

Torah for a Time of Authoritarianism

We are living in a time of authoritarianism. And we need the Torah of Jews from generations past to help us withstand it.

An authoritarian regime seeks to dominate rather than to persuade, to control rather than collaborate, to punish rather than compromise. It overwhelms the populace by acting on so many fronts at once that any possible opposition is fractured. It sometimes highlights real problems but offers illusory, corrupt, and self-serving solutions. And, in a previously democratic society, it seeks to control elections to entrench and ratify its legitimacy even if a majority of the populace would not choose it. We may agree or disagree with any particular action or position that such a regime takes. Some of us may vote it into power for reasons that seem important to us at the time. We may think that some of what it does benefits us personally or is even the right thing to do. But we have to remember: that does not mean that the regime is serving us. Authoritarian regimes only serve their leader.

I am not a politician or a political scientist. I can't tell you which strategies or levers will work to change this political trajectory, and I won't tell you how to vote. I am a rabbi, a teacher of Jewish tradition and a student of Jewish history. One of the advantages of being an ancient people is that we have seen it all before, and Jews have lived under authoritarian regimes for centuries. In fact, while I haven't made an exhaustive study, I would venture to say that we have been dealing with the burden of authoritarian rulers for much if not most of our history.

Today I want to illuminate for you a Torah for just these times, Torah for a time of authoritarianism, taken from our people's experiences under the Roman Empire, the medieval Christian kingdoms of Europe, and the Nazi regime. Just as Torah has always been a refuge, a support, and a guide for the Jewish people from Sinai to today, so too can the Torah of those Jews who lived under authoritarian regimes in the past give us comfort, guidance, and hope for our collective future in this very difficult time.

I: The Roman Empire

Although we often talk about the "ancient rabbis," we rarely set them in the context in which many of them lived: ancient Rome. After the failures of the Jewish rebellions against Roman rule early in the first century, the destruction of the Second Temple in the year 70, and the defeat of the Bar Kochba rebellion in year 135, Jews in the Roman Empire were a defeated, subjugated people who lived under the burden of an authoritarian regime that dominated their lives. For much of the rabbinic period, Jews held a special status, allowed to pay a tax that exempted them from participating in Roman religion, but they were mostly not considered citizens and had little political power. That power in the Empire was vested in the Caesar in Rome and in the Roman governors of Judea who collected taxes and enforced Roman law. Jews were allowed to maintain some religious practices, but their freedoms were severely limited.

When we read the words of the ancient rabbis while keeping in mind this context, it becomes clear that their interpretations of the Hebrew Bible were often not-so-subtle commentaries on the authoritarian regime under which they lived. They would point, for example, to the Torah's limits on the

power of kings¹ and to the prophet Samuel's catalog of the many ways kings could take advantage of those they ruled² to form an image of the ideal king that was far from that of the Roman emperor. The emperor commanded obedience; the ideal king would engender respect through humility and listening to the needs of the people.³ The emperor ruled as he saw fit; the ideal king would be subject to the laws of Torah just as much as anyone else.⁴ The emperor aspired to be like a god, and was often added to the pantheon of gods upon his death; the ideal king recognized that God is the one and only true King, מלך המלכים, the "King of Kings," as we say in our prayers on this day of Rosh Hashanah, the One who rules over all.⁵

Sometimes the ancient rabbis would critique the regime directly, as the sage Shemaya taught: "Love work, hate acting the superior, and do not attempt to draw near to the ruling authority."⁶ Rabban Gamliel went into greater detail: "Be careful [in your dealings] with the ruling authorities for they do not befriend a person except for their own needs; they seem like friends when it is to their own interest, but they do not stand by a person in an hour of distress."⁷ These warnings not only tried to lay bare the motivations of the rulers but also to clarify the danger in trying to get close to them in hopes of securing favor for oneself or one's community. When policy toward a minority community depends on the rule of law, advocating for legal protection from those in power makes sense because it can provide enduring safety. But when a minority's safety depends on the whim of a ruler, insinuating ourselves with the leadership can only compromise our own integrity while providing an illusion of safety that can be reversed at any moment.

