

Dvar Torah – Yitro - 2015

Shabbat shalom.

I was asked to speak this week about authority, as part of our ongoing series about the subject. But instead, I want to start by discussing something else: *power*.

One of my favorite TV shows is “Game of Thrones”. Not just for the usual reasons – the wonderful acting, vivid scenery, strong characters – but because its central themes are about politics. I can’t help myself; I’m almost professionally obligated to be interested.

In one episode, two characters – Lord Petyr Baelish and Queen Cersei - are having a rather intense disagreement. [In a classroom I would show the video, you’ll have to make do with my reconstruction.]

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ab6GyR_5N6c

Lord Baelish, reminding the queen that he knows about a secret she wishes not to be made public, tells her: “knowledge is power.”

The queen briefly pauses, then orders the guards to seize him and cut his throat – instantly changes her mind, has the guards back away 3 paces, turn around and close their eyes. They follow her every word. Queen Cersei walks slowly up to Baelish and states, very simply, “power is power.”

This week’s *parsha*, Yitro, contains the Ten Commandments, preceded by a somewhat strange dialogue involving Moses, the people, and God.

It starts with God having Moses transmit a message (19:4): “you have seen what I did to Egypt.”

Then, (19:5), “Now, if you will listen to my voice and follow my covenant, you will be for me special from all the nations.” (19:6) “You will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation; these are the words to speak to the children of Israel.”

Moses tells this to the people, who respond, importantly, “together” – “all God has spoken we will do.” *Na’aseh*. And then a bit more back and forth culminating in the giving of the Ten Commandments.

Now – this isn’t the way we think about the story in casual conversations. We celebrate *na’aseh v’nishma*, “we will do and we will hear,” that the people say they will follow the law before knowing what it is, that they take a leap of faith.

But that line isn’t in this parsha at all. It comes later, in *Mishpatim*, (24:7), directly prior to Moses’ stay for 40 days on the mountain.

To add another layer of complication: in (19:17), we read that “Moses took the nation from the camp out to meet God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain.”

Famously, the Gemara in *Shabbat* 88a reads this as meaning “he held the mountain over them like a barrel, and said if you accept the Torah, good; but if not, there will be your graves.”

The Gemara is bothered by this: R’ Aha b. Jacob says, if so, there is reason to protest the Torah! Rava responds: even so they reaccepted it in the days of *Achashverosh*, “*kimu v’kiblu*”.

So, something odd is happening here. The people accept God’s word, *na’aseh*, but only in regards to accepting the idea of covenant. They accept the whole law later on, *na’aseh v’nishma*, without knowing all the details. And the Gemara makes the entire giving of the Ten Commandments seem coerced, almost as if the people didn’t want it.

Of course I'm hardly the first one to notice these seeming contradictions – much ink has been spilled trying to understand what's going on here.

But let me suggest a slightly new way to think about this.

Chazal in the Gemara are introducing the idea that “power is power”: God's omnipotence is so overwhelming that in its presence no one could stand idly by, no one could reject the obvious manifestations, the *kolot u'vrakim*, sounds and thunder, accompanying the revelation.

In that sense, there is no choice. The most basic definition of power is the ability to coerce, to make someone do that which they do not want. Even if it's brought about through fear.

But: God doesn't just want service through coercion, pure slavery – though we should note the people are often called “*avadim*, slaves” of God, and that is one side of the equation. Obedience is certainly necessary.

Rather, God also desires acceptance of the covenant and the laws by the people.

There's no contradiction between *na'aseh v'nishma* and the image of the mountain being held over the people's heads, therefore, because they aren't about the same thing: one is about power, and the other is about **authority**.

As political theorist Michael Walzer points out in his book *Exodus and Revolution*, “the covenant introduces into the Exodus story a radical voluntarism that sits uneasily with the account of the original deliverance... At the moment when they actually take their life into their hands, the people are not craven and despondent but courageous. Standing at Sinai, they embody the excellence of man.” (80-81)

As Jane noted last week in her d'var torah, “authority is built from the core of relationship.” All authority is relational in the sense that someone has to be there to accept that authority.

Authority implies acceptance, while power is coercive.

What kind of relationship does God have with the people, at this point in *Shmot*?

Eliezer Berkovits, in his work *God, Man, and History*, argues that the encounter with God contains within it the peril that individual moral action will be lost in the face of God’s “consuming fire.” At the same time, “man is assured of God’s nearness and accessibility.” This creates “a relationship that is charged with ambivalence.” (35)

When the people accepted the covenant, when they said *na'aseh*, what background led to that moment of acceptance?

The people had traveled from slavery in Egypt, seen the Ten Plagues, experienced the escape from Egypt, the splitting of the sea, the drowning of Pharaoh and the Egyptian army, and now walked to the foot of Mount Sinai.

They were primed to be free, in the spirit of Moses calling “let my people go” -- yet weren’t really ready for freedom. They still existed inside a moral universe where they had no autonomous decision-making capacity, since as slaves nothing had been in their control.

Compare, for instance, the authority Moses has to that of Pharaoh. Pharaoh’s can’t be rejected, it’s pure power – but the people repeatedly reject Moses’ authority, most prominently by building a Golden Calf.

Michael Walzer, citing the great theorist Rousseau, argues that changing this mindset was Moses' "great achievement; he transformed a herd of wretched fugitives, who lacked both virtue and courage, into a free people."

They were more than ex-slaves, they were a political community with laws and regulations. Walzer again: "The Israelite slaves could become free only insofar as they accepted the discipline of freedom, the obligation to live up to a common standard and to take responsibility for their own actions." (53)

In serving God, therefore, the people remove the yoke of their Egyptian master, of Pharaoh, and replace it with God's. Walzer frames the distinction: "slavery is begun and sustained by coercion, while service is begun and sustained by covenant." (74)

In this respect, then, I would argue that the experience of authority Josh Feigelson has urged us to think more deeply about is binary: voluntary acceptance of authority through the covenant, through the people saying *na'aseh*, is accepting the "discipline of freedom", as Walzer puts it.

But when we are forced, or perceived we are forced, into accepting obligations we don't understand, that's the moment of "holding the barrel" over our heads – doing with no understanding, out of fear, because of God's power.

Authority is voluntary, but it's ultimately backed by a power relationship – in the same way that the president of the United States has vast power, but that power only comes to that person's hands when we grant authority through the mechanism of elections.

So, Lord Baelish in "Game of Thrones" says knowledge is power – Queen Cersei says power is power. I believe authority is a combination of both power and that voluntary acceptance.