

Is risk-taking Jewish?

God spoke to Moses saying, ‘Also take a census of Gershon’s descendents by families...’ (Num. 4:21-22)

Why was Moses told ‘also’ to count the Gershonites? Might we have excluded the family of Gershon, if the the Torah had not explicitly commanded us to count them as well?

‘Indeed,’ says the Izbicy rebbe. ‘If the Torah hadn’t endorsed them by telling us that they are also included in the census, I might have thought that the Gershon way is not a valid Jewish way of serving God.’¹

The Tribe of Levi comprises three families. None of them are by nature risk takers, but the Gershon family are fearfully cautious - to the point where one might rightfully challenge their commitment to God.

What does risk taking have to do with one’s commitment to God?

R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi (1745–1812) wrote many books on a wide variety of subjects. Some of them were published and have become classics of Hasidic literature, while others were purposely suppressed by the author himself for reasons he kept private. Two such manuscripts had been bound side-by-side into a single volume at the rabbi’s behest and occupied a place of provocative curiosity in his library. Hasidim would gingerly remove this volume from the bookshelf, just to hold it in their hands and feel the weight of its thwarted potential and mysterious holiness. For on the front cover in the bold and unmistakable hand of the rebbe himself was the warning, ‘Whosoever dares open the cover to glance at these pages will lose his place in the World-to-Come - signed, Shneur Zalman.’

The book’s two spines only added to its mystique. It spoke volumes without ever having its words read. The mere shape of it and the feel of its vellum cover were enough to inspire awe in the Hasidim. They would kiss it reverently and return it to its place. The rebbe obviously knew what he was doing. The manuscript was not for everyone’s eyes to peruse, they would respect it all the more.

Disaster struck: during the Napoleonic Wars the rebbe’s house and library were destroyed in a bombardment. Looking through the wreckage of his library and its precious collection of holy books, searching for some unburned texts, the rebbe turned to his son, Dovber.

‘D’you know, if you could remind me of even one teaching out of the book with the two spines, it would revive my whole spirit. Losing my library this way has been so traumatic that I cannot even remember a word of what I wrote in those two manuscripts.’

‘I’m sorry I cannot help you,’ replied his son. ‘I never dared look beyond the covers of the book. None of us did.’

‘Why not?’ inquired the old rabbi. ‘Didn’t you want to know what was written therein?’

‘Naturally I was curious. But I honored your wishes, and heeded the stern warnings you wrote on the cover.’

Rabbi Shneur Zalman interrogated his son for some time, hoping all the while that Dovber would admit to having delved into the book at some juncture. When it became quite clear that Dovber was not prevaricating, that he had never seen the contents of the book, Shneur Zalman became incensed.

‘What sort of a Hasid are you?’ he demanded. ‘What sort of Jew isn’t prepared to risk his place in the World-to-Come just to catch a glimpse of some new way of worshipping God? Why, you might have discovered a whole new path to walk on your spiritual journey!’

My impression on reading that story, is that Shneur Zalman’s greatest disappointment of all was the discovery that his son was not prepared to take a major risk to uncover a new sacred mystery, to unveil a new Divine Face.

1 Mei Hashiloach - Naso [2]

Every time we discover something new in the world or inside ourselves, a Face of God is revealed where it never existed before. Because God is only revealed when we learn something fresh and for the first time. So where does our spiritual timidity come from, and what causes us to cleave to the same old same old instead of discovering new ways to express ourselves and connect to God?

An answer can be found back in the dawn of Jewish history, in the story of Shechem and Dinah (Gen. Cap. 34). Shechem was holding Dinah captive in his home, when Simeon and Levi broke in to free her. They killed Shechem and all the men in the city who'd been recovering from their mass circumcision, but Dinah refused to leave. 'I would be alone,' she said. 'No one will want me after being with Shechem.'

Levi had demurred, because he had too many qualms and scruples about marrying his sister. Had Simeon not been there to promise to marry her, Levi might have been forced by his misgivings to abandon their sister in the city forever. Simeon swore that he would marry her, and so she left the city with him².

Simeon said, 'What! Should I accuse myself of incestuous inclinations, God forbid? Of course I'll marry you.'

Levi's choices are dictated by his personality, his spiritual gestalt. He is a channel and conduit for *SHEFA* - divine superabundance. In a sense, Levi is a polished article, a perfectly finished product of Jacob's parenting. Levi's grandchildren, Miriam, Aaron and Moses become talented leaders and priests because they are simple expressions of his personality. They don't need refining or assaying in some fiery crucible, as other Jewish leaders have required to become worthy. Levi's role among the Twelve Tribes is already decided and perfected in childhood.

Simeon's is not. Faced with Dinah's ultimatum, he gives himself the benefit of the doubt and assumes his motives are clear and pure. Thus he triggers the Tribe of Simeon's historical narrative around matters of sexuality.

Simeon gambles, Levi never does. While the Tribe of Levi may currently occupy a higher status than that of Simeon, it still remains to be seen what will become of Simeon's gamble - will he win in the end? If his gamble pays off, then Simeon will achieve a much higher level than Levi the non-gambler. The reason being, if you are not prepared to risk something precious upon the result of a venture with an uncertain outcome, you can't win any spiritual dividends. You cannot amass any profit or advantage if you keep your capital and your spiritual kernel intact. Without first being planted somewhere and left to rot or germinate, it won't grow and fruit - nothing does.