In addition to providing both subtle and more obvious critiques of the authoritarian regime under which they lived, the ancient rabbis did something else that was remarkable, the thing that makes them our teachers to this day. They created an entire system of law as they envisioned it flowing from the Torah, a divinely inspired blueprint for a society to live by, covering every detail of ritual, civil, family, and criminal law. This is especially remarkable because the ancient rabbis had absolutely no way to implement the majority of this system in their own time. While a portion of the ritual law was relevant to their daily lives, and the Roman government gave them some limited autonomy over family law, most civil and nearly all criminal matters were out of their hands entirely; they were handled by Roman courts using Roman law. The rabbis were creating a complete corpus of law at a time when it was mostly theoretical. We spend a lot of time studying this corpus as it is laid out in the Mishnah and Talmud, but we don't often ask an obvious question: Why the rabbis would write it at all?

We can see from their critiques that the rabbis believed that the authoritarian regime of Rome was the opposite of the vision of a just government and ideal society they saw outlined in Torah. But they also knew how powerful the Roman regime was, not just in its military might but also in its philosophies of law and politics. They feared that their ideas of what was right and just would not survive under the weight of the regime. And perhaps they envisioned a time when the Jewish people would be free and in command of their own fate, and they wanted to preserve the wisdom to guide them when redemption came. They created an entire corpus of mostly theoretical law, the Mishnah

¹ Deuteronomy 17:14-20.

² I Samuel 8:11-18.

³ See Mishnah Bikkurim 3:4 about the humility of King Agrippa.

⁴ See Mishnah Sanhedrin 2:4.

⁵ See Mishnah Sanhedrin 2:2.

⁶ Pirkei Avot 1:10.

⁷ Pirkei Avot 2:3.

and Talmud, so that the ideals they believed in so strongly—the rule of law, the limits on leaders, the necessity for both justice and mercy, the protection of the weak from the strong, and so much more—would not perish from the earth or be stamped out by those who denied its value. They taught it to their students and their students’ students, and it was passed down through the generations for centuries, intact, to us.

The first piece of Torah we learn from past ages of Jews under authoritarian regimes is that we must preserve our ideals in the face of those who would deny them. We must hold tight to our convictions of what is right and just even when those in control tell us they are fantasies, and even when we do not have the power to implement them. We must teach them to our students and our children and pass them down, firm in our belief, just like the ancient rabbis, that there will come a time when they are relevant again. We must not allow our consciences to be worn away, our moral courage sapped, or our intellectual commitments eroded under the assault of those who may seek to dominate us. Like the ancient rabbis, we must ensure that future generations inherit a firm ethical foundation that can stand up, even if authoritarianism reigns for a time, because we know that it cannot last forever.

II: Medieval Europe

Jews living in the Christian kingdoms of medieval Europe were subject to a variety of mechanisms of control and oppression, from restrictions on where they could live, to limitations on the kinds of occupations open to them, to constraints on what they wore, what their synagogues could look like, and what language they could speak. These control mechanisms were reflections of the medieval Christian feeling that the very existence of Jews, after the coming of Jesus and the gospels testifying to his identity as the Messiah, was a rebuke to Christian faith. Inducing or forcing the conversion of Jews to Christianity and trying to prove the superiority of Christian doctrine became important for this reason. This proof would be all the better if the resources of Jewish texts like the Hebrew Bible, Mishnah, and Talmud could be marshalled to prove to the Jews that Christianity was the true religion and Judaism the false.

From our vantage point it may be hard to understand why it was so important to Christian authorities, who dominated Jews in every possible way, to take the extra step of convincing them that their religion was worthless. Jews posed no actual threat to these authoritarian regimes, whose control over the Jewish population was immense. Often confined to ghettos and subject to various and changing restrictions, Jews struggled to survive in the few occupations open to them, while hatred of Jews flourished and was encouraged by the authorities. Outside the realm of family law, Jews had little control over their lives and no ability to seek justice for any mistreatment or attack by non-Jews. But physical, legal, and political domination was not enough. Some of these authoritarian regimes also wanted to control Jewish minds and bring about the end of Jewish communities by persuasion as well as by force.

One of the mechanisms used to do so was the disputation. Disputations were formal arguments set up by the authorities pitting a Christian cleric, often a convert from Judaism, against a representative from the Jewish community. The authorities would compel the Jewish community to appear, and although the event was framed as a debate, often the rules would be constructed in such a way as to ensure that the Christian side would win. This engineered “win” would often be followed by violence against Jews, burning of Jewish texts, and forced conversions.

