

To Protest or Not to Protest



Devarim (Deuteronomy) 16:20	דברים טז:כ
Justice, justice you shall pursue; so that you will live and you will inherit the land that YHVH your God gives to you.	צֶדֶק צֶדֶק תִּרְדּוּף לַמַּעַן תִּחְיֶה וְיִרְשֶׁתָּ אֶת- הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר-יְיָ אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לָךְ;

- The first part of this *pasuk* (verse) has become a common refrain. Why do you think it is important to pursue justice?
- The second part of this *pasuk* gives its own reason for pursuing justice. What is the reason given? How can this reason be understood as something other than simple self-interest?

“The pursuit OF righteousness must also be pursued WITH righteousness”

— Rav Elya Meir Bloch as quoted by Rabbi Yissocher Frand at <http://torah.org/torah-portion/ravfrand-5764-shoftim/?printversion=1> (Retrieved January 30, 2017)

Rav Bloch picks up on the fact that the *pasuk* could have said *tzedek* (justice, righteousness) only once and answers the question of why it says *tzedek* twice.

- What is Rav Bloch’s explanation for why the *pasuk* says *tzedek* twice?
- How does his explanation deepen the meaning of the *pasuk*?
- What are practical implications of his interpretation?



To Protest or Not to Protest

Esther 4:14	אסתר ד:יד
For if you keep silent at this time [of crisis], relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another place; and you and your father's house will perish. And who knows if you arrived to a royal position for this [particular] time?	כִּי אִם־הִתְחַרַּשׁ תִּתְחַרֵּשׁ בְּעֵת הַזֹּאת רוּחַ וְהִצָּלָה יֵעָמוֹד לַיהוּדִים מִמָּקוֹם אֲחֵר וְאַתָּה וּבֵית־אָבִיךָ תִּאבְדּוּ וּמִי יוֹדֵעַ אִם־לְעֵת כְּזֹאת הִגַּעְתָּ לַמַּלְכוּת:

- In this text, Mordechai suggests that, if Esther doesn't act to save the Jewish people, someone else will. Does knowing that someone else will act give you more courage to act alongside them or permission not to act as someone else will do the work?
- Why might it be important to act in a time of crisis even if others are acting as well?
- Mordechai, in part, tries to convince Esther of her duty by suggesting that she was perhaps in her position as queen for a reason, to save the Jewish people. Do you believe that Esther was placed in the role of Queen simply "for such a crisis?" Do you believe that people are in the right place at the right time for a reason, or do people have to make conscious choices to act?
- Mordechai also appeals to Esther's self-interest. Are you more likely to act if you, personally, are in direct danger?

Tractate Shabbat 54b	מסכת שבת נד:
Anyone who is able to protest to the people of one's household and does not protest is considered [i.e. punished for the transgressions of] the people of the household. To the people of one's city, they are [punished for the transgressions] of the people of the city. To the whole world, they are [punished for the transgressions] of the whole world.	כל מי שאפשר למחות לאנשי ביתו ולא מיחה נתפס על אנשי ביתו באנשי עירו נתפס על אנשי עירו בכל העולם כולו נתפס על כל העולם כולו

- What is the message of this teaching from the Talmud?
- Why would someone be punished for inaction?
- How do you know what is the appropriate time for action and what is the appropriate action to take?



To Protest or Not to Protest

When in a controversy both parties are guided solely by pure motives and seek noble ends (such is the implication of the term *לשם שמים*), and when both parties seek solely to find the truth, then, of course, only one view will constitute the truth and only one of the two opposing views can and will prevail in practice. But actually, both views will have permanent value because, through the arguments each side has presented, both parties will have served to shed new light on the issue under debate, and will have contributed to the attainment of the proper understanding of the question discussed. They shall be remembered as long as there are men sincerely interested both in the subject of the debate and in the finding of the truth. For such men, retaining an abiding memory of the differences and the attempts on both sides to prove the validity of their view, will study the arguments of both sides thoroughly and repeatedly, thus advancing the cause of the genuine knowledge of truth.

— Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888), *The Hirsch Siddur*, 1997, p. 502

Hirsch explains in this passage how people with differing opinions can help each other to better understand an issue.

- What characteristics are important for two sides to be able to shed light to each other?
- How can rational people have diametrically opposing views on an important subject?
- What might Hirsch say to people who are protesting about an issue? To people who might believe that the protestors are wrong in their views?

"I have listened to all the speakers, and I have no further patience for talk. I am a working girl, one of those striking against intolerable conditions. I am tired of listening to speakers who talk in generalities. What we are here for is to decide whether or not to strike. I make a motion that we go out in a general strike."

— Clara Lemlich, speech November 22, 1909

Lemlich was a garment worker in New York's Lower East Side, who was active in the labor movement. She was present at a rally of thousands of other young women at New York's Cooper Union to talk about labor conditions. After many hours, during which prominent male labor leaders suggested exercising caution, Lemlich, then 23, was lifted to the stage and spoke the words above in Yiddish. Her call to action led to the "Uprising of the 20,000" in which thousands of garment workers staged a strike.

- What clues does the text give as to Lemlich's motivation in suggesting a strike?
- Under what circumstances or conditions should people stop speaking about an issue and act instead?



To Protest or Not to Protest

The most important political office is that of the private citizen.

— Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis (1856-1941), <http://www.brandeis.edu/legacyfund/bio.html>
(Retrieved January 30, 2017)

- What do you think this statement means?
- The President of the United States is often referred to as the “Leader of the Free World.” How can the role of a private citizen be more important than that of the President?
- When does Brandeis’ statement apply? What can private citizens do to make their political office an active one?

Because if we truly believe that *nefesh echad k’olam maleh*, that one life is like an entire universe, then all you have to do is change one life, and you’ve begun to change the universe the only way we can, one life at a time, one day at a time, one act at a time.

So when, out there, there is despair, let us bring hope. When out there there is hurt, let us heal. And when out there is division, let us show that we are enlarged and not diminished by our differences. Let us show the world what it is to stand together and respect one another.

Therefore, I say this, never waste a crisis. Never stand still. Go out there, continue the Jewish journey, and be a blessing to the Jewish people, and to the world.

— Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, November 13, 2016, opening plenary keynote address at the Jewish Federations of North America’s annual General Assembly in Washington, DC
<http://rabbisacks.org/rabbi-sacks-keynote-address-2016-jfna-general-assembly/> (Retrieved January 30, 2017)

- What does Rabbi Sacks mean when he says, “Never waste a crisis”?
- What are different ways to bring hope? How can protest bring hope? How can protest heal?
- How can protestors and non-protestors alike “stand together and respect one another”?