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“Were It Not For”

I.

Four years ago I brought to you three Jewish things to take with you into the voting booth. The first was the memory of our being strangers in Egypt: *ki gerim heyitem b'erezt mitzrayim*. The second was the dialectical challenge to be “for oneself” but also “not only for oneself”: *im eyn ani li mi li*. The third was the stirring warning given in our Torah by God, by angels, and by our ancestors to one another: “Do not fear”: *al tira avdi ya'akov*.

Today, in just a bit, I'm going to recycle this “Jewish voting guide.”

But first, let's work through a text I don't recall ever teaching here or elsewhere. You'll immediately see why this text calls out to be discussed in this quadrennial season. It's from our second-century tractate known as Pirkey Avot. Pirkey Avot is as clear and concise a distillation of Rabbinic Judaism as we could possibly find.

רַבִּי חַנִּינָא סֵגֵן הַכֹּהֲנִים אוֹמֵר, הָיִי מִתְפַּלֵּל בְּשִׁלוּמָהּ שֶׁל מַלְכוּת, שֶׁאִלְמָלָא מוֹרָאָהּ, אִישׁ אֶת רֵעֵהוּ חַיִּים בְּלָעוּ

Rabbi Chanina, the deputy of the priests, would often say, “Pray for the welfare of the government, for were it not for the fear of [the government], people would swallow each other alive.”

That's the text.

Who was Rabbi Chanina? He lived in Roman-occupied Jerusalem in the mid-first century CE. He is not listed among the ten rabbinic martyrs killed by the Romans for fearlessly perpetuating Judaism against their governmental edict, but scholars think he was executed along with the others, like Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel, probably soon after the destruction of the Second Temple.

In his position as *s'gan hakohanim*, or deputy to the priests, he may have played an interlocutor role between the Jewish authorities and the Romans. I'm just guessing. He may have been one of those early models of a *shtadlan*, a Jew who learns the political ropes in order to protect his community from the whims of a host culture that runs hot and cold in their dealings with "the Jews," that strange *am acher*, "a people apart." Or he was simply the major domo to the Kohen Gadol. Either way, he seems to have a strong opinion about these authorities looming at the door.

Rashi explains that Chanina might be talking not only about praying for the welfare of a Jewish government, but "even" about the governments of other nations. Rashi brings up the strange and magnificent pageant described in the Torah, whereby Israelites offer seventy bullocks on the altar during the festival of Sukkot, one for each of the so-called seventy nations of the world. As if to suggest that Israel had its eye on international relations even then.

Rabbi Ovadiah of Bartenura, one of the foremost commentators on the Mishnah, who lived in 15th century Italy, says that Chanina is definitely talking about other – i.e. foreign or host – governments. After all, he says, other nations seem to do fine with their kings. But whenever Israel had its own king, all hell broke loose. People *did* swallow each other alive, starting with the kings themselves.

Bartenura says that the only sort of Jewish government worth talking about is a government consisting of *dayanim* and *sanhedrins*, of *shoftim* and *shotrim*. In English: judges and lawgivers, magistrates and officers. In other words, the kind of government that concerns itself not with ruling but with taking care of the society it serves. Or anachronistically, “of the people, by the people, and for the people.” No royalty, just us Jewish folks administering a community based on the *civil* values in the Torah itself. To which the great Chassidic master, S’fas Emes, adds, “how could people swallow each other with a government like that?”

A modern commentary on Pirkey Avot by my old philosophy teacher, Rabbi Leonard Kravitz, suggests that Rabbi Chanina “anticipates the view of the social philosopher Thomas Hobbes...who wrote that ‘...except they be restrained through fear of some coercive power, every man will dread and distrust each other.’ Both Hobbes and Rabbi Chanina assume that society can only operate through fear.”

This must certainly have seemed the case to Rabbi Chanina, who witnessed the various factions in Jerusalem literally going for each other’s throats. Indeed the Rabbis claim that this *sin’at*

chinam, this baseless, uncivil swallowing of Jew by Jew, brought down the Bet Mikdash and Jewish Jerusalem. Brought down the Jewish state.

Finally Rabbi Kravitz acknowledges that readers throughout our history responded more positively or negatively to this teaching – Chanina’s teaching, not Hobbes’s – “depending on the circumstances in which they found themselves.”