There were famous disputations held in Paris in 1240 and in Tortosa in 1413, but the most well-documented disputation was in Barcelona in 1263, held at the palace of King James I of Aragon between Dominican Friar Pablo Christiani and Rabbi Moses ben Nachman, one of the most famous Jewish scholars of the Middle Ages, known as Nachmanides or Ramban. Christiani was a convert from Judaism who hoped to use his knowledge of Jewish texts to triumph over Ramban, who was the chief rabbi of Catalonia. But Ramban did something unusual. He petitioned the king to allow him complete freedom of speech, something not often granted to Jewish participants in disputations, and the king, surprisingly, agreed. This was to be a confrontation like no other.

Christiani and Ramban engaged in heated debate for four days in July of 1463 over three questions: 1) Had the Messiah appeared or not? 2) Was the Messiah referenced by the Hebrew Prophets divine or human? And 3) Are Jews or Christians in possession of the true faith? Although Christiani brought passages from rabbinic texts to purportedly show that even the ancient rabbis acknowledged that Jesus was the Messiah, Ramban effectively dismissed these as distortions. Instead, he argued that since the prophecies of universal peace and harmony that were said to accompany the coming of the Messiah had not been fulfilled, the Messiah must not have come. And he marshalled the evidence of the Hebrew Prophets to argue that the Messiah was clearly considered to be a human being, not divine.

When the assembled Jewish community saw that the debate was turning in the direction of Ramban, they urged him to withdraw, fearing the consequences if the Jewish side were to actually “win” the disputation. But the king wanted the contest to continue, and so it did. At the end, Ramban having clearly triumphed, the king reportedly gave him 300 gold pieces and said that he had never before heard “an unjust cause so nobly defended.” He even attended the Sinagoga Major de Barcelona on the Shabbat after the debate and addressed the congregation, something unheard of in the medieval period. Despite the king’s regard, though, the Dominicans claimed victory, and to refute them Ramban published a complete transcript of the entire disputation, which is the source of much of our knowledge about it. Unfortunately, rather than settling the matter, the publication made it more heated, and the king was pressured into exiling Ramban from Barcelona, to which he never returned.

Given all that Ramban must have known about disputations and their dangers, as well as their inevitable conclusions of Christian victory and Jewish suffering, why did Ramban treat this disputation as he did? Why did he insist on complete freedom of speech, even when he knew any victory in the debate would be fleeting and its consequences possibly grave? Why did he take the risk of putting his considerable skills of interpretation and argument on display? Although he had little choice about whether he would participate or not, Ramban clearly made the calculated decision that standing up for the truth of his beliefs and the integrity of the Jewish community was worth the risks. In the face of rampant hatred of Jews, Ramban forcefully rebutted the calumnies that were being thrown at the Jewish people, lies that were being used to encourage violence against them and to force them to convert. Perhaps he hoped against hope that a considered look at the truth just might influence the king to lessen the oppression of the Jews within his kingdom.

The Christian authorities of Barcelona hoped that a victory in the disputation would undermine Jewish opposition to conversion and lead to their willing abandonment of Judaism. This it completely failed to do. Many Jews were forced into conversion by fear, but their identity as Jews remained intact, as testified by generations of *conversos* who kept family memories of Jewish practice alive. Judaism survived. But if the Jewish community hoped that a victory in the disputation would lead to a change in

the regime's attitude toward them, that hope was not fulfilled either. After Ramban was forced into exile, the king ordered offending passages from the Talmud removed and burned. The oppression of Jews in Barcelona intensified in the remainder of the 13th century and into the 14th, as Jews were blamed for famine and plague and were attacked in pogroms. And in the 15th century, the Jewish population of Barcelona was almost entirely wiped out by the Spanish Inquisition.

Despite the sad fate of the Jews of medieval Spain, Ramban's insistence on speaking truth to power stands as an example to us in a context in which we have far more influence and suffer from far fewer restrictions than the Jews of Barcelona. We live at a time of rising antisemitism, when centuries-old lies about Jews have been resurrected in order to justify hatred of the Jewish community and attacks against us. We, like the Jewish community of Barcelona, may think it is too risky to speak out publicly against these lies, but Ramban teaches us the opposite. The more that antisemitic propaganda is allowed to be shared and to spread unchallenged, the more dangerous it becomes. We must speak out against the lies being spread against Jews, as well as against the lies being spread against immigrants, LGBTQ people, and other minority communities to justify their oppression. Like Ramban, we have the skills to argue and to counter, and we also have relationships and power that we can use to spread our message of the true nature of Jews and of all of these groups. We cannot allow lies to stand. We must counter them with the light of our own truth.

