

Rosh Hashannah Day 2

One of the most powerful sessions as part of my time at the Hartman Institute this summer in Jerusalem was with Dr. Micah Goodman. Goodman, in addition to being on faculty with the Hartman Institute, has the ear of former Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett with ideas on a number of subjects including how to handle the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

While his address to our group had many amazing components, the part I'd like to focus on today is the difference between what he calls Protestant politics and Halakhic politics. Protestant politics are politics focused on the narrative, the final outcomes, the desired destination. Halakhic politics, Goodman suggests, is based upon agreement on the actions, even if the parties disagree on the end results. Even if the actions are meant to accomplish entirely different outcomes, they can work together to accomplish their shared objectives.

An example that he gave is as follows: 3 people are gathered in Jerusalem, one is headed for Eilat, another for Sinai, and a third to Aqaba as a cab pulls up (as a Canadian reference point, this would be like one person was leaving here and going to Toronto, another to Hamilton and a third to Guelph). As they are all going to different destinations, they fight as to who will get to take the cab as each has valid reasons for why they need to leave first.

Now imagine if one of those people said, we all need to get as far as Keturah, just north of Eilat (Oshawa), for all of our destinations, why don't we travel together to that shared destination and figure it out from there. Who cares what all of our destinations may be! Let's do what we can together and then decide once we arrive. Look how far we will have gotten as a result!

A practical example of this in Israel could be the following: regardless of one's hopes regarding the resolution to the ongoing conflict with the Palestinians, the establishment of better infrastructure and schools in East Jerusalem would be helpful. One leader might support this project because it is emblematic of the unequal treatment of Palestinians in Israel and must be

resolved, while others might do so to encourage more Jews to move to that part of the city and yet another might support this project to stop children from being sent to religious madrasas. For some of these individuals the establishment of these schools is towards a 1 state solution, for others a 2-state solution. For some of these people, the establishment of these schools are for the betterment of the Palestinian people and for others, the betterment of the Jewish people and for some the well-being of all. These distinctions are what keeps better schools from being built even though everyone agrees they are of benefit. If, however, each party said let's just get this done, after all we all agree about *this*, later we can fight about the end result, but for now, look how much progress has been made. This is the promise of Halakhic politics.

It would be easy to say, Kenter, you're crazy, this would never happen. Our world is too divided! But, we need look no further than the current government of Israel to find this idea brought to fruition. Parties on the left and right, Jewish and Arab, came together because they shared only 1 value in common, the desire for no more elections and to keep Bibi Netanyahu from coming to power once again. This government may not have lasted as long as many would have liked, but it represented the idea that Halakhic politics are possible. That we can find ways to work together towards our shared goals, even if we disagree regarding almost everything else.

In Israel, this idea is sometimes referred to as *mamlachtiut*, placing the needs of the country over the desires of the individual. There are plenty of examples from Israel's history of this idea. Menachem Begin choosing not to retaliate against David Ben Gurion after the Altalena incident (if you don't know the details of this story, I encourage you to look it up after the holiday). Progressive Israeli soldiers protested the war in Lebanon while home for Shabbat from fighting in that very war. Religious Zionists serving in the IDF, forcibly removed their brothers and sisters from Gush Katif, and more. These people placed the needs of the nation, what was best for everyone over their own personal feelings and needs.

What would a world look like with more *mamlachtiut*? How could politics, both governmental and otherwise change if we were willing to find common ground, even with people with whom we disagree on almost all other matters? A world inspired by halakhic politics.

As many of you are aware, I am usually quite reluctant to deliver sermons about Israel. When answering why I don't, I reference a pre-High Holiday talk that Ed Feinstein, the Rabbi Emeritus at Valley Beth Shalom in California delivered about a decade ago. He told us the following:

A rabbi can get up in front of her congregation and say she doesn't believe in God and no one will bat an eye. Another rabbi could steal half a million dollars from the shul and 40% of the membership would still follow him to the breakaway synagogue he starts 10 miles down the road. But a rabbi who delivers the wrong sermon about Israel will be fired within the year. Israel is the third-rail of sermons and the issue about which people are most passionate. While we valorize the idea of dialoguing with people with multiple opinions and placing love of country over our specific differences, in practice, are we truly open to conversation? To understanding where someone else may be coming from? Especially when it comes to Israel matters. (Let's find out).

