Stifling Thought and Speech: Thoughts for Parashat Va'et'hanan

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By
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In a recent lecture, Rabbi Hayyim Angel alluded to a remarkable passage in the Talmud (Sotah 13b), which seems to cast some criticism on Moses. When Korah and his associates arose against Moses, they argued that "all the congregation is holy, and why do you lord over the congregation of the Lord?" Although their motives were dubious, there was some justice in their claim. They purported to want a more democratic system that did not concentrate all power in the hands of Moses and Aaron. In rebuffing the critics, Moses said: rav lahem b'nai Levi, i.e. you have enough, children of Levi.

Instead of engaging the critics in conversation, Moses cut them off: Enough!

In this week's Torah portion, Moses pleads with the Almighty to let him enter the Promised Land. God tells Moses: rav lakh, that's enough. Echoing Moses' response to Korah and company, God uses the same phrase to silence Moses. The Talmud draws a connection between these two passages. Moses had cut off conversation with those who raised questions, and now God cut off conversation with Moses when he raised his question.

The lesson is that one should be very reluctant to stifle open discussion. One should listen to criticisms, suggestions, different opinions…and not summarily cut them off. It is possible that there is some truth in the words of the critics; it is possible that the opinions of others are worthy of serious consideration. Instead of issuing gag orders, responsible leadership should encourage an environment where people can voice their opinions freely. If those opinions are false, then they can be refuted. If those opinions are true, they can be adopted. If there is some truth in them, one can modify his/her own opinions accordingly.

These thoughts came to mind as I have been reading Dr. Marc Shapiro's new book, “Changing the Immutable: How Orthodox Judaism Rewrites Its History”, dealing with censorship within the Orthodox world. He has cited many examples of how historic texts have been altered to conform to the current "religiously correct" views, especially those held in the right wing Hareidi community. Books

by rabbis of previous generations are reprinted, but are made "kosher" by today's religious thought police. They purge texts that have positive attitudes toward secular education or to Zionism. They eliminate passages, eliminate reference to people whose names are not clearly identified with right wing Orthodoxy, they misrepresent personalities.

A book by Rabbi Yosef Hayim of Baghdad mentions the common practice of religious Jewish women in Europe to appear in public without covering their hair. When the book was reprinted, this passage was removed. Writings of important German rabbis note that in the school of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, boys did not wear head coverings during classes of general studies. This fact is deleted in new editions of the works of these rabbis. A book by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik was printed, but no reference is made to the fact that he taught at Yeshiva University, an institution that fosters secular as well as religious education. Rabbi Soloveitchik is simply listed as the Rabbi of Boston. Biographies of the "gedolim" invariably depict them as models of contemporary Hareidi Orthodoxy. Any facts that diverge from Hareidi ideology are simply left out or covered up.

Hareidim, of course, do not have a monopoly on rewriting history in their own image. This tendency is apparent among many groups, Jewish and non-Jewish. The tendency is apparent in secular, as well as religious, texts. Much of contemporary media coverage is shaped by, and consciously or sub-consciously censored by, prevailing political correctness.

When people attempt to prevent free and open inquiry, they not only sin against Truth. They sin against the public at large.

When one says "rav lahem" to others, one can expect an ultimate "rav lakh" from the Almighty.

Angel for Shabbat