III: Nazi Germany

Of course, for the Jewish people, Nazi Germany was the worst of the authoritarian regimes under which we have lived—and died—in modern times. Once in power, the Nazis stripped Jews of citizenship and declared them to be an alien race and the source of all of the nation's problems. Beginning in 1933, Jews were gradually deprived of their rights, including the right to vote, and were not allowed to hold public office or to work for the government. Jews were demonized and attacked, and after Jewish businesses and synagogues were ransacked on Kristelnacht in 1938, the Nazi regime began sending Jews to concentration camps and systematically murdering them in death camps. The previous gradual chipping away at the rights of Jews and the growth of antisemitic rhetoric had made it easier for the German public to accept the implementation of Hitler's "Final Solution." As we know too well, six million Jews, two thirds of the Jewish population of Europe, were murdered.

Incredibly, some of the great rabbis and teachers of European Jewry continued to teach and to write even in the midst of the destruction. One of the most famous of these is Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, who before the war was the Grand Rabbi of Piaseczno [PIA-SETCH-NOH], a town just south of Warsaw. Rabbi Shapira's son, daughter-in-law, and sister-in-law were killed in the bombing of Warsaw, and he with a few of his students was interned in the Warsaw Ghetto from 1939 to 1942. In the ghetto, Rabbi Shapira ran a secret synagogue and gave weekly sermons to his students on faith in the context of suffering. He collected these into a book, and before the liquidation of the ghetto the manuscript was buried with other documents in a large milk container that was found by a construction worker after the war. It was published in Israel in 1960 under the title "*Esh Kodesh*" – "Holy Fire" – and Rabbi Shapira became known by that name as well.

The writings of the *Esh Kodesh* do not focus on the upending of law, the antisemitic hatred, or the physical deprivation that Rabbi Shapira and his people are undergoing in the ghetto. Instead, he focuses on the spiritual struggle that he sees as the main challenge of their time. How can Jews remain in connection with God in the midst of their suffering? What meaning can still exist in a world in which

those in authority defy morality, justice, and the divine? The answers that the Esh Kodesh finds take different tacks.⁸ Sometimes he strives to maintain perfect faith even in the midst of the suffering that he is experiencing:

There are sufferings in the category of *mishpatim*, whose function and purpose we understand; but there are also sufferings in the category of *hukkim* whose purpose we do not understand and quite the opposite—we see their counterproductivity, as we’ve stated. To meet every *hukkah*, a strengthening of faith is required. The *hukkah* is without reason; but faith too is above reason so that when we bind ourselves with a perfect faith, to God [Who is] above reason, then even the *hukkah*-type calamities are transformed...⁹

Here Rabbi Shapira takes the rabbinic distinction between *mishpatim* – laws whose purpose we understand – and *hukkim* – laws whose purpose we cannot understand – and transposes it to suffering. When we confront sufferings that we cannot understand, a person of faith can strive to see them as having a holy purpose beyond reason, just as faith itself is beyond reason.

At other times, though, Rabbi Shapira’s faith in God’s inscrutable nature fails him, and as the author of the Biblical Book of Lamentations does, he cries out against God’s silence in the face of the terrible suffering he is witnessing:

When we hear the voices of young and old crying out under torture, crying out “*Ratevet! Ratevet!*” [Help! Help!], we know that this is their soul’s cry, and the cry of all our souls, to God, the compassionate [Parent]—“Help! Help!, while the breath of life is still within us!” It is indeed incredible that the world exists after so many screams. We are told that, regarding the Ten Martyrs [who we read about on Yom Kippur], the angels cried, “Is this the Torah, and this its reward?” Whereupon a voice answered from heaven, “If I hear another sound I will turn the world back to [primordial] water.”¹⁰ But now innocent children, pure angels, as well as adults, the saintly of Israel, are killed and slaughtered just because they are Jews, who are greater than angels. They fill the entire space of the universe with these cries and the world does not turn back to water, but remains in place as if, God forbid, [God] remained untouched?!¹¹

Here Rabbi Shapira expresses the depths of his pain not only at the extremes of suffering by his people at the hands of other human beings, but also at God’s seeming indifference, which adds torture on top of torture. What is the meaning of a world created and ordered by God if God is uncaring in the face of such pain?