Which is to say, it is frightfully instructive for us today to read this text in order to remind ourselves of the radically different circumstances whence we Jews recently came. For if we do, we give ourselves a window into the psychological subtext of our Jewish dilemma in America: One the one hand, we’re so excited to be fully accepted into this wide-open society that we Jews have made ourselves into America’s all-time greatest, most enthusiastic participants in the democratic process. (We like to say we even show up for a school board primary election!)

But, because we so recently experienced downright *fear of the government*, we still suffer deep anxiety about what “The Government” will do to us – or won’t do *for* us - if we let our guard down, not to mention – here’s another elephant in the living room – not to mention what It will do to our last best shot in history at Jewish independence and self-determination, the State of Israel.

II.

I don’t need to go into detail about all the issues. Everybody knows them. Iran; Iran and Israel; The Arab Spring; The Arab Spring and Israel; Hamas and Hezbola rockets hitting Israeli cities,

and Iran behind it all, and Israel; Europe; Europe and Israel; Palestinian statehood; Palestinian statehood and Israel; Palestinian statehood and Europe and Israel and the territories of much-disputed status, and American interests and policies in “the region” over against America’s “historic relationship” with Israel. Et cetera.

And now, of course, the alarming attacks on American embassies and other targets across the map of Islam. All folding back on this small but vocal and vibrant and grateful and anxious and conflicted voting cohort called “the Jews of America.”

Now remember Bartinura’s words. Bartinura thinks all of this statecraft and power stuff is what we call in Yiddish, “*goyim nachas*.” Roughly, “the gentiles’ idea of a good time.” Jews, he says, think governing is about civil disputes, civil rights, civil needs, torts, welfare. Not about “ruling.”

But no longer. Because now we Jews have civil rights and civil power in America; and we have the State of Israel, which, whether you hate this or love this, and I happen to LOVE this, which has one helluva powerful military to take care of itself. Which makes possible all kinds of new and fearless stances and postures in the world of being Jewish; and which ALSO brings to bear so many of the deep Torah values of self-governance and human dignity which we haven’t had to think about since the days of the Torah itself. Jewish national ethics. Government not for fear, but for justice. Righteous government. Dare I say, *prophetic* government.

Or in short: Rabbi Chanina, this ain't your grandfather's fearsome government. This government is us: us over here, and us over there.

How so over here? Well, when we use our American vote to promote prosperity and justice for all Americans, and for all the peoples of the world affected by the long arm of American hegemony, we are making our Jewish contribution in a way that's true to our prophets' vision. However, when we use our American vote to manipulate American policy for our own Jewish interests at the expense of America's, we're playing Rabbi Chanina's game. We're acting like we live in someone else's country. Which we don't.

How so over there? When, for example, we help create a Jewish state that models democracy in a region of cutthroat despotism, and when that Jewish state practices *tohar haneshek*, "purity of arms," by risking its soldiers' lives to model an ethical military defense force, and when it generates a free economy and the most envied technological and medical innovation in the world, we are living the prophets' vision. However, when we allow that same society to foster and fester the kind of bigotry that results in Jewish youths attacking Arab youths in Zion Square, or Jewish mobs attacking African refugees in south Tel Aviv, or Jewish settlers burning mosques and homes in Arab villages, we own the problem and we are responsible for calling it what it is and fixing it. No excuses.

No hiding behind euphemisms, no trying to fool American legislators and the American public by fudging the facts. No changing the subject, not even to nuclear proliferation. We own it. We're proud of it. But we're responsible for it.

I used to say that I wish some of the more insular Jews here in America would make “aliyah” to America so that they could finally start to own up to living here. Then there are times I wish our more assimilated Jews would step back and realize that America is a composite of many different groups and creeds, and that *our* group and *our* issues are worth identifying with. We Jews are a terrific people with a terrific message, and with a whole lot to contribute to a country that for once in history could actually “get” what we’re trying to offer.

III.

So, as advertized, here comes my new and improved Torah of voting and citizenship from four years ago. I asked you then, and I ask you again today, to bring three great Jewish ideas with you into the voting booth, and to keep in mind each day of your blessed American life.

The first is a lesson which the Torah considers so important that it repeats it in one form or another thirty-six times: *ki gerim heyitem b’eretz mitzrayim*. You were strangers in the land of Egypt. Which then leads to: *Lo toneh*: Don’t wrong the stranger, for you were strangers. *Lo til’chatzenu*: Don’t oppress the stranger, for you were strangers. *Lo ta’anun*: Do not ill-treat the stranger, the widow, the poor, the orphan, the down-trodden, for you were all of those. “If you do mistreat them, I will heed their outcry as soon as they cry out to Me.”

