The Dangers of "Groupthink:" Thoughts for Parashat Shofetim

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Shofetim

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Several years ago, Professor Eliezer Schnall of Yeshiva University, and his student Michael Greenberg, presented a paper at the annual convention of the American Psychological Association in which they discussed an influential theory developed by the psychologist Irving Janis, known as “groupthink”. Janis posited that tight-knit, smart and well-informed cliques can suppress dissent and create a “groupthink” phenomenon—where the general public goes along with the ideas of the inner power group. People either come to accept the dictates of the power group, or they are de-legitimized or ostracized. Dissent is crushed. Open and free discussion is not tolerated.

Dr. Schnall demonstrated how the deleterious effects of “groupthink” were consciously counteracted by the methods of operation of the Sanhedrin, the classic judicial system of ancient Israel. For example, when discussing cases in the Sanhedrin, the judges of lesser authority spoke first. The more senior judges offered their own opinions later. This system was adopted in order to ensure free and open discussion. If the veteran “expert” judges spoke first, the other judges might be reluctant to express disagreement with them. The result would be “groupthink”—control of discussion by a small, powerful clique.

The Sanhedrin sought to avoid becoming insular. Outside experts were consulted. Disciples who watched the proceedings were allowed to offer their opinions. If the Sanhedrin reached a unanimous guilty verdict in capital cases, the defendant was acquitted! It was assumed that absence of dissension meant that group conformity was operating and that the defendant did not have a fair trial.

“Groupthink” is a highly dangerous phenomenon. It arrogates considerable authority into the hands of a small inner circle, and essentially causes the public to conform to the views of this power clique. This is the method employed by tyrannies. This is the method that enables small elite groups to impose their views on a passive or frightened public. “Groupthink” is quite evident in anti-Jewish and anti-Israel propaganda and in the “politically correct” movement. Individuals stop thinking for themselves, stop demanding facts, stop evaluating the “truths” that are imposed on them. If they resist the pressures of “groupthink,” they risk being branded as social and intellectual outcasts. They risk being isolated and ostracized.

In this week’s Torah portion, we read that the courts are to pursue justice, tsedek tsedek tirdof. Many commentators have understood this phrase to mean: you must pursue justice in a just way. The search for truth must be conducted in an open and free environment, without coercion or intimidation. People must feel free to offer their insights and opinions, and must not succumb to “groupthink.” Discussion and dissension are to be encouraged, not stifled.

Manifestations of “groupthink” are ubiquitous in our society, and it requires considerable astuteness and courage to resist its pressures. “Groupthink” is increasingly evident in religious life, where small groups of clerics/intellectuals seek to impose their narrow views on the public. They state what is “true” and expect the public to go along with their pronouncements. Those who don’t follow the dictates of the power group are branded as heretics. The tyranny of “groupthink” is rampant in religious fundamentalist circles of whatever religion. Small cliques of “authorities” are granted incredible status, bordering on or including infallibility, and they proclaim what is “true” and what is “heresy.” Discussion, debate, and dissent are ruled out. Woe unto the person who does not conform in thought or behavior to the dictates of the “authorities.”

If “groupthink” is highly dangerous for society at large, it is perhaps even more pernicious for religious life. It injects a spiritual poison into religion, gradually sapping religious life of vitality, creativity, dynamism. Instead of fostering a spirit of discussion and free inquiry, it demands a ruthless conformity. Instead of empowering religious people to think and analyze and debate, it forces religious people to stop thinking independently, to refrain from analysis and debate, and to suppress any ideas that do not conform to the framework of “groupthink.” It insists on abject obedience to “authorities”—even when we don’t agree with them, even when we don’t acknowledge them as our “authorities,” even when we are convinced that these “authorities” are leading the public in an entirely incorrect direction.

If we are to be responsible individuals, we must resist the tyranny of “groupthink.” We must insist on the freedom to think for ourselves, to evaluate ideas independently, to stand up against coercion and intimidation. We must strive for a religious life that is alive and dynamic.

We must pursue truth and justice in a true and just way.

Angel for Shabbat