

"Pride and Pridefulness"

Greetings from rabbi camp!

I think that's the most fitting description of the Hartman Institute rabbinic Torah seminar program. It's a two-week text study and schmooze fest. It's where rabbis get to come to Jerusalem (where virtually all of them have spent a year or more during their younger seminary years) to indulge in the very thing that drew them to the rabbinate: serious ancient and modern Jewish texts that clear the mind and soul, and that allow rabbis to hone the tools they need in order to think and speak about the burning issues of our own time.

Rabbis are text junkies. We love to talk to each other about texts, to hear each other's take, and then to bring it all home to you, our congregants and students, always with the goal of getting you to stretch yourselves as Jews and as human beings.

And if this is camp, then there has to be trip day! Today was trip day. I signed up for the most head-clearing activity among the offerings: a strenuous hike along a section of the Israel Trail (Israel's national hiking route).

Our group trekked through the Elah Valley, where David putatively slew Goliath, and where in the past five years archeologists have uncovered a large 10th century BCE Philistine city mentioned in the Bible, known as "Shaarayim," the "two-gated" city where, sure enough, there are two gates where other ancient fortress towns had only one. There's a metaphor waiting to be d'rashed!

We hiked up to the promontory, sat together, and read the passage aloud from I Samuel relating little David's brave act of volunteering to take on the nine-foot tall Goliath, who is armed to the teeth and whose description matches those computer-generated monsters you see stomping on buildings and cars in summer blockbuster movies. Goliath tells David he should go home to his mommy and send out a true fighter. David responds that he is fighting for the ultimate cause, Ado-nai tz'va'ot, the "Lord of Hosts."

In that text, the Israelites don't have a chance of an ice cube in hell. They are up against a fully Iron Age force, fighting with their dinky Bronze Age equipment and their Keystone Cop disorganization. Their fact that they eventually come to dominate ancient Canaan and roll violently over their neighbors in pursuit of empire is deeply ironic.

As we sat there reading, I couldn't help thinking about how in the minds of Israel's neighbor Palestinians today, Israeli soldiers look like armed giants, while they see themselves as the little guys fighting for an unattainable noble cause. Unfortunately for Israel – and for involved Jews around the world – that reversed image has sprouted legs and is now spreading itself through campuses, governments, and centers of ideas and ideologies throughout the globe. Jews are Goliath the evil, and Palestinians – regardless of their methods or intentions – are the new David the noble.

The truth now – like the truth three thousand years ago in the Elah Valley – is layered and complicated. Neither side is totally virtuous or evil. Both sides have "narratives" that tell not the "truth" but the truth

of how they see themselves. Both sides desperately need to reach a compromise before the current situation is irreversible.

An ostracaon (a shard of pottery with writing on it) was found recently at the site. It contains a short text (a text!) in ancient Hebrew, one of the three oldest Hebrew fragments ever found. It declares that the ethos of ancient Israel must be to argue the cause of the widow, the stranger, the poor, and the needy, and not to oppress the downtrodden. In other words, to have multiple gates in one's society, and to focus on human needs rather than conquest (or ritual! but that's another discussion).

Readers of the Bible will despair that this kind of thinking failed to dominate the behavior of the Israelite and Judean kings. We Jews and our kings became what Samuel warned us not to become: just like everyone else. No better, no worse. But hardly the people of the covenant at Sinai.

Are we just like everyone else today? Is there really any point in still calling Israel a "Jewish" enterprise, other than the fact that it remains a fortified haven for Jews? Is there a happy medium between defending the borders of the State of Israel at all cost from those who would wish the State away (and here I refer to, among others, a large swath of the Palestinian population), and the striving to make modern Israel the beacon of national morality called for in that ancient ostracaon?

Archeologists disagree as to whether David actually existed; whether he was ever a king in the common sense of the term; and whether the Davidic-Solomonic dynasty ever performed all the swashbuckling deeds it claims to have done. But no one thinks that the lofty ideas on that ostracaon – or in the Torah itself – are not the meat and potatoes of the Jewish religion to this day.

No one, that is, but those little would-be Davids who cower before what they see as our Goliath-like behavior. They don't think of us as the people of any obvious covenant whatsoever, especially when they spend hours trying to navigate the territory between one of their villages and another and between their homes and orchards, or when they receive unannounced visits from uniformed Israeli teenagers in the middle of the night, armed in their imaginations like you-know-who.

Nota bene: The Philistines and all their chariots and iron were swept away by history. Their chariots couldn't do them any good on the hills leading up to Jerusalem. As much was obvious to us hikers today as we walked through the ruins of their town. They, along with every other empire, disappeared from the land of Israel. This includes, of course, the empire of David himself.

Sitting there in the heat today, and walking those many miles of ancient sunbaked rocks, I decided that the only empire that will ever be allowed to flourish in the land of Israel in perpetuity will be the one that embodies not the pridefulness of Goliath, but the pride of a people who fight for the cause of the widow, the poor, the needy, and the stranger. Especially the stranger.

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