Both this past year and this coming year, we have taught in our JTeen program about Israel, attempting to equip our teens with the information necessary to participate in the challenging conversations around Israel that are showing up in their social media and within their schools. When a guest speaker joined us for one session, the suggestion was made that before engaging in dialogue, we should confirm that the other person acknowledges Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state, because if they won't concede that, there is nothing to discuss. I certainly agree to some extent with that sentiment, but I would suggest that we should be proactive about offering a second shared concession as well. What would it look like if we both enter into that dialogue also agreeing that the Palestinians also deserve self-determination and equal opportunities in the land as well. 1 state, 2 state, confederation, all those things are problems

for another day. But if we can both agree on those two statements, we have a journey to begin together.

To share one other story.... It was the summer of 2002 and I was serving as a group leader for USY on Wheels. We were spending the day at Yosemite National Park. A group of Mormons on mission had found our kids and were beginning to tell them about how great the Church of Latter Day Saints is. Now, for those of us who were in youth groups in the 90s and early 2000s, our parents and youth leaders were terrified of cults and missionaries. It felt like every youth group gathering involved some program designed to teach us to stay away and to reject what we would be encountering as we went off to university. When I saw this attempted missionizing, I was ready. All those youth group sessions had prepared me for this moment. I was metaphorically rolling up my sleeves and was ready for battle. And then, as I approached, I saw something that blew me away. Our kids weren't yelling at those potential missionaries. They said thank you for sharing with me about your faith, now I'd love to share with you some of the things that I love about mine. And the two groups chatted throughout their dinners about their different religions, not afraid of the other as a threat, but as a chance to share their pride in who they were.

Now 100% there are people who act in violence, antagonism, and have no interest in dialogue. But for every one of them, there are at least half a dozen more who are well meaning participants in this issue who have never spoken with a Jewish person about Israel. For every person who utilizes intimidation to accomplish their goals, there's any number more who post on their social media about Israel because they think they should, not because they are well informed on the subject.

What would it mean to inspired by my Wheelniks and instead of fighting a person who carries a Free Palestine banner, approaching them and saying, I too want self-determination for the Palestinian people, how can we work towards this together? I realize that people were forced from their homes in order for my people to get its homeland back. Can we find a way to have

this conversation in a way that is about reaching our shared goals? A future with a vibrant Jewish state and a successful Palestinian one as well, with peace for all?

When students chant “From the River to the Sea”, do we run to post it on social media or do we take a moment to internalize the sadness, anger, and frustration that these words cause us to feel. Then, having processed our emotions, find the opportunity to talk with these children about the implications of that statement. If they are saying this phrase to express a desire for the end of Israel and a Jewish homeland, then there is no space for conversation, but I have a feeling that for many people, especially our young people, they have no idea about this phrase’s implications.

I still have hope that if we strive for Halakhic politics, that there are more people that we can travel with than we might have previously thought. What does it mean to utilize our congregation’s Israel Discussion Group as a space that is not meant for convincing but exploring? Where people can find their voice in relation to Israel, rather than be told what it should be (as is all too often the case). Then, once we bring these people together. Once we see that while we may not share the same destination that we can still travel together, amazing things can happen.

Anti-Semitism and its home within Anti-Zionism must receive no harbour. But the best way to combat those forces is not by simply attacking those with whom we disagree but also must be by shoring up the support of those with whom we otherwise disagree. Working together on our shared goals even if our desired outcomes are quite different.

Shaking our fists into the wind can be satisfying. Expressing concern is important. But if those acts aren’t followed by discreet actions, they will all be for naught. By engaging in halakhic politics we may not get all the way to our destination, but we will get farther than we ever thought we could.

This world is possible, we've seen it happen, but we've also seen how quickly it can collapse. But this world, one filled with *mamlachtiut* and its partner halackhic politics, is the only one worth living in. May its arrival come speedily and soon.

Shannah Tovah