You were strangers in Egypt. Try to remember your own crying out, your own terror. Now remember who and what caused that terror. And now take *that* memory with you into the voting booth. Vote as the free person who remembers bondage. Vote as the materially-blessed person

who remembers sleeping in your pledge garment for lack of a bed. Vote as the secure member of society who remembers not being able to get justice for lack of status or a bribe to the government of fear. Vote as one who hears the cries of the legally unprotected, or of the barely protected whose rights hang in the judicial balance.

Ki gerim heyitem: Remember what it feels like to be estranged. To forget is to return to Egypt, where we were slaves and we didn't even know it.

The second: *Im eyn ani li, mi li*; "If I am not for myself, who will be?" *U'ch'sheani l'atzmi mah ani*; "But if I am only for myself, what am I?" *V'im lo achshav, eymatai*; "And if not now, when?"

That's Hillel's dictum, famous to the point of cliché. As a voter's guide? Priceless. And most Jewish teachers would agree that it is the quintessential expression of our world-view, much like "Remember that you were slaves in Egypt."

Hillel would tell us to concern ourselves with self-preservation *and* with altruism at one and the same time. He would say that if both ends of this dialectic are being served in equal measure, then we are succeeding at our human task. Yes, we should vote our interests, including our economic interests and our Jewish people's interests, including the security interests of the State of Israel.

Still, we must always realize that what is good for all *is* in our self-interest. We watch our own back, *and* we remain idealistic to the degree that we keep striving for a society in which we would not need to worry about what's creeping up from behind.

As our musaf liturgy puts it, based on Mishley, or Proverbs: “Drink water from your own cistern, but give the community its due.” . מִמַּי שְׁתֵּה מְבוֹרָךְ - וְהִנַּח לְקֵהֶל אֶת שְׁלוֹ .

And what is the third shtikl of Torah we can take into the voting booth? It's none other than the Torah of the *malach*, our friend the angel from today's Torah reading, who says “Do not fear.” *Al tir'a. Al tir'i.* The angel says it to Hagar and shows her the well. God says it to Abram and shows him the stars. God says it to Jacob and promises to accompany him down into Egypt and out the other side. Moses says it to Joshua and hands him the reins of leadership. Isaiah says it to the Judean exiles in Babylonia and encourages them to find their way back to Eretz Yisrael. On and on. *Al tira.* Don't fear.

Of course, *al tira* cannot really mean “don't be afraid” in the usual sense, because indeed we *are* afraid: afraid of terror, afraid of financial collapse, afraid of growing older without love and community, and maybe without our pensions.

So it cannot mean “don't be afraid.” Rather, it has to mean “don't be afraid to do “forward teshuvah,” to turn *toward* the world, rather than *away* from the world.” Don't be afraid to face the frightening world with all your heart, your soul, and your might. With all your beliefs. With your whole self. *Al tira.*

When we go to vote as American citizens, I would want us to go as Americans who are proud to be Jews, and to take that pride with us all the way in. I would want us to think of ourselves as a people who stands for something great; not just the greatness of our heritage, of our history, of our literature, our “civilization;” but also the greatness of our great ideas, our great vision for humanity and the whole world.

That’s not just the core of our ethos. It’s the heart of our spiritual life. It’s what really gives us that sense of transcendence. We believe in *teshuvah*, the unending possibility of transformation and improvement *in real time and space*. We believe in *yir’at hashem*, the respect for godly moral order, and not in *yir’at adam*, the fear of other human beings, and certainly not in the fear of our government. We believe in listening for the voice of the oppressed, and of responding to it. We believe in *tzelem elohim*, the idea that every human being, regardless of sex, gender, race, origin, orientation, pigment, or religion, bears the image of divinity in his or her face.

Finally, let the shofar say it best. *T’kiah*: wake up and take notice. *Sh’varim*: there’s much brokenness in the world. *T’ru’ah*: respond to the call and be part of the solution. *T’kiah g’dolah*: work toward that big, impossible dream of a free and prosperous and healthy world.

“We were strangers in Egypt.” “Be for myself but not only for myself.” “Fear not, my people Israel.” And of course, “if not now” – at this unprecedented and extraordinary time in our history – if not now, then when, indeed?