through *dibur*, as in *va'yedaber*, whereas in the second half of the verse God is revealed as Hashem and in this mode, God communicates through *amirah*, as in *va'yomer*.

Midrash Lekah Tov explains these nuances in an insightful way:

"'Anger is better than laughter: for by the sadness of countenance the heart is made better' (Ecclesiastes 7:3). Better the anger that the Holy One, blessed be He, directs against the righteous in this world . . . than the laughter that the wicked laugh in this world . . . Come and see: from the hour that the Holy One blessed be He spoke to Moshe at the [burning] bush, as it is written, "and He said: Moshe, Moshe" (Exodus 3:4), there were sixteen times that God spoke to him with the verb *amar*, and in none of them was the term *dibur* used, just, *Va-Yomar*, *Va-Yomer* ("and He spoke and He spake"). And when Moshe came before the Holy One blessed be He and said, "[For since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Thy name, he hath done evil to this people;] neither hast thou delivered the people at all" (Exodus 5:23). Immediately, the aspect of stern judgment (*Middat ha-Din*) began to accuse him, as it is written, "And God (*Elokim*) spoke (*Va-Yedaber*) to Moshe" (ibid., 6:2). And the use of the term *dibur* represents harsh speech, as it is written, "The man, who is the lord of the land, spake (*dibber*) harshly to us" (Genesis 42:30), and *Elokim* is the aspect of stern judgment; until the aspect of divine mercy (*Middat ha-Rahamim*) interceded on his behalf, as it is said, "and He said (*Va-Yomer*) to him, I am the Lord (*ani ha-Shem*) – that is the aspect of divine mercy. . . . I am the Lord (*ha-Shem*) who will exact punishment to Pharaoh and his servants, I am the Lord who rewards the righteous in the Kingdom to Come, I am the Lord, I am He and no other."

Commenting on this midrash, R. Daniel Sperber notes:

"This passage tells us that Moses did not hesitate to criticize God for worsening the situation of the Children of Israel, even though by doing so he invoked against himself the *Middat ha-Din* [the divine aspect of stern judgment]. But shortly afterwards his actions were justified and he was rewarded by the *Middat ha-Rahamim* [the aspect of divine mercy]. This is a true mark of courageous leadership." (R. Daniel Sperber, *The Importance of the Community Rabbi*, p. 239)

In the aftermath of last week's violent assault on the Capitol, several rabbinic leaders in the American Orthodox community have demonstrated bold leadership of their own. While Moses did not shirk away from challenging God, these leaders did not refrain from challenging their own communities.

Rav Ahron Lopiansky, Rosh HaYeshiva of the Yeshiva of Greater Washington, a son-in-law of Rav Beinish Finkel ztz"l, the former Rosh Yeshiva of the Mir, offers a powerful example coming from the Chareidy, yeshivish community. Though I do not agree with a number of points R. Lopiansky makes in the article, I am deeply appreciative of his audacious moral reckoning. The excerpts below were published in *Mishpacha*, a mainstream publication in the *Chareidy* community.

In one instance, R. Lopiansky bemoans the lack of civility in his own community:

"My rebbi, Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz ztz"l, spoke sharply against *kana'us* [zealotry]. But that needs to be accurately described. He did not speak against any *shitah* [ideology] per se, pro or con this opinion or another. And there were a fair amount of weighty *talmidei chachamim* [distinguished Torah scholars] in the Mir yeshivah who had anti-Zionist *shitos* [ideologies]; but they carried themselves with dignity, and their words were measured and thoughtful. Their interactions with others with whom they strongly disagreed were cordial and polite. These *gedolei Torah* [Torah giants] were respected greatly by Reb Chaim and the rest of the Mir because they were part of a society of "*derech erez* [civility] and *mussar* [ethics].

"Reb Chaim spoke only against people (yes, on occasion even "*talmidei chachamim*" [distinguished Torah scholars]) who were hotheaded, incapable of listening to another side honestly and weighing the arguments. He spoke against people whose favored mode of operation was mob-like: rowdy demonstrations and garbage burning. Reb Chaim did not tolerate those who used tactics that terrorized their opponents, from name-calling, to anonymous, crass *pashkevilim* [broadside], to harassment.

