

The Torah of Listening: Conflict in Context by Rabbi Joel Alter

A sensitive and thoughtful girl who had been my student the year before knocked on my office door. She wanted to talk. Actually, she needed to cry. Now in 8th grade and learning about the Holocaust for the first time, she was shocked by Nazi Germany's diabolical overturning of all that is plainly just and good and honest and true. She was dumbfounded by the Nazis' reasoned arguments for bloodthirsty genocide. My student cried not for what had happened, but because learning about the Holocaust punctured her confidence that she could ever know what is plainly just and good and honest and true. "But the Nazis sincerely believed they were doing the right thing!" she cried. She was petrified by what seemed the impossibility of knowing what is right and of ever taking right action in the world.

My student had fallen into a deep hole of doubt from which it took time to climb out. Her urgent question, "How can you know?!" stands as a weighty counterbalance to the finger-pointing accusations that characterize so much everyday conflict, when opponents are really just disputants – like Hillel and Shammai. Years after I left the school where I taught this student, I'm reminded of her question on 9 Adar because questioning our sureties, while it must not paralyze us or overwhelm what we know to be true, can encourage debate that yields stronger outcomes. In the words of *Pirkei Avot*, the outcome of a worthy dispute stands firm.

Moses leaves a pastoral life to pursue liberation in Egypt, riding on God's promise that the Israelites' slavery will be replaced by a good life in a good land. Never mind that God *tells* Moses that Pharaoh will balk at releasing his slaves (Ex. 3:19), Moses rages at God when the Israelites assail him for their troubles after their situation gets dramatically worse (Ex. 5:22-23). (Here we have another feature of conflict, in which disputants ignore contrary data – but that's for another essay.) Rather than get defensive, God shows deep understanding of where the people are coming from. God preaches patience, expressing confidence that the facts will in time bear out the truth of His promise.

God points out that the only divine quality the people have yet experienced is making promises about a distant future which show no hint of fulfillment in the present. "I have not yet made Myself known to them by My name YHVH" (Ex. 6:3). As Rashi explains, God's name signifies a reality in which promise and fulfillment are one and experience substantiates hope. But what they need is not to *hear* God's name but to *experience* its truth. Resoundingly, God reaffirms for Moses His promise (Ex. 6:4-8), but the people flatly refuse Moses' encouragement. They have neither time nor spirit to hear it (Ex. 6:9). Their present experience belies his arguments. Until the facts on the ground change, the people remain unmoved. Neither Moses' words nor his demonstrations of God's saving power have the slightest effect on them; they seem to shuffle mutely through their liberation.

God, though, has the freedom of action to force the situation. God makes plain that Pharaoh's power is subject to God's own and that nature bends to God's will. While God

demands awareness from Pharaoh and the Egyptians, God is patient with the Israelites, fully understanding that their experience cannot yield a position other than doubt. (God becomes less patient with the people further along but that, too, is the subject of another essay.) Only when the Egyptians are drowned at the sea do the people perceive a change; they burst forth in a confident song of trust in God, calling God by God's name (Ex. 14:31).

A pillar of the training JTS provides to its rabbis, cantors, and chaplains is Clinical Pastoral Education. Most fundamentally, this is the Torah of listening. Listening means fully recognizing the reality of the person with whom one is in encounter. It means seeing and affirming the other's experience. It means granting that the other knows what they know for good reason, even if you know differently from your own experience. We apply this pastoral wisdom to situations of conflict and dispute, as well. *What is the other's experience and how does it yield their understanding? How does it obstruct their seeing things any other way? How might their experience call on me to revise my own conclusions?* Fundamental to JTS's approach to Torah study and scholarship, no less than to Jewish living and leading, is that context matters. Seeking out and understanding context – whether personal, historical, or societal - hopefully teaches us to pursue our deep commitments wisely.

We navigate the waters between knowing with confidence what we know, and recognizing that others know differently. As our experience informs our knowing, their experience informs theirs. Guided as we are by a vision of a redeemed world, we simultaneously recognize that we only know what we know. While we may be relentless and undaunted in pursuit of our vision, when conflict arises and we are faced with the ordinary obstacles of opposing views, patience moderates conflict and understanding may open up a path forward. After all, unless we are truly at war, none of us has the luxury God enjoys in the Exodus to (try to) force the situation.

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