

Empowering Authority

The following is a sermon given by Rabbi Freundel at Kesher Israel Congregation. As many of our members asked to see that talk in writing, Rabbi Freundel has made it available to all of us.

Wherever human hearts have yearned for freedom and liberation, the story of the Exodus, of the freeing of the Hebrew slaves, has served as an important inspiration. Particularly in an era in which the term "empowerment" has become the "summum bonum" of many social thinkers and activists, the escape to freedom by the Jews some 3,500 years ago seems to be the prototypical "empowering" act.

This understanding of the story does not, however, withstand a close reading of the text. Or more correctly, it is only supported by Pharaoh's understanding of the events. When Pharaoh alerts his people to the threat posed by the Jews, his language is the language of power. "Behold the nation of the Children of Israel is more numerous and more powerful than we are," says Pharaoh. His warning is redolent of armaments and blood, of the sword, the spear, and the chariot. In explicit terms, he goes on to suggest that Jewish power will ultimately be used to aid the enemies of the Egyptians.

Pharaoh, in his own terms, sees the need to use the power of the throne to crush the power of the potential Jewish rebellion.

Pharaoh is ultimately correct concerning one central fact. There is, eventually, a Jewish rebellion. But when it comes, its language is not one of power nor of "empowerment." "Let us please go for a three-day journey into the desert so that we may offer sacrifice to Hashem, our G-d," says Moses. No shadow here of the sword, the spear, or the chariot. No militarism, no armaments. In fact, Pharaoh, who speaks the language of power, and Moses, who does not, seem to be speaking past each other.

This eschewing of the "power" dynamic in the fact of others who can see nothing but power as the motive force in all interactions is a recurring theme in Jewish sources, from earliest Biblical history to the contemporary reality. When Isaac, the first native-born Jew, went to live in the land of the Philistines, Abimelech, the king of the Philistines, eventually came to him and said, "Leave our midst for you are too powerful for us." This accusation would be repeated in Egypt as we have seen, and again as the Jews wandered in the desert on the way to the promised land. During their meanderings, the Jews came into the sphere of influence of Balak, King of Moab. Concerned, he called on the prophet, Bil'am, for help with the words:

"Come please and curse this people for he is more powerful than me. Perhaps I will be able to strike against him and expel him from the land."

These accusations are of a kind with theories of Jewish conspiracies found in the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, or the words of Leonard Jeffries.

Sadly, this has been the supposed threat posed by the Jews according to tyrants as far removed in time as Hitler and Haman. The irony, of course, is that in none of the instances cited have the suspicions been even remotely true. Isaac had about as much interest in dominating the Philistines as Jews had in conquering

Germany in 1934 (meaning less than none, if that is possible)-- yet the accusation remains and reappears with disturbing regularity. Certainly in the Biblical and premodern context when, as with Moses, the issue for the Jews was not power but the fostering of their relationship with G-d, these accusations contained not a scintilla of truth.

Biblical theology makes this point explicitly. "[There will come a time when] you will say in your heart 'my strength and the power of my arm amassed this wealth for me.' But you shall [at that time] remember Hashem your G-d for He is the one who gives you the strength to amass wealth in order to establish His covenant [with you]."

Or Isaiah's even more explicit, "Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help [against the Babylonians whom G-d has sent to subjugate the Jews]. They rest their hopes on horses, they trust in cavalry for they are many and on chariots for they are extremely powerful, but they do not rely on the Holy One of Israel and they do not seek after G-d."

It must be understood that the Bible does not take an anti-power stance, nor is it a "meek shall inherit the earth" morality, but it is a recognition that power is not the ultimate good and that when used, power is to be used in service to the true "summum bonum"-- a proper relationship with G-d.

This "talking past each other" that we encountered in Moses's conversation with Pharaoh apparently continued throughout history and exists, at least in some venues, to this day. It may represent one source of anti-Semitism and may offer one reason why all of history's great tyrants seem to have had a "Jewish problem" Tyrants and empire builders generally pursue power for power's sake. Amassing power and controlling others is their stock and trade and the motive for much of what they do in building their empire. As they go about their business, however, they are often aware of the fragility of power. An encounter with a stronger power, an assassin's bullet, a restless populace, an unlucky policy failure, their own mortality itself are all threats. The recurring image of some of the contemporary world's most powerful tyrants (Saddam Hussein, for example) being forced to sleep each night in a different location for safety's sake gives insomniac testimony to this reality. So, too, the struggle to keep the White House (the "People's House") from becoming an armed camp in the wake of several violent breaches of security reflects the difficulty in preventing the President of the United States from becoming part of that same fragility.

