

Just and Smart – Tzodek and Chakham

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Some two decades ago there was an Israeli campaign to encourage safe driving with the tagline *al tihyeh tzodek, tihyeh chakham* (אל תהיה צודק, תהיה חכם) – “don’t be right, be smart.” The idea behind the tagline is that some people engage in dangerous driving habits after they are infuriated by what they perceive to be inappropriate behavior on the part of other drivers. It’s not enough to be right, the message is saying, you must also be smart. For instance, is it really a smart thing to cut ahead of someone in retaliation for them having just cut ahead of you?

These two qualities, being *tzodek* – right – and being *chakham* – smart, are both criteria for assessing our behavior with the world at large.

In this week’s Torah portion we read of the very lamentable episode of Yaakov’s daughter Dinah. Dinah was raped by the son of a local chieftain, who became enamored with her and sought to marry her. Shim’on and Levi, two of Dinah’s brothers (the extent of Yaakov’s other sons’ culpability is hinted at but not made explicit) told the townspeople that such a marriage can be permitted, and even an intermingling of families/tribes contemplated, only if the locals agree to become circumcised. The locals agreed, and while they were all recuperating from the procedures Shim’on and Levi went through the town and massacred all the men. Immediately after this episode Ya’akov rebuked his sons Shim’on and Levi, saying that they have made him odious to the inhabitants of the land (עכרתם אותי להבאישני ביושב הארץ). This form of rebuke suggests that Ya’akov was more concerned with the practical consequences of this episode – that vengeance will be exacted from him and his family (ונאספו עלי והכוני ונשמדתי אני ובייתי) – than with the essential morality of killing a rapist and his protectors. And yet much later, as Ya’akov was blessing his sons on his deathbed, he came out with a much stronger rebuke of Shim’on and Levi, cursing them for their anger (ארור אפם כי עז) and their iniquity (כלי חמס מכרותיהם) which led to murder (כי באפם הרגו איש). In the initial rebuke Ya’akov seems to be concerned acting prudently – *tihiyeh chakham*, while in the final rebuke Ya’akov seems to be concerned with morality and justice – *tihiyeh tzodek*.

The rabbis were similarly bifurcated when delineating the proper relations we should have towards gentiles. What I am about to say is guilty of gross over-generalization, since there are different categories of gentiles – one cannot compare a sinful idolater to a pious gentile who strictly observes all the Noahide laws – and different rabbinic traditions treat these categories differently. But broadly speaking one can discern two general streams of rabbinic attitudes: One stream argues that gentiles are worthy of respect and concern because each one of them is a human being created in God’s image; and another stream argues that gentiles (or at least idolaters) are better off dead, and yet one must treat gentiles with respect and dignity *mishum eivah* (משום איבה) – “because of enmity.” [I would argue that *mipnei darkei shalom* (מפני דרכי שלום) – “for the sake of peace” – is essentially the same notion, although some would disagree]. The result is that both streams end up treating gentiles with respect and dignity, yet the reasoning is very different: The first argues that gentiles deserve it, and this is therefore the right thing to do – *tihiyeh tzodek*, whereas the second tradition would argue that idolatrous gentiles do not deserve respect and dignity and yet we must act as if they do so as not to engender anti-Semitism – because that is the smart thing for us to do – *tihiyeh chakham*.

These two principles – being right and being smart, or justice and prudence – come to play in modern statecraft as well. In the recent UN vote that gave observer status to the Palestinian Authority, I felt that Israel and the US might have had a reasonable argument that the Palestinians were acting unilaterally contrary to prior agreements, but I didn't feel that it was smart to object on these narrow legal grounds. For one thing, it makes us look as if we reject any form of Palestinian state, something that both the US and Israel have agreed to in principle. Imagine the good will Israel would have engendered if it had been the first to extend a welcoming recognition of Palestine. Instead we have created enmity and hostility, and all for the sake of fighting a lost cause against a nearly meaningless statement. We might have been right, but it's hard for me to see how we are being smart.

Justice and prudence should indeed be guiding principles for all of our actions, and both are requisite conditions. May we have the moral vision and the wisdom to always abide by them. Shabbat shalom.