

Vayeshev
Erev Hanukkah
December 8, 2012
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Tonight begins our celebration of Hanukkah. Tonight we will gather around our menorahs and chant the blessings, light our candles, we will recite in our prayers the traditional words: "In the days of Mattathias son of Yohanan...a cruel power rose against Your people Israel...and You delivered the strong into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of the few... the guilty into the hands of the innocent"... But have you ever wondered how?

I know we call it a miracle – but still – this is not the way the world usually works. The strong usually defeats the weak, the many usually triumphs over the few, and the guilty usually triumphs over the innocent. I know that is a bit cynical – but in my experience that is how the world works – and I want to know how, miracles aside – our ancestors were able to reverse the natural order and achieve their victory.

The simplest answer I can give you is that the Maccabees were blessed in that their enemy was the Greeks and the Greeks in addition to being the mightiest, strongest, and most sophisticated power in the ancient world – the Greeks were also a reasonable people. And being a reasonable people – they recognized when they had been outsmarted and knew when to declare defeat. In truth the Macabees were no match for the Greeks – not even close. But in this, which was the first war in history fought for religious freedom, the Greeks were about to learn what our own America would have to learn thousands of years later in the rice fields of Vietnam – that an inferior force can defeat a far superior force if they use their knowledge of the terrain to neutralize the advantages of that superior force. Fighting in the jungles of Vietnam, an elusive enemy that refused to engage us in open combat was able to force us to fight them on their terms and ultimately wear us down to the point where we realized we could not win. So too, thousands of years ago, the Macabees refused to come out of the hills thereby neutralizing the chariots of the Greeks – forcing them to fight at a disadvantage – using their intimate knowledge of the terrain of their own land to choose when and where they would engage the enemy and ultimately use many of the same tactics of guerilla warfare that would enable a far inferior military force to defeat the far superior Greek troops. And because the Greeks were reasonable people – they recognized when they were beaten and that is how the few defeated the many and the weak triumphed over the strong.

But here is a question for you to contemplate as you munch your latkes tonight or as you chew on your jelly doughnuts: "What if the Greeks had not been so reasonable?" What if they would have said – "We can't let this backwater group of renegades defeat the mightiest army in the world? We will persist – no matter how long it takes, no matter how many soldiers we have to sacrifice. We have the money, we have the time and we have the men to do it – we will fight on!" Well – had the Greeks not been so reasonable – the story might have had a very different ending - -certainly a more tragic one. Thank God the Greeks were reasonable – maybe *that* is the true miracle we should celebrate on Hanukkah.

Reasonable enemies are the best kind to have. Why? Well, because you can reason with them.

I went out to dinner this past summer with an old friend, a very successful businessman and an intelligent and astute man. And during the course of dinner he commented that he could never vote for a Muslim for president of the United States. Now there were a lot of good reasons to vote against Obama as there were a lot of good reasons to vote for him – but I was at a loss in knowing how to respond to someone who was telling me his reason for not voting for Obama was because he was a Muslim. It was kind of like those folks who continued to believe that our president was not born in the United States, even after they produced his birth certificate. When people are intent on being unreasonable – the facts are irrelevant.

I think more and more we are entering an age where the facts don't matter – or more accurately facts are merely there to serve a higher truth. We have just concluded a political campaign season where both sides didn't seem to pay much attention to the facts. The determining factor seemed not to be whether or not something was true or not – but whether people would believe it or not. We are entering an age where perception is everything, reality is meaningless - so it is possible for people to believe that the president is a Muslim or that Israel was behind the attack on the World Trade Center or a whole host of things that seem absurd to reasonable people.

In an age of reason facts are critical. In an age of passion beliefs are king, and it seems to me that we are leaving an age of reason and entering an age of passion.

I think we Jews have been slow to realize this new reality – and as we so often are – we are busy fighting the last war rather than preparing for the next one. Many of you come up to me and frequently share the following frustration: “why does Israel do such a lousy job of *hasbara* – public relations? Why are they so slow to get out their side of the story? Why are they the last to let the world know the real facts about what happened and shape events rather than so often find themselves being shaped by the events?” But the error in this analysis is in the assumption that facts matter. The problem with this approach is that it is based on the assumption that in the final analysis, justice will triumph and truth will out. But if anything should be clear to us at this point, it is that truth in this post-modern era is no longer all that important, and facts are just not all that relevant – such a belief is so 20th century.

The age of reason is over – the age of passion has begun – and historically we Jews have not fared well when passion ruled over reason – see: the Crusades, the Inquisition, Stalinism, Naziism. In an age of reason facts matter, in an age of passion, belief matters – facts be damned. AIPAC, ADL, and the whole alphabet of Jewish organizations that were developed to help defend us in an age of reason are not equipped to help us as we enter this new age of passion. Survival will now require new skills and new directions. But don't worry – we Jews are good at adapting.

You know who was one of the first Jews who learned how to survive in an age of passion? *Yosef Avinu* – the hero of today's torah reading. *Yosef* may well be a hero for our time and we may be able to learn much from him as we Jews need to rethink our strategies for this new age of that is upon us.

Yosef was always a person who stirred up great passion. People either loved him or hated him. His father loved him – so beloved was he over all his siblings that his father against all rules of parenting 101 – bestowed upon him the *ketonet passim* - -the many colored coat as a visible sign of how much he was his favorite. His brothers hated him. This is probably partly

because he was their father's favorite and they resented him for this. But *Yosef* certainly did not help matters when he lorded his status over his brothers and shared his dreams with them – dreams that had them bowing down to him – yes, *Yosef* himself clearly contributed to their passionate resentment so they sought to get rid of him. First they threw him in a pit, then they sold him to passing *Yishmaelites* as a slave – they even took his torn coat back to father Jacob – to taunt their father with the ignominious end of his “beloved” son. Such was the passion the *Yosef* engendered – love and hate.

