

My community # 2- Is the passion there?

פתיחה, "צדקת הצדיק" לרבינו צדוק מלובלין

"ראשית כניסת האדם לעבודת ה' צריך להיות בחפזון כמו שמצינו בפסח מצרים, שהיה נאכל בחפזון - ולא פסח דורות. מפני שהתחלה לנתק עצמו מכל תאוות העולם הזה שהוא מקושר בהם, צריך לשמור הרגע שמתעורר בו רצון ה' ולחפוז על אותו רגע למהר לצאת מהם אולי יוכל, ואח"כ שוב ילך במתינות ולאט כדין פסח דורות."

DEVELOPING A TORAH PERSONALITY. Based on addresses by my rebbe, Harav Aharon Lichtenstein, Adapted by Rav Reuven Ziegler, LECTURE #12-Centrist Orthodoxy: A Spiritual Accounting¹

...INSTILLING PASSION

I spoke before about a passionate concern for Torah. The key, indeed, is the passion—passion which is important in its own right as a component of *avodat Hashem*, and passion which holds the key to the development of other components, in the sense of “*Yirato kodemet le-chokhmato*” (Avot 3:9), where one’s fear of Heaven is prior to his wisdom. In order to attain that passion, we as educators should be ready to sacrifice—and even sacrifice considerably—a measure of objective intellectual accomplishment. The sense that, indeed, the words of the Torah are “*chayyeinu veorekh yameinu*, our life and the length of our days,” is far more important than the actual knowledge. Certainly, for so many of our students, who in the first place are not going to become *talmidei chakhamim*, love of Torah is far more important than knowledge of Torah.

The Lubavitchers like to relate that at a certain age, the Ba'al ha-Tanya decided he had to go to Vilna to learn from the Gra. En route, he was met by an older person (the Chassidim denote him as the prophet Eliyahu) who asked him, “Where are you going?” He said, “I’m going to Vilna to learn from the Gra.” The elder said to him, “You know how to learn somewhat, but you don’t know how to pray at all. Better go to the Mezeritcher Maggid.”

Without passing judgment on this particular encounter, let us ask ourselves: What is the more acute problem in our Centrist community? I submit that, on a competitive basis, we might do better in the area of learning than in the area of prayer. I knew a man who was identified as an Orthodox rabbi but, ideologically, was essentially Conservative. Someone once asked him, “Why don’t you identify with the Conservatives?” His response was, “How can I go to the Conservatives? They don’t cry at *Ne’ila*” (the final prayer on Yom Kippur). Let us ask ourselves: Does our Centrist community cry sufficiently at *Ne’ila*?

¹ <http://www.vbm-torah.org/archive/develop/12develop.htm>

It is only by instilling this kind of passion that we can avoid the lapse of Centrism into mere compromise. There are times when one must compromise, and this itself is an issue between us and the Right: How are we to gauge the qualitative as opposed to the quantitative element? They are the champions of the qualitative, *shemen zayit zakh*—adherents of the position which, in a magnificent sentence in his *Civil Disobedience*, Thoreau presented that, “It is not so important that many should be as good as you, as that there be some absolute goodness somewhere; for that will leaven the whole lump.” We have a much greater commitment to the quantitative element, to reaching large segments of the community, even if we only reach them partially and the accomplishments are limited.

Even if we must, in a certain sense, compromise, it cannot be out of default. I remember years back reading a very perceptive remark of the Lubavitcher Rebbe; he said, “The problem with the Conservatives is not that they compromise—it is that they make a principle out of compromise.” We cannot, God forbid, make a principle out of compromise, nor can we lapse into it by default. But if we are to avoid lapsing, then that passionate commitment must be kept burning. It is only when we can attain that passionate commitment that Centrism as a vibrant and legitimate spiritual force can be sustained. Only by generating profound conviction can we sustain ourselves from within and be inured to onslaughts from without: conviction of the overall importance of Torah, and of the worth—and there is worth!—of our own interpretation of it.

There are several lines in a poem written by an Irish poet, William Butler Yeats, which, as I survey the contemporary scene, often haunt me terribly:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart: the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned.
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

I have no use whatsoever, in our context, for the comparative terms “best” and “worst,” and I surely do not, with reference to the people I am talking about, present a categorical assertion that they “lack all conviction.” But it is beyond question that good people in our camp lack the kind of passion and intensity with which they are being attacked.

Kana'ut (zealotry) is, among us, a dirty word. But I believe we should learn to distinguish between two senses of *kana'ut*. I mentioned R. Aharon Kotler *zt"l* before. In terms of the objective positions he maintained, he was far more liberal than his contemporary disciples. But he maintained his positions with a

dynamism, a fire, an energy, a passion which is almost incredible. To have seen him simply, as *Chazal* say, “from behind” (*Eruvin* 13b), was an experience—he was a dynamo! There was within him a *kana’ut* not for extreme positions, but for *his* positions.