

I.

Rabbi Zev Gold was one of the great influencers of America Zionism in the Pre-War era. He emigrated from Germany at the age of 18 in 1907 and served as a community Rabbi building a number of famous institutions, including Yeshivas Torah Vo'daas in Brooklyn. It wasn't until 1932 that he became the President of American Mizrahi and traveled the country in support of the Land of Israel until his death in 1956.

Among the great friendships that Rabbi Gold cultivated during his travels was with Rabbi Yaakov Ruderman, the founding Rosh Yeshiva of Ner Israel in Baltimore. Although they were an odd pair, a Zionist leader and a traditional European Rosh Yeshiva, the two would speak often and Rabbi Gold would visit Rabbi Ruderman on each of his trips to Maryland on behalf of Mizrahi.

Rabbi Yissochar Frand records in one his books that on one such trip to Maryland, presenting at a Mizrahi event, Rabbi Gold was actually attacked for his relationship with the Rosh Yeshiva. Someone in the audience shouted out: *Ruderman nisht kein mizrachnik* – Ruderman is no Zionist! To which Rabbi Gold sharply replied:

“Rabbi Ruderman and I disagree on but one mitzvah, I imagine you and I disagree on dozens more.”

II

Our Parsha opens with the pasuk: וְהָיָה עִקֵב תִּשְׁמָעוּן אֶת הַמְשַׁפְּטִים הָאֵלֶּה *if* you will listen. But the Midrash Tanchuma suggests that Eikev has a second level of interpretation; *eikev* is the heel of the foot– like the name of Yaakov Avinu, clasp onto the heel of Esav. David HaMelech writes "עוֹן עִקְבֵי יִסְבְּנִי" – *the sins of my heel will ensnare me*. For all the great mitzvot he did, Dovid worried about the small ones he might have overlooked. אִם הַמְצוֹת הַקְּלוֹת שְׂאֵדָם דַּשׁ בְּעִקְבֵינוּ – the mitzvot that we trample with our heels.

Ours is a Parsha of broad strokes and mission statements. In his final public address, maybe the most important speech of his life, Moshe Rabbeinu articulates the language of Shema, the notion of Yirat HaShem, the power of Teshuva and the centrality of the land of Israel. How powerful it is, at this crucial moment, that our sages call us back to the small mitzvot, the lashon hara, the tzitzis, the mezuzah, tzedakah the

kind of things on the lower rungs of our priority list that could easily be overlooked in the process of nation building. In doing so they challenge us to not abandon any of the 613 mitzvot, even when the most noble causes seem so much more worthy of our attention.

III

We seem to find ourselves in a world debating the weightiest of issues in many different sectors. In politics we debate the nuclear Iranian regime and how to curb terrorism in America and Israel. In the religious sphere, we are faced with differing policies on homosexuality, on the role of women in our communities. In America we're fighting over gun control, racism in Law Enforcement, planned parenthood – the list goes on, the debates grow ever more fierce.

The trend that is most worrisome in each of these debates is not the issues themselves, each of them must be had, but the danger lies in the simplicity of our rhetoric. It's either a good deal or a bad deal, you're either pro-choice or pro-life, for women or against them. As if no middle ground exists for either party. You watch people wearing t-shirts that say "black lives matter" or standing at rallies holding signs that say "*V'haota lei'acha kamocha*" and "*lo tirsach*". These are not compelling arguments. In doing so the other side always seems, foolish, poorly thought-out, bigots or worse. In the era of internet debate, we align ourselves so superficially and so succinctly, with just a hashtag or a tweet in 140 characters or less, that hardly gives voice to the complexity of each issue and seriously underestimates the perspective of the other side.

In this lies the root of the vicious contemporary debate. When each side of a conversation oversimplifies its values and the values of its opponent, it tramples on the Eikev, on those values that are objectively true and present, on the counter-points that are valid, even if in our opinion they need be pushed aside. We don't overrule them, we dismiss them entirely.

IV

The Gemara in Sanhedrin describes the necessary qualities a judge on the highest court should possess in order to earn his position: he should be distinguished looking, wise and experienced. But Rav Yehuda says in the name of Rav there is an additional skill:

אמר רב יהודה אמר רב: אין מושיבין בסנהדרין אלא מי שיודע לטהר את השרץ מן התורה.