Being committed to God does not always mean looking to protect your place in the World-to-Come. There's more to being Jewish than taking care of the distant future, no matter how important one's future place in the Garden of Eden. If my relationship with God is fixated on ensuring myself a good and comfortable place in the World-to-Come, it is not God I hold in greatest esteem - it's me.

Isaac loved Esau, preferring him to Jacob, not because Esau was the better man but because he was a gambler and a risk-taker. Jacob secluded himself inside his tent, refusing to risk spoiling his holiness by interacting with the polluted world. Isaac figured that while Esau's behavior was provocative and troubling, there was at least some possibility of it working itself out for the best. Perhaps some new form of worshiping God might grow from it, which would mean Esau is ultimately greater than Jacob, who risked nothing. It was only on discovering that Jacob was the biggest risk-taker of all, that Isaac acknowledged Jacob's right to the blessings: Jacob pulled off a daring and audacious gamble to cheat Esau out of the blessings by impersonating him. Jacob risked being cursed by his father instead of blessed. Isaac would never

2 בראשית רבה פ' י"א: א"ר הונא אמרה ואני אנה הוליך את חרפתי עד שנשבע לה שמעון שהוא נוטלה

have directed all his love at Esau if had known all along that when the moment came to risk everything on a single throw of the dice, Jacob would not hesitate to gamble.

Abraham took a big risk when, on hearing the news that his nephew Lot had been taken hostage, he chased after the miscreants and waged war against them. He wondered whether he was doing the right thing, putting himself in danger to save of Lot, a wicked man who preferred life as a Sodomite citizen to a nomad existence in Canaan. Abraham's gamble paid off in the end, because the Messiah springs from that very wickedness, through Ruth the Moabite to whom Lot gave life.

We took a very big risk when we came to Aaron and demanded that he fashion us a god to walk in front of us. But it paid off in the end and we got what we wanted - God in the Tabernacle.

Mordechai took a huge risk, provoking Haman's Jew-hatred and endangering the entire Jewish nation, just for the sake of his personal beliefs. As did the Maccabees when they took up arms against the Selucid Greeks. R. Johanan ben Zakai took a tremendous risk in persuading the Sanhedrin to replace animal sacrifice with prayer, setting the foundations of Rabbinicism and modern Judaism. R. Judah the Prince took a risk when he codified the Mishna, putting on paper what had been by law and precedent a purely Oral Torah. He has been vindicated by history. We are so sure he did the right thing, that we have rationalized his breaking the law as being 'necessary at the time', which is just another way of saying after the fact, 'you cannot argue with success.' R. Judah gambled and won - but he might have lost. Jewish history is replete with spectacular losers such as Bar Kochba and R. Akiba in his revolt against the Romans. The Karaites lost, as did the Sabbateans, and of course perhaps the most catastrophic gamble of all, the gradual adoption of institutionalized rabbinic pacifism, that spiritual path of not-making-waves or learning the arts of war which resulted in the annihilation of European Jewry.

Zionism arose in late nineteenth-century Europe, influenced, some say, by the nationalist ferment sweeping that continent. The overwhelming consensus among Orthodox Jews was (and in some cases remains) that Zionism is incompatible with authentic Judaism, and is comparable to the Israelite worship of the Golden Calf. They claim it is not a spiritual path, and does not lead to the worship or glory of God, and that the Jewish people follow its siren call at their peril, to be wrecked on the jagged rocks of history.

Now history hasn't had the last word yet, but I'd hazard the guess that Zionism is going to prove a winner. I'd gamble on it.

Who in the middle of the 18th century would have guessed that Beshtian Hasidism would take the Orthodox Jewish world by storm and become the dominant paradigm by the 21st century? Nobody, that's who. Most expected it to shatter itself in its fervor and passion against the impregnable bastions of rabbinic privilege. As little as twenty years ago Carlebach was merely a person, a man, a name. Today it's a way of *davening* - worshiping! All over the world there are Carlebach Shuls and Minyanim. Shlomo Carlebach encountered massive, coordinated opposition from institutions and leaders, objecting to his innovations and his risk taking. Again, history has not had the last word, but he single-handedly changed the flavor and the very taste of Judaism in our mouths.

So why are we generally so timid in our spirituality, frightened of exploring new paths to God? That part of us which is Levi insists on clarity and freedom from ambiguity. We are risk-averse, preferring the easier option, the old way of doing things. The trouble is that even according to Levi's way of thinking and doing things, Gershon is a bit extreme. When Gershon encounters a fork in the path and needs to make a choice, or state his preferred alternative, he chooses not to choose. He simply sits at the fork in the road and does nothing, immobilized by his desire to live in a risk-free world. Now I ask you, what sort of commitment to God can you have if you are obsessed with keeping all your pages clean, your tickets unused and your mileage at zero?

Comes the Torah and tells us that even this is an authentic path to God. They also deserve to be counted among their brothers. Fear and paralysis are also a legitimate response to God.