"We need to ask ourselves: Are our children being taught to apply yardsticks of objectivity when considering opposing views? Are they being taught *derech erez* [civility] and to see civility as a virtue? Are they taught to deliberate issues instead of grabbing on to an adrenaline-pumping slogan?

"Yes, it's true that young people gravitate to those emotional extremes, but it is our job as parents and rebbeim and adults to see to it that our children have adult role models, so that when the time comes, they can mature and settle down appropriately."

Here I must note that the call for *Derech Eretz* (civility and ethical conduct) is one that all of us should internalize at this time, even for those who see themselves on the very opposing camp of those who stormed the Capitol, for the temptation of meeting anger with anger and matching vitriol with vitriol has only grown and the desire to cast aside anyone or any point of view that opposes our own is lurking at our entryways.

In another instance, R. Lopiansky criticizes his community for emotionally and ideologically aligning themselves with a single party or candidate, instead of being guided by the Torah's guidance which does not align neatly with any particular party or affiliation. This criticism too is one that I believe we in our own community ought to internalize as well:

"Another element that has begun to plague our community — and which especially manifested itself during these last elections — is our emotional involvement with the political candidates and their parties.

No candidate or party represents Torah values. Neither the Republican nor the Democratic platform is Torah. (And this is beside the fact that their political "ideologies" are shifting sand.) A Torah Yid has no business identifying with either party.

Klal Yisrael has many needs and sensitivities. We weigh the different options and vote for a candidate or party based on what is important to us. We engage in political barter: a vote from the community in return for advancing values important to us and allocating vital resources. We are courteous and respectful to all, but we do not identify emotionally with any candidate or party. In fact, emotional enthusiasm for a candidate or a party is an “*aish zarah*”!

The complete article can be accessed here: https://mishpacha.com/gone-missing/?fbclid=IwAR0dBSst_RSAMZyO_kbQ6WqYx10f4Hlyoc96ei_TPY1aTbu1-yJuw6sYWpNY

Another example of brave leadership was offered by R. Ezra Schwartz, a YU RIETS Rosh Yeshiva:

“My concern is for my community. Sadly, there is a genuine need to address those closest to me, people I *daven* (pray) with and with whom I share a commitment to Torah, *mitzvos* (Jewish commandments) and traditional morality. There is a need to address the Orthodox Jews who participated in the rally, those who celebrated the event even silently, those who sympathized with its goals if not with its implementation, and even those who in their Monday morning quarterbacking fell short of voicing uncompromised condemnation of the entire event. In short, what happened on Wednesday should force our community to recalibrate our moral compass and take careful stock of whether we are being true to *hashkafas ha’Torah* (the outlook of the Torah). I believe that the event needs to be reacted to with the strongest possible condemnation.”

The complete article can be accessed here: <https://yuobserver.org/2021/01/a-call-for-moral-clarity/?fbclid=IwAR2HBzXLQCzdBUL1Mg7gOqNgT8lQgDTdpT-lyY69mbJAyG-YZ-mxJvvE29U>

At a completely different time and place, Rav Moshe Teitelbaum (1759-1841), the author of *Yismach Moshe*, a pillar of Hasidic Judaism in Hungary, did not refrain from challenging *shochtim* (ritual slaughterers) in his community nor did he shirk from enforcing enactments in response to his community’s spiritual and moral failings. In fact, the story is told that Rav Teitelbaum collected stones that were hurled at his window in response to his unpopular, yet courageous, stances. Years later, when he built a *Beit Midrash* (a house of study) in Sighet, he fitted those very stones into the wall.

Criticism can be met with anger and rebuke. In time however, criticism expressed properly can become a truly constructive force. In Parshat Vaeira, God responds to Moshe’s bold rebuke with the promise of redemption. We too will merit the promise of redemption, if we, as Americans, as well as Orthodox Jews, heed the criticisms borne by this dark hour.