Throughout the centuries, the Jewish presence, even the very fact of Jewish survival, served as an uncomfortable reminder of this fragile reality of the dynamics of power. Tyrants and empire builders, if they have any sense of history-- and all invariably must-- know that others before them have walked the road towards ultimate power. Walking that path many have found success and built world-transforming powers, but all shared one fate. Inexorably and with utter finality all had fallen and disappeared.

The only exception to this unforgiving law of history appears to be the Jews, a people whose sacred literature specifically challenges a power-centered ethos. By the rules of power we should no longer be here. In fact we should have disappeared several times in our history. Famous, in this regard, is Arnold

Toynbee's description of his contemporary Jews as a "fossilized remnant." There was apparently no other way for him to explain the survival of a people that, according to this understanding of history, could not longer be here.

For the tyrant and the empire builder, for anyone to whom the acquisition of power is the name of the game, the Jews pose the ultimate refutation of all that they hold dear. Their response to the Jews is both tragic and perfectly in keeping with their worship of power. Persecution, extermination, genocide, and attempted extinction. If they can make the Jews go the way of all others, it will prove that Judaism's way is no more amenable to survival than theirs, and the challenge to the tyrant's being and beliefs is gone.

Make the Jew the victim of power and the power dynamic is vindicated.

A second more subtle response also exists. Denial and psychological projection allow those who focus on power to claim, against all evidence to the contrary, to see immense power in the Jews. For the worshippers of power only power can explain how the Jews have survived, and since we are talking about the terribly problematic Jews, it must be power used for evil. As a result, from Abimelech, Pharaoh, and Bil'am to Hitler, Jeffries, and Farrakhan, not only has Judaism talked past its enemies, it has threatened its enemies in ways that were not only unintentional but impossible to understand from within a Jewish framework.

This analysis is not offered to suggest that Jews give up striving to best implement our relationship with G-d and begin playing the power game.

Pragmatically, we do not have enough power to succeed were we to make such a decision and as indicated, even the winners at this game ultimately lose.

More importantly, the Jewish contribution to this world has come from our relationship with G-d and the non-power-based morality that evolves from it.

"Not by power, nor by might, but by My spirit says Hashem," is the Biblical watchword, and it needs to be ours if we are to continue to live meaningfully.

It is offered, however, as a partial explanation of the past and as a warning for the present and the future.

Bertrand Russell wrote in "The Impulse to Power,"

"the fundamental concept in social science is Power, in the same sense in which Energy is the fundamental concept in physics."

Though not at all the normal understanding of things in 1938 when it was written, Russell's perspective now holds sway in much of academia and in much of the arena where social and political science thinking takes place. Today in many circles, everything-- politics, religion, literature, the family-- is discussed only in terms of the power relationships involved. Hierarchy, patriarchy, racism, sexism, etc., the familiar cant of the academic world, is all about the language of power. And Jews, as heavily represented as we are in academia, are not only unfortunately at home with the language, but at the forefront of advancing its frontiers.

What has been lost is, first, the Jewish opposition to seeing the world only in terms of the dynamics of power. Second, we have lost the distinction between "power" and "authority," two words that once meant different things that in today's Russellian world order are used to mean the same thing.

Erich Fromm, in "The Sane Society," explains: "Authority is not a quality one person 'has,' in the sense that he has property or physical qualities.

Authority refers to an interpersonal relationship in which one person looks upon another as somebody superior to him." Put another way, while power is a quality that flows from the top down and carries with it coercion, oppression, and tyranny, authority comes from the bottom up and begins with the acceptance of something larger and better. At Mount Sinai, the Jews say "we will do and we will obey," and G-d's authority is established. Because this appears to the Midrash to be somewhat lacking in free acceptance as according to the Rabbinic tradition, the Mountain itself stands ready to bury the Jews should they give the wrong answer, a completely uncoerced reacceptance is found in the words of the Scroll of Esther. In any case, G-d's authority begins from those in a position of less authority accepting that something special exists in the higher authority. The power then displayed by the One on High derives its legitimacy not from superior strength but from the conveying of authority. This distinction has all but disappeared for some of our leading thinkers.

Authority now resides only in autonomy. All outside authority must be challenged. All outside authority is coercive and ultimately illegitimate and so we are left only with power and the uncovering of the power dynamic in all things.