(תלמוד בבלי מסכת סנהדרין דף יז עמוד א)

We only appoint a judge who can purify the insect through biblical proofs. Anyone who knows anything about a Sheretz, knows just how impure it is. Surely, the sheretz is the paradigm of tumah, he *was* treif and always will be. The Sefas Emes explains that the Judge can never overlook the aspects of his being that are positive – that have potential, even when those attributes are strongly outweighed by the forgone conclusion of his eternal impurity. To hold passionate opinions is in the best interest of both sides, but to under appreciate the nuanced ideas of our opponents is to do a disservice to us both.

In a famous passage, the Gemara in Shabbos records a series of converts that were rejected by Shammai and embraced by Hillel. The most famous of them all requests to be taught all of Torah while standing on one foot. Shammai of course throws him out – *dochpo b'amas habinyan*; Hillel converts him. He says to this simple man, presumably still standing on one of his two feet:

בא לפני הלל, גייריה. אמר לו: דעלך סני לחברך לא תעביד - זו היא כל התורה כולה, ואידך - פירושה הוא, זיל גמור.

[תלמוד בבלי מסכת שבת דף לא עמוד א]

“That which is unpleasant to you, you shall not do to your friend. This is the entire Torah, the rest is commentary.” But the last two words of the story, often overlooked, are the most powerful as Hillel concludes, “Now – zil gemor!” Now go learn it all. The goal may be clear, but path has much to be discovered.

V

In this Parsha Moshe Rabbeinu sets the foundations for the values that are indispensable in framing the mission and destiny of the Jewish people, but at the same time, he acknowledges the complexity and the competing values we will inevitably face. Love of your neighbor may conflict with his disappointing decisions in life, your passion for progress may conflict with the ethic of tradition. Your impulse for generosity will be curbed by a sense of pragmatism. In each case, Hillel said: Go learn – debate and even disagree, but never trample the mitzvot, the variables and the ethics that remain on the table. And in the heat of the contemporary climate, this is a powerful message to rethink.

Many of you remember how Rabbi Jung would remind his congregants – to disagree agreeably. It's more than just the decency others deserve in conversation, but it's the key to successful results in everyone's best interest.

דברים פרשת ואתחנן - עקב פרק ז
(יב) וְהָיָה עִקֵב תִּשְׁמְעוּן אֶת הַמְּשֻׁפָּטִים הָאֵלֶּה וְיִשְׁמְרֶתֶם וְעֲשִׂיתֶם אֹתָם וְשָׁמַר יִקְוֶה אֶל הַיְיָ לְךָ אֶת־הַבְּרִית וְאֶת־הַחֶסֶד
אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לְאַבְרָהָם:

רש"י דברים פרשת ואתחנן - עקב פרק ז
(יב) והיה עקב תשמעון - אם המצות הקלות שאדם דש בעקביו תשמעון:

מדרש תנחומא (בובר) פרשת עקב
[א] והיה עקב תשמעון וגו' (דברים ז יב). זש"ה למה אירא בימי רע עון עקבי יסבני (תהלים מט ו), יתברך שמו של הקב"ה שנתן תורה לישראל שבה שש מאות ושלוש עשרה מצות קלות וחמורות, ואין בני אדם משגיחין בהן, אלא משליכים אותם תחת עקבותיהם, כלומר שהן קלות, לכך דוד היה מתירא מיום הדין, והיה אומר רבון העולמים איני מתיירא מן המצות החמורות שבתורה שהן חמורות, ממה אני מתיירא מן הקלות, שמא עברתי על אחת מהן, אם עשיתי אם לאו, מפני שהיא קלה, ואתה אמרת הוי זהיר במצוה קלה ככמצוה חמורה, לכך אמר למה אירא בימי רע.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת שבת דף לא עמוד א
שוב מעשה בנכרי אחד שבא לפני שמאי, אמר לו: גירני על מנת שתלמדני כל התורה כולה כשאני עומד על רגל אחת. דחפו באמת הבנין שבידו. בא לפני הלל, גיריה. אמר לו: דעלך סני לחברך לא תעביד - זו היא כל התורה כולה, ואידך - פירושה הוא, זיל גמור.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת סנהדרין דף יז עמוד א
אמר רבי יוחנן: אין מושיבין בסנהדרי אלא בעלי קומה, ובעלי חכמה, ובעלי מראה, ובעלי זקנה, ובעלי כשפים, ויודעים בשבעים לשון, שלא תהא סנהדרי שומעת מפי המתורגמן. אמר רב יהודה אמר רב: אין מושיבין בסנהדרין אלא מי שיודע לטהר את השרץ מן התורה.