Independent Thinking is Indispensable

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Intellectual Freedom

I recently had some correspondence with a rabbinic colleague in which we discussed ideas relating to the role of women in halakha. I had offered some thoughts on how I imagined things would be in messianic times. He found my ideas somewhat interesting and then asked: Do you have a source for them?

I replied: The source is my own thinking.

Our dialogue then reached a cordial conclusion.

I mulled over this conversation, and realized that it reflects some of the problems I have with much discussion within the Orthodox world. It is increasingly difficult to express an idea without pinning it to an “authority” or a reliable “source.” Independent thinking is not considered to be good form.

If I had told my colleague that I had found my idea in a midrash, or a classic rabbinic work, or even in the writings of an obscure kabbalist, he would have taken my words more seriously. After all, I had a source!

But shouldn’t ideas be evaluated on their own merit? A statement isn’t truer if

someone
said it a few hundred years ago, even if that someone was a great scholar and sage. A statement
is not less true if it is espoused by someone today, who has no “source” to substantiate his or her
views.
Yes, certainly, we have a proper tendency to give more weight to the opinion of sages
such as Rambam than the opinion of a person who is far less learned than Rambam. We assume
that Rambam (or other “authority”) was surely wiser and more knowledgeable than we are; if
early sources didn’t come up with our idea, then it must be that our idea is wrong—otherwise the
previous “authorities” would have said it first.
But this line of thinking keeps us focused on the past, and doesn’t allow enough freedom
to break new ground, to come up with novel ideas and approaches. It has been said that reliance
on the authority of Aristotle kept philosophy from developing for a thousand years; reliance on
the medical teachings of Galen kept medicine from advancing for many centuries. Whether in
the sciences, arts, or philosophy, innovation is a key to progress. An atmosphere of intellectual
freedom allows ideas to be generated, evaluated, rejected, accepted; it provides the framework
for human advancement.
It is intellectually deadening to read articles/responsa or hear lectures/shiurim that are
essentially collections of the opinions of early “sources” and “authorities.” Although it is vital
for rabbis and scholars to be aware of the earlier rabbinic literature, it is also vital that they not be
hemmed in by those opinions. One needs the intellectual freedom to evaluate sources, to accept
what is deemed acceptable, to reject what is objectionable—and to offer one’s own views on the
topic, even if no earlier source/authority exists.

Oh, and yes, I have a source for these views! Rambam wrote (Guide of the Perplexed,
2:13):
For when something has been demonstrated, the correctness of the matter is not increased, and certainty regarding it is not strengthened by the consensus of all men of
knowledge with regard to it. Nor could its correctness be diminished and certainty regarding it be weakened even if all the people on earth disagreed with it.
Rambam also noted (Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Kiddush haHodesh 17:24):
Since all these rules have been established by sound and clear proofs, free from any flaw
and irrefutable, we need not be concerned about the identity of their authors, whether
they be Hebrew prophets or gentile sages.
We rely on the proofs, not on the credentials of the author.
Some years ago, I wrote an article “Orthodoxy and Diversity,” in which I expressed my
concerns:

Orthodoxy needs to foster the love of truth. It must be alive to different intellectual currents, and receptive to open discussion. How do we, as a Modern Orthodox community, combat the tendency toward blind authoritarianism and obscurantism?
First, we must stand up and be counted on the side of freedom of expression. We, as a community, must give encouragement to all who have legitimate opinions to share.
We must not tolerate intolerance. We must not yield to the tactics of coercion and intimidation.
Our schools and institutions must foster legitimate diversity within Orthodoxy.
We must insist on intellectual openness, and resist efforts to impose conformity: We will
not be fitted into the bed of Sodom. We must give communal support to diversity within
the halakhic framework, so that people will not feel intimidated to say things publicly or
sign their names to public documents. (Here’s the link to that
article: https://www.jewishideas.org/article/orthodoxy-and-diversity)
When well-reasoned views are expressed, they should be evaluated fairly. Quoting
“sources/authorities” does not in itself validate an opinion. Not quoting

