

Shoftim 2015

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick 8/22/15

Earlier this summer Helene and I had the chance to spend a week in Spain. We've wanted to go there for quite some time. And in many ways it is a lovely country with fine art and music and wine, and yes, even vegetarian food. It is such an interesting country, with such a rich Jewish history that later this year we are going to have a whole Shabbaton weekend on the Jews of Spain and the Sephardic Tradition. Then later, next summer, our Hazzan will be leading a trip to Jewish Spain. It's all very exciting.

But in some ways, Spain is a tough country for Jews to visit. From a Jewish standpoint, it's certainly not the "Golden Age of Spain" anymore. In fact, in a very real sense, Jewish Spain never recovered from the Inquisition 500 years ago. We went on a free walking tour of Barcelona and at one point we stopped at a church, of which there are of course a great many. And our guide, who was not Jewish, stopped and said, "We can date the building of this church with a great deal of accuracy, and here's why. Note the secondary usage of stones..." He pointed and there, among the many stones that made up a huge wall probably 60 feet high, were several stones with Hebrew chiseled into them. Those, he said, were from the Jewish quarter that used to occupy this spot. In 1492, the Jews were expelled and the neighborhood torn down. All that was left of the original Jewish area were stones now used in the wall of a church. Sad...

In studying this week's parsha, I came across a comment by Don Yitzchak Abravanel, a famous Rabbi who not only lived through the Spanish Inquisition, but actually knew King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella personally. He appeared in their court on a regular basis. In 1492, the very year that neighborhood was razed, he tried but failed, to have the Spanish expulsion decree revoked. So, by way of introduction, let's just say Abravanel knew something about Kings and Queens. The Torah portion this week teaches: "When you enter the land the Lord your Gd is giving you and have taken possession of it, and settled in it, and you say, "Let us set a king over us like all the nations around us", be sure to appoint over you the king the Lord your Gd chooses." Now some great Sages interpret this as a commandment: "You MUST appoint a king." That's the way Rambam reads it. Ibn Ezra said it gave the Jewish People PERMISSION to appoint a king if they wanted to do so. But Abravanel was far more wary of royalty than they were. Having lived through the intrigues and duplicities of several royal courts he was convinced that political enterprise was corrupting. He argued in favor of democratically elected councils (can you imagine!?) but of course the king and queen would hear nothing of it. And so, with a sense of sadness in his words, Abravanel writes that this section of Torah is simply recognition that people are willing to give away their rights to self-determination by appointing a king, and the need for this commandment was a sign of human weakness.

So this makes me wonder: Why would anyone want to give away their ability to have a representational government? Why would you WANT to have a King, a Supreme leader, even a dictator? Most people, myself included, fail to remember that from 1939 to 1975, Spain was a dictatorship ruled by Francisco Franco. 1975 and a Western nation was ruled by a dictator! Why would anyone put up with that, let alone voluntarily ASK for it?! (Which is not to say that no one fought the dictatorship. They did. But the majority went with the flow of fascism.)

And here I think Abravanel offers us some keen insight. What I think he is saying is that here is a natural tendency among people to want someone else to make the hard decisions for them and therefore we voluntarily cede power to someone else. We consciously, or even subconsciously empower someone else to make decisions for us so that we can complain about the decisions they make. It is far easier to complain about what someone is telling you to do, to blame your circumstances on powers outside of your control, than it is to take full responsibility for your own destiny. And despots bank on this. It's easier to go with the flow, even while complaining all the time, than it is to chart your own course and swim upstream.

And what is true in politics is often true in our own lives as well. Sometimes it is just easier to cede control, to throw up your hands and say, "*So what can I do!?*" than it is to take responsibility here and now for your own present and future. Sometimes it's simply easier to complain than it is to take charge of your own life. And so, consciously or unconsciously, we cede the power to make decisions, the power to make changes, to other people and to circumstance beyond our control.

But as we approach the High Holidays we need to rethink this. If the High Holidays are really going to be effective IN our lives then we need to take responsibility FOR our own lives. We need to have the courage to take more charge of our destiny internally, because the power of thought and the power of purpose, the inner drive to live a meaningful life, can never be taken away from you. Not by anyone. You are part of a tenacious people. No king, no queen, no government, no dictator, no Inquisition could break the will of the Jewish People. That courage is in-bred; it is in us. We need to find that tenacity within ourselves, to build on it, and to do the hard work now that will make the holidays we will share together very soon all the more meaningful.