

PARSHAT RE'EH
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The Chinese curse: “May you live in interesting times” could have easily been written for this period of history. I am not really referring to the ups and downs of the stock market though, easily, one could talk about what all that does to the human psyche. Instead, after returning from a short visit to Israel, most of the time spent visiting with my children and grandchildren, I want to discuss some of the very interesting issues that have recently occurred in Israel and may ultimately have an effect on world Jewry.

In the middle of June, Yitzhak Alrov went shopping in the grocery store and noticed that the price of cottage cheese had risen to a rather high price. Over the course of the next couple of weeks over 90,000 people joined in a Facebook boycott protest he led against cottage cheese prices. The boycott went all the way to the Knesset and then the Prime Minister’s office. The government asked the dairies to lower their prices on cottage cheese.

A few weeks later, a woman in Tel Aviv decided that she needed to protest her eviction from her Tel Aviv apartment because she couldn’t afford the rent. She pitched a tent on Rothschild Boulevard in Tel Aviv and was soon joined by hundreds of others. Over the course of the next few weeks, protests and rallies were held in the major cities and in the periphery. Over 300,000 people turned up Saturday night a few weeks ago in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. The following week tens of thousands appeared in Haifa, Be’er Sheva and other cities and towns around Israel. Two weeks ago, when I was in Israel on Saturday night, I walked down the steps from my children’s apartment to the main park in the City of Modiin. The park was filled with people who had come to make their voices heard to the ruling authorities. The major protest statement of the leaders was “the people want social justice.”

Tent cities have been set up in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem to continue the protest and bring the message to both the common Israeli and the Knesset. Last week in Jerusalem I walked by the Jerusalem tent protest on a Tuesday afternoon. It was being held in a small park at the top of Ben Yehuda Street and, in addition to individuals living in tents, there was a large protest tent with individuals present looking for people to sign petitions and make their voices heard.

Across the Arab world, the Arab spring has brought a great deal of violence and a demand for regime change. In Israel, the protests have been peaceful, respectful and essentially non-political. People from all parties and walks of life are present at these demonstrations.

What is it that they are demanding? They are asking for a government that is more egalitarian and in tune to the needs of ordinary middle class Israelis more than it is currently to those of the ultra-Orthodox in the political sphere and the super rich in the

economic sphere. They are asking for a government that embodies higher Jewish values and not simply concern for its own political welfare.

Protestors are characterized as typical middle to upper class young professionals in their 20's and 30's, most with higher education. They seek an Israel which is more responsive to the needs of the population at-large and not simply concerned with narrow political interests.

When I asked my family and friends about the protest, they said there is indeed a measure of truth to the protestors' concerns. Housing costs are rather high for young people starting out in life. There is a gap between those who have made it and those who are struggling. Education, which is part of the culture of every Jewish community, has become quite expensive, especially on the college level. Gas and food staples have risen in price. And those who work in Israel cannot keep up as their salaries have not risen in commensurate value. During the course of the last few weeks there have been doctor strikes around the country to express dissatisfaction with doctor's salaries. Teachers going back to work at the beginning of September are not satisfied with their salaries and across the board there is concern with the escalating cost of living for all.

The protestors could easily look at this week's Torah portion for some support for their positions. The Torah tells us: "If, however, there is a needy person among you do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy kinsman. Rather, you must open your hand and lend him sufficient for whatever he needs." The Hebrew word that is used is "evyon," which can be translated as needy rather than poor. If a person is poor then we see his needs as economic sustenance. However, if a person is needy this may go beyond simply economic issues and may deal with issues of self-worth, dignity and social as well as physical well-being. To be without money is difficult, but one can be as needy of support and assistance if one does not feel worthy of respect and dignity. The Torah tells us that we must reach out to these people in whatever condition they may find themselves and be ready to support them, to make sure that the inequalities of society be surmounted and that each person be valued in and of himself or herself.

The protestors are not only following the Biblical mandate. They are also following the Zionist mandate, as well. Zionism, as the national movement of the Jewish people, acknowledged that as its goal was not only a nation state where Jews could live as a majority culture. Many classical Zionist voices such as Theodor Herzl, Rav Kook, Ber Borochov and Valdimir Jabotinsky also had visions of Israel as an exemplary society, where social solidarity was championed to create a new reality for the Jewish people under the conditions of sovereignty.

Israel has gone through many revisions in its society in the last number of years, including the move from a socialist welfare state to much more of a capitalist one. While its economy continues to be strong there have been people left behind on the road to a Western style economy. It is this that has motivated the current protest and while non-political in nature up to this point may spur in time a political movement.

While I was on the plane last Thursday terrorists attacked Israelis on the way to Eilat. Eight people were killed and many injured. Rockets have been fired into Ashdod, Ashkelon and Be'er Sheva and there has been the loss of life and property. It is difficult under these kinds of conditions to know what will happen to the social protests since all of Israel is concerned when terrorism rears its ugly head and Israelis become victims once again of murder and terror. However, the idealism of the protestors should not be lost and their vying for a more equitable society, one that takes into consideration all people and not just those of a certain political bent, should be a lesson for our society as well.

We watched, a few weeks ago, played out in the political arena in this country, a game of chicken on the issue of the debt ceiling. While I do not know, having taken only one Economics 101 class in college, the best way to solve the problem and I do not want to get into a political discussion, it was very clear to me that what was important for those sitting in Washington was their own personal welfare as politicians and that of their political party. The needs of the populace at-large was put on the back burner and party politics played supreme on both sides of the aisle. It was an acrimonious partisan debate and I think all of us around the country were incensed by the nature of it. One would hope that elected officials would put the needs and interests of the general population above those of party politics, but then I guess I am simply much too idealistic. Perhaps what we need in this country is the equivalent of a cottage cheese protest and tent cities to remind the politicians that what is at stake is the welfare of our society and the values of this great nation.

Moses, in the context of our Torah portion, is speaking to the Children of Israel as they are about to enter the Promised Land. He knows that they are to set up a society of their own and he reminds them of the importance of making it as equitable as possible, one based on social justice and moral values. The Zionist Movement as it began to dream of a return to the Promised Land and the creation of a nation state had the same dream. We are not there yet. We have a ways to go. The call for social justice is on-going. In Israel and in this country the journey to an exemplary society is long, arduous and difficult, but it forever must remain our goal and our vision.

I do not know where the Israeli protests will lead and I am not sure that in the next year partisan politics can be put aside in this country, but I am convinced that the standards of the Torah must be upheld as a vision for a democratic society based upon the highest values of equality and social justice for all. This must be the goal for which we all strive.