“sources/authorities”
does not invalidate an opinion.
We certainly should draw on the wisdom and scholarship of others, and we should give
them due credit when we learn from them and quote their words. But we should not shut off our
own brains, nor feel unable to express an opinion without basing it on an earlier source. A
thinking Judaism makes us better Jews—and better human beings.
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Crowd Instinct, Personality Instinct

In his memoir, The Torch in My Ear, the Sephardic Jewish writer Elias Canetti (who won
the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1981) reflects on an insight that came to him as a young man: “I
realized that there is such a thing as a crowd instinct, which is always in conflict with the
personality instinct, and that the struggle between the two of them can explain the course of
human history” (387). This idea became central to Canetti’s life, ultimately resulting in his
classic book Crowds and Power.
What is the “crowd instinct?” It is the desire to blend into a crowd, to dissolve one’s
personality into a large mass of people. The crowd instinct can be witnessed in sports arenas,
where fans become one with each other and with the players on the field. It can be experienced
in mass rallies where fiery orators fire up the crowd, or at rock concerts where fans lose
themselves in their wild admiration of the singers and their music. People have a deep desire to
be part of such crowds.
Yet, crowds can become dangerous. When individuals succumb to crowds, demagogues
can control them, can drive them to do terrible things, can turn them into lynch mobs or
murderous gangs, can push them into terrorism and war.

And so, there is also a “personality instinct,” a deep desire to retain our own ideas and values, to resist the mesmerizing power of crowds. Although we at times want to share in the enthusiasms and griefs of crowds, we simultaneously want to maintain our inner freedom from the crowds. We want to blend in—but not to blend in.

In the Almighty’s blessing of Abraham, we can detect both the crowd instinct and the personality instinct. God apparently wanted Abraham to keep aware of these conflicting pulls, and to maintain spiritual balance.

God promised that He would multiply Abraham’s seed “as the stars of the heaven.” Stars, although there are so many of them, are essentially alone; light years separate one star from the next. Stars symbolize the personality instinct, the unique separateness of each one. Although part of a galaxy, each star is separate and distinct, never losing its particular identity.

But God also promised that Abraham’s seed would be “as the sand that is upon the seashore.” Sand represents an entirely different kind of multitude than stars. While each star is alone and separate, each grain of sand is surrounded by many other grains of sand. Whereas stars evoke separateness, sand evokes incredible closeness; it is almost impossible to take only one grain of sand in your hand. Sand symbolizes the crowd instinct.

Abraham was to found a new nation, and nations need to have adequate numbers in order to thrive. Nation-building entails working with crowds, striving to create consensus among various factions. Nations demand patriotism, national symbols that inspire citizens to feel united with each other. But nations can become dangerous crowds. Demagogues can manipulate the crowd’s emotions and can control information that they share with the masses. Crowds can

become dangerous; crowds can be turned into murdering, war-mongering and hateful entities.

How can one resist the power of crowds? For this we need the personality instinct. Each person needs to understand the crowd, but keep enough independence not to totally succumb to the power of the crowd. Each person literally has to be a hero, has to be willing to stand up and stand out—and possibly take terrible risks in order to maintain personal integrity.

This was God's blessing to Abraham: Your seed will learn how to form positive, helpful, cooperative crowds that will enhance human civilization. Your seed will be composed of individuals who will have the wisdom and the courage to remain separate, to resist those who would try to manipulate the crowd into wickedness. Your seed—like the stars—will be composed of strong, luminous and separate beings. Your seed—like the sand—will come together to form healthy, strong and moral communities and societies.

Throughout human history, there has been an ongoing tension between the crowd instinct and the personality instinct. Too often, the crowd instinct has prevailed. Masses of people have been whipped up to commit the worst atrocities, to murder innocents, to vent hatred. Too seldom have the masses acted like stars who can and do resist the power of dangerous crowds.

In our time, like throughout history, there are those who seek to manipulate crowds in dangerous, murderous and hateful ways. There are those who play on the fears and gullibility of the masses, who dissolve individuality and turn people into frenzied sheep.

But there are also those who refuse to become part of such crowds, who resist the crowd instinct and maintain the personality instinct. These are the stars who will form a new kind of crowd, a crowd that will bring human beings together in harmony and mutual respect. God's

blessing to Abraham is a blessing that we all need to internalize.