"However sugarcoated and ambiguous, every form of authoritarianism must start with a belief in some group's greater right to power. whether that right is justified by sex, race, class, religion or all four. However far it may expand, the progression inevitably rests on unequal power and airtight roles within the family." With these words, Gloria Steinem reminds us that power and authority are now one and the same. Moses has become Pharaoh and the dynamics of power reign.

This is precisely what Judaism has always opposed. for most of Jewish history, Rabbinic and communal authorities possessed only limited coercive power. Certainly, even a rudimentary awareness of the power relationships makes one aware that true power resided in the Gentile government and the Jewish authorities were almost always in a weak and precarious position.

It was not power that kept the community committed to following this leadership, it was authority. It was the fact that people believed that wisdom and truth could be found in their leaders and that following them would best lead one along the road to finding G-d.

I have come, in this way, to doubt the uncritically and generally accepted belief that our present historically unprecedented high rate of assimilation is attributable to the far greater ease with which one can today leave the community. While some of the historical social and familial strictures no longer exist, thus making that process easier, other factors have also changed. The Church openly proselytized for Jewish converts, often in coercive settings in the bad old days, and the difference in quality of life between Jew and Gentile was far greater than it is today. Yet only a relatively few opted out.

I suspect, therefore, that our undermining of the very concept of authority may have much to do with the problem of assimilation. As long as communal authorities were seen to carry authority, the way out was simply not an appropriate option. With authority gone, and radical autonomy taking its place, any and all options that one may choose are equally acceptable.

So, too, this confusion between power and authority leads to the most frequently encountered and significant misunderstanding of the role of Halachik Rabbinic leadership. people will suggest that Rabbis use their power to do something or other that appears to be the right thing to do.

Often egalitarian issues are approached in this way. But Rabbis do not have power, they have authority, and that authority is circumscribed by the higher authority of Torah and Halachah. Whatever the merits of the argument or the issue, the power may not be there to do what is asked. The Rabbinic claim to authority may impose limits that a power dynamic may not. However, belief in the system and its authority means accepting the limitations because it leads to something far greater.

Judaism does best, then, when, like Moses before Pharaoh, it seeks to recognize legitimate authority and to worship at its altar while leaving the deification of power to others who are seduced by its charms. Those caught in the power trap, those who measure all things against a power grid, may gain temporary advantage now and then, but finally and ultimately, this top down structure of theirs lacks proper foundation and they will suffer the fate of all who have come before and played the power game. For Judaism, on the other hand, the relationship with G-d, the bottom up structure of recognizing and trying to respond appropriately to legitimate authority, provides a foundation on which a sound structure can grow and thrive. As a result, even when the structure takes a blow-- even the terrible blows that we have experienced all too often in our history-- it is well-rooted enough to recover and survive.

While I hesitate to pass theological judgment on contemporary events, many have pointed to the difference between the aftermath of the '67 War as opposed to the Yom Kippur War in Israel. After the 6-Day victory of 1967, the national slogan was "Kol Hakavod Letzahal" (loosely, "Nice going, IDF").

Then, when the fragility of power was revealed in 1973, the slogan became "Yisrael Betach Bahashem" ("Israel trust in G-d"). Power was replaced by authority in a national cultural course correction that Jews must always make if we are to be true to ourselves.

It was similarly fascinating to me to see Pope John Paul II chosen as Man of the year by Time magazine. With all of the theological and policy differences I have with the Pope, the contemporary Pontiff is a person of authority, not power.

Today more than ever before the Pope has no divisions, no troops to fight for him. But the Pope has authority.

Millions, if not billions, of people see him as a repository of truth and wisdom, and as the gatekeeper to the road to G-d. In an era when power has finally coalesced in one superpower, it is interesting to see the need for authority reemerge. Time's choice accurately reflects one symbol of that need.

Torah, too, provides many such role models. Returning to Pharaoh and Judaism's first encounter with massive imperial power of this type, it is worth nothing that even before Moses's act of rebellion, Pharaoh was opposed even by some within his own ranks. His second attempt, after enslavement, at dealing with his "Jewish problem" was to order the midwives to kill the newborn male children of the Jews. But the midwives were in awe (from the root "yrh") of G-d.

Now awe when used by the Bible in the context of a relationship always means respect for authority. For example, one is to show awe for parents by not calling them by their first names, by not sitting or standing in their usual place, by not publicly disagreeing with or even publicly supporting a parent engaged in debate with another. A parent's authority must be preserved.

The midwives, who recognized G-d's authority even in the face of Pharaoh's power, refused to do as he asked. In choosing to accept authority over power, "they allowed the children to live." That "living" by authority as against power is a necessary component for Judaism to achieve its historic destiny to this day.