

TORAH TABLE TALK – PIRKE AVOT

The Power and Danger of Authority

Parshat Vayigash, Genesis 44:18 – 47:28

Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt

With love to their grandchildren

Elka, Joshua, Lindsay, Oren z”l, Jenny, David, Lauren, Kayla, Zenna, and Emily

One of the most disturbing aspects of the Joseph narrative is the postscript to this story. Having been reunited with his family, Joseph brings his father and brothers to Egypt to weather the years of the famine. The Torah goes on to tell us about Joseph’s agrarian policies. Little by little he manages to gain control of all the property in Egypt on behalf of Pharaoh. In the end when the Egyptians have nothing else to offer, they come to Joseph and acknowledge that they will be slaves to Pharaoh. This chapter foreshadows things to come. It is through Joseph’s policies that Pharaoh gains absolute power over the land of Egypt. While Joseph saved both his family and the people of Egypt he sowed the seeds of tyranny and enslavement that would eventually come back to haunt the people of Israel generations later.

In the end was Joseph a hero or a villain? Did he save his nation from starvation or did he allow the people of Egypt (and his own family) to become enslaved? Often the actions and policies of our leaders turn out to be both a blessing and a curse. The sages recognized both the need for and the dangers in a strong central government. Living in the period of Roman domination they saw both the grandeur of the Roman Empire as well as its cruelty. They understood the lure of winning the affection of the governing powers. But they warned their students of the dangers in getting into bed with those in positions of authority or even assuming authority themselves. Both points of view are presented in Pirke Avot.

Pirke Avot 1:10 Shemayah said: love work, hate positions of domination, and do not make yourself known to the authorities.

Pirke Avot 2:3 Rabban Gamliel, the son of Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi said: Be wary of the authorities! They do not befriend a person unless it is their own self interest. They appear as friends when it is to their advantage but do not stand by a person in his hour of need.

Pirke Avot 3:2 Rabbi Chanina, an assistant of the high Priest said: Pray for the welfare of the government, since but for fear of it men would swallow each other alive.

Sources

Genesis 47: 23-26

Then Joseph said to the people: “Whereas I have this day acquired you and your land for Pharaoh, here is seed to sow your land” ...And they said, “You have saved our lives! We are grateful to my lord and we shall be slaves to Pharaoh.”

Avot D’Rebbe Natan 11

Shemayah said: Shun authority. Just what does this mean? A man should not on his own place a crown upon his head. But others may do so.

Babylonian Talmud Berachot 55a

Rav Judah also said: Three things shorten a man's days and years: To be given a scroll of the Law to read from and to refuse, to be given a cup of benediction to say grace over and to refuse, and to assume airs of authority.... 'To assume airs of authority', as Rabbi Hama ben Hanina said: Why did Joseph die before his brethren? (As we learn from Ex. 1:6, 'And Joseph died and (then) all his brethren'.) Why did he die before his brothers? Because he assumed airs of authority.

Jerusalem Talmud Pesachim 6:1

Rabbi Joshua ben Kevusai said: All my days, I fled from office. But now that I have achieved it, were anyone to attempt to oust me, I would go at him with this kettle. Even as a kettle scalds, maims, or blackens, so would I go at him.

Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 33a

On one occasion, while Rabbi Judah, Yosi, and Shimon were sitting together, Judah the son of proselytes happened to sit with them. Rabbi Judah began the discussion by observing, "How noble are the works of this [Roman] nation! They laid out streets, they built bridges; they erected baths." Rabbi Yosi remained silent, but Rabbi Shimon spoke up and said, "All that they made, they made to serve themselves: they laid out streets to settle harlots in them; baths, to pamper themselves; bridges, to levy tolls. Now, Judah the son of proselytes went off and kept retelling the sages' words, until they were heard by the [Roman] government, which decreed: Judah, who acclaimed, shall be acclaimed [as spokesman for the Jews]; Yosi, who remained silent, shall be exiled to Sephoris; Shimon, who vilified, shall be put to death.

Commentary

It is shocking to consider the fact that Joseph may have been responsible not only for the enslavement not only of Egypt but of Israel. Obviously, he was motivated by the best of intentions. In a time of crisis he came up with a solution that saved the nation from starvation. But as often happens in the implementation of governmental policies, his actions had unforeseen consequences. The sages recognized that getting involved with government often serves the interests of those in authority rather than the general good. On the other hand, the sages acknowledged the power of Pax Roma. Without government there would be anarchy. Fear can be a powerful motive in promoting societal harmony. Without government; people might destroy one another.

But there is a price that is often paid by those who seek public recognition and become involved in political matters. Those who serve in high office often age prematurely from the pressures and tensions of serving others. (Consider how much older some of presidents have looked at the end of their tenure in the white house.) And yet the temptation to seek such power is as powerful as sexual lust; maybe even more powerful. Once one has a taste for such power it is often hard to resist the temptations that go along with it.

We see great accomplishments as well as abuse in government. While Rabbi Judah admired the grandeur of Rome, Rabbi Shimon offered a cynical view of authority. His opinion was so inflammatory that he was forced to flee for his life. We are left to consider about the positive and negative affects of government.

Questions to Ponder

1. Why does the Torah tell us about Joseph's policies at the end of his narrative? What does this add to our understanding of Joseph's life story?
2. Why was Pharaoh willing to listen to Joseph when he interpreted his dreams and offered a solution to the impending famine? Do you think it is possible that Pharaoh had ulterior motives?
3. So what are we to make of Joseph's policies? Was he motivated by pure idealism or was he simply a tool serving Pharaoh's self interests? Was the price that he paid for his position too high?
4. Do you think Shemayah and Rabban Gamliel are unfair in their judgment of people in position of authority? Do whom do you think they were addressing themselves when they made this statement?
5. The sages quoted above were influenced by the cruelty and corruption of the Roman Empire. To what extent are their opinions relevant to us today? Whose opinion do you find more sympathetic: Rabbi Shimon, Rabbi Judah or Rabbi Yosi? Why?
6. Compare and contrast government in the time of Rome and America which might be called the modern Rome? Do you think we are different?

Torah Table Talk is a weekly e-publication of Rabbi Mark B Greenspan sponsored by the Oceanside Jewish Center in New York. For more information on TTT contact me at Haravmark@optonline.net. If you would like to subscribe to Torah Table Talk please send an e-mail to Tabletalk@oceansidejc.org. To remove your address from this list, send a blank email to tabletalk-unsubscribe@oceansidejc.org. To see an archive of TTT go to <http://www.oceansidejc.org/rebmark/RabbiGreenspan.html>. To download TTT you need Adobe Acrobat Reader; <http://www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/readstep2.html>

***"All it takes to study Torah is an open heart,
a curious mind and a desire to grow a Jewish soul."***

Copyright 2008 Rabbi Mark B Greenspan