But his story continues in Egypt. He is sold to *Potifar*, pharaoh's trusted head cook and *Yosef* becomes a valued servant in *Potifar's* house. Once again he is loved and hated. At first both *Potifar* and his wife love *Yosef*. He is competent, talented and handsome – what's not to love? But he is such a passionate figure that his master's wife tries to seduce him and when he refuses she reacts like a woman scorned and accuses *him* of trying to seduce *her*. This outrages his master who has him thrown in Pharaoh's prison and left to die.

For me, the key turning point in the *Yosef* saga happens while *Yosef* sits in Pharaoh's jail. There is before jail and after it – in *Yosef's* life. I imagine he had a lot of time to think while he sat there in jail, and it probably dawned on our hero, as he sat there contemplating his fate, that life was not fair. He probably thought back to the moment he was thrown in the pit by his brothers. That certainly was not fair. What had he done wrong? Was it his fault that he was his father's favorite? Was it his fault that his father gave him a special coat? Was it his fault that he had dreams? All he did was share them with his brothers. Was he not supposed to tell them the truth? Similarly he probably thought about the unfairness of events in the house of *Potifar*. They were right to value his services. He was bright and competent and did nothing to betray their confidence in him. On the contrary, when his boss's wife came on to him he resisted temptation. And what did he get for his efforts? He landed in jail! He, the good guy in the story, was accused of being the bad guy – it was not fair. He did not deserve his fate.

But as he sat in Pharaoh's jail and thought about the unfairness of it all, it probably dawned on *Yosef* – as it is now dawning on us, that the facts just don't matter. His brothers certainly didn't care about the facts. *Potifar* and his wife certainly didn't care about the facts. His brothers believed him to be at fault – so at fault he was. *Potifar* believed him to be at fault – so at fault he was. In a world where passion was more decisive than reason – appeal to reason was a waste of time. And at some point, sitting in that deep dark dungeon, it must have occurred to *Yosef* that if he was ever to get out of the pits which he seemed to keep finding himself in – it was not going to be because he deserved to get out. In a world of passion, it was more important to be loved than to be right.

What evidence do I have that *Yosef* went through this kind of reasoning while he sat there in Pharaoh's jail? Well look at what he does. He stops feeling sorry for himself and he takes action – and look at what actions he takes. He befriends his fellow prison mates – the pharaoh's baker and cup bearer who had also fallen on hard times - -and were serving some time in the clink. He did not attempt to convince them he had been wronged – that his presence there was a terrible miscarriage of justice – no, he befriends them – he interprets their dreams and ingratiates himself to them. And as they come to the end of their sentence - - *Yosef* makes a simple request – not for justice – but more simply – remember me, the guy who was your friend in jail. And later when Pharaoh is having his own dream problems, they do just that – they remember their prison friend - -the guy who had helped them out when they were in trouble and suggested that maybe he could do the same for Pharaoh. So he is called up from

jail – and he gets his moment before Pharaoh – and how does he use it? Does he argue his case? Protest his innocence? Appeal to Pharaoh's sense of justice and reason? No – our *Yosef* is much wiser and much smarter now – he knows the world in which he lives – so he uses the opportunity to ingratiate himself to the most powerful man in the world – Pharaoh falls in love with *Yosef* – and entrusts his entire empire to his stewardship – much as *Potifar* had done before and much as father Jacob had wanted to do so long ago. *Yosef* – learned that his success was due to the fact that people loved him and when they loved him – good things happened.

Even when *Yosef* will be reunited with his brothers – and I know I am getting ahead of myself in the story – but look at the *Yosef* who reveals himself when he announces: “I am Joseph – your brother!” He embraces them, he cries and is overcome by emotion – it is the *Yosef* of passion and feeling – that confronts them and it is no coincidence that *Yosef* becomes known in our tradition as *Yosef HaZadik* – not *Yosef* the wise, or *Yosef* the clever – but *Yosef* the Righteous – *Yosef* the good guy.

Look, I am not at all happy that our world is leaving the age of reason and entering the age of passion. I am not happy, but we ignore that simple truth at our peril. It is no coincidence that of the three major 24-hour news services – Fox, MSNBC and CNN - the reasonable one - CNN is now in third place. Fox is passionately conservative and doing fine. MSNBC is passionately liberal and doing fine. CNN struggles to maintain a reasonable approach to the news – and they are not doing so well. We live in a world where the facts no longer matter as much as feeling – and the sooner we recognize it – like *Yosef* did – the sooner we can chart a course that will get us out of the pit we are in.

You know why Barak Obama is our president? Because a majority of Americans thought he was the more qualified to lead us? That would be nice if people voted for the person they considered the most qualified – but I think he is president because more people like him than they did Mitt Romney. And in 2012 - it is all about being liked.

Israel does not need better *hasbarah* - better information services, it does not need more facts it needs more friends. And if I were asked to give Netanyahu advice – this would be it. Call it the *Yosef* strategy if you will but in my humble opinion what Israel needs to do today is to go on a campaign to make friends – and stop wasting so much time on the truth.

Tonight as we light our first Hanukkah candle – we celebrate a victory of the few over the many and the weak over the strong. I will take a moment to sigh over the good old days when our enemies were reasonable people who were moved and motivated by the facts. But, if we hope to triumph over the enemies of *our* day – well *Yosef* is my man. And a long time ago, *Yosef* learned that if people don't like you, well the rest is not important. *Yosef* succeeded when he became known as the good guy – and so will we. He learned his lesson – I hope we will learn it was well.