Confronting the suffering wrought by an authoritarian regime, Rabbi Shapira often finds it difficult either to sustain perfect faith or to dwell in despair. So he finds another way to sustain himself in a world that sometimes seems empty of God’s presence. He draws on the idea that even when God

⁸ For this understanding of Rabbi Shapira’s work during the Holocaust, I am indebted to Avichai Zur’s article, “‘The Lord Hides in Inner Chambers’: The Doctrine of Suffering in the Theosophy of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira of Piaseczno” (*Dapim: Studies on the Holocaust*, Volume 25, Issue 1, 2011, pp. 183-237).

⁹ *Esh Kodesh* pp. 84-85, quoted and translated in Nehemiah Polen’s master work, *The Holy Fire: The Teachings of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto* (Aronson 1994), p. 81.

¹⁰ Rabbi Shapira is referring to the piyut [liturgical poem] *Eleh ezkerah* [“These I remember”], recited as part of the Martyrology service on Yom Kippur.

¹¹ *Esh Kodesh* p. 187, in Polen pp. 102-103.

may seem outwardly silent and uncaring, there is an “inner chamber” in which God feels the pain of those who suffer and can even strengthen them in the midst of their pain:

God...is to be found in [God’s] inner chambers weeping, so that one who pushes in and comes close to [God] by means of studying Torah, weeps together with God, and studies Torah with [God]. Just this makes the difference: the weeping, the pain which a person undergoes by [themselves], alone, may have the effect of breaking [them], of bringing [them] down, so that [they are] incapable of doing anything. But the weeping which the person does together with God—that strengthens [them]. [They weep]—and [are] strengthened; [they are] broken—but [find] courage to study and teach. It is hard to raise one’s self up, time and again, from the tribulations, but when one is determined, stretching [their] mind to connect to the Torah and divine service, then [they enter] the Inner Chambers where the Blessed Holy One is to be found; [they weep and wail] together with [God], as it were, and even [find] the strength to study Torah and serve [God].¹²

Even when God seems to withdraw from humanity, to perform *tzimtzum*, the contraction of God’s presence that is necessary for humans to have space to exist at all, God is never completely absent. Using prayer and reflection, we can access the inner chambers of God’s care and be strengthened, even in our tears and our pain. And this can save us from the paralysis that can otherwise afflict us, raising us up enough to find meaning again and to discover the ways we can still serve the divine.

Thank God, we are far from the horrible sufferings of the Holocaust. But Rabbi Shapira’s words speak powerfully to us at a time when we do see people acting under authoritarian regimes in ways that disregard others’ humanity and flout the laws mandating care for the stranger, compassion for the poor, and so much else that is central to our understanding of Torah. As he strived to do, we must reject both a blind faith that might make us passive in the face of these violations and a despair that would freeze our response. Instead, we must reach out to the divine in the inner chamber, weeping with God at what human beings are making of the world God created, and feel ourselves strengthened. We need to turn to our spiritual lives to give us the courage to speak and to act in ways that bring God out of the inner chambers and reveal the divine will that honors all humanity, created in God’s image.

Closing

We are not living in Imperial Rome, in medieval Europe, or during the Holocaust. We are living at a time when the Jewish people have more freedom and more power than any other period in our long history. But in a time of authoritarianism, we need the teachings and the lessons that Jews who lived under those past authoritarian powers have to teach us. Like the ancient rabbis, we must preserve our understandings of what is right and what is wrong, what is just and what is unjust, what is compassionate and what is cruel, in the face of regimes that seek to deny the values that have animated the Jewish people for millennia. Like Ramban and the medieval sages, we must speak out against the lies that vilify minorities and justify their oppression, including those rising voices that are speaking out against Jews and praising those who would destroy us. And like Rabbi Shapira and the sages of the Holocaust, we must renew our spiritual connections to steady us at a time when our world is being rocked, to strengthen our hearts to see the way ahead, and to give us the sustenance we need to act in the face of despair. When we stand against authoritarianism, we do not stand alone. All of the past

¹² *Esh Kodesh* p. 179, in Polen p. 119.

generations of Jews who found ways to withstand the authoritarian regimes of their times stand with us.
May we have the insight, the courage, and the spirit to stand with them.

L'shanah tovah tikateivu – may we all inscribe ourselves for a good year.