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Politicians or Statesmen

Henry Adams, a nineteenth-century American historian and author, distinguished between a politician and a statesman. A politician is someone who listens to what people are saying, and then molds his/her agenda accordingly. A statesman is someone who thinks carefully and arrives at intelligent conclusions—and then works to persuade the public to adopt his/her policies.

Politicians are essentially petty self-promoters who will say what people want to hear, who will pander to the whims of the masses. They say one thing today, another thing tomorrow; one thing to this audience and another thing to a different audience. They tell jokes, hug children, spout off truisms. Their goal is to be popular enough to get elected and stay in office. They can be bullies, buffoons, or big mouths: It doesn't matter to them as long as they can get people to talk about them and vote for them.

Statesmen are a much rarer breed. They actually take the time and trouble to think carefully. They have a long range vision of what is best for society. They espouse ideas and ideals that the masses may—or may not—readily understand or appreciate. They try to remain above the fray, and to guide people to a better, larger view of what is at stake. They are people who avoid sound bites and photo ops.

Political campaigns of our time often seem to be in the province of politicians, not statesmen. People run to become President of the United States, but many of them sound as though they are running for president of their high school class. Instead of contests for who provides the soundest and most intelligent vision for the future of the nation, the political battles seem to be popularity contests.

Will Rogers once said: When I was a boy I was told that anyone could become President
of the United States; now I’m beginning to believe it.
People in all generations complain that their political leaders are politicians rather than
statesmen. But it is the people who elect them! Apparently, the public does not demand or need
anything more than glib showmen for their leaders.
People deserve exactly the leadership that they choose for themselves, whether for good
or ill. This applies not only to political leaders, but to leaders of all sorts. It’s easy enough to

complain that our leaders are mere politicians and panderers; but we somehow seem to forget
that we are the ones who have elected them or have allowed them to stay in office.
As long as the public will laugh at the politicians’ jokes and rejoice in the politicians’
one-liners, then the politicians will continue their reign. Until the public will demand more of
their leaders and more of themselves, we will have politicians, not statesmen. And we will all be
the worse for it.
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Kamtsa, Bar Kamtsa and Contemporary Parallels
R. Johanan said: The destruction of Jerusalem came through Kamtsa and Bar Kamtsa in
this way: A certain man had a friend Kamtsa and an enemy Bar Kamtsa. He once made a
party and said to his servant, Go and bring Kamtsa. The man went and brought Bar
Kamtsa. When the man [who gave the party] found him there he said, See, you tell tales
about me; what are you doing here? Get out. Said the other: Since I am here, let me stay
and I will pay you for whatever I eat and drink. He said, I won't. Then let me give you
half the cost of the party. No, said the other. Then let me pay for the whole party. He still

said, No, and he took him by the hand and put him out. Said the other, Since the rabbis
were sitting there and did not stop him, this shows that they agreed with him. I will go
and inform against them to the Government. He went and said to the Emperor, The Jews
are rebelling against you. He said, How can I tell? He said to him: Send them an offering
and see whether they will offer it [on the altar]. So he sent with him a fine calf. While on
the way he [Bar Kamtsa] made a blemish on its upper lip, or as some say on the white of
its eye, in a place where we [Jews] count it a blemish but they [the Romans] do not. The
rabbis were inclined to offer it in order not to offend the Government. Said R. Zechariah
b. Abkulas to them: People will say that blemished animals are offered on the altar. They
then proposed to kill Bar Kamtsa so that he should not go and inform against them, but R.
Zechariah b. Abkulas said to them, Is one who makes a blemish on consecrated animals
to be put to death? R. Johanan thereupon remarked: Through the scrupulousness of R.
Zechariah b. Abkulas our House has been destroyed, our Temple burnt and we ourselves
exiled from our land. (Gittin 55b–56a)

The story tells of a host—apparently a wealthy man—who throws a party and wants his
friend Kamtsa to be brought to it. The servant makes a mistake and brings Bar Kamtsa—a person
the host despises. When the host sees Bar Kamtsa, he orders him to leave. Even though Bar
Kamtsa pleads not to be humiliated by being sent away, the host is unbending. Bar Kamtsa offers
to pay for whatever he eats, for half the expenses of the entire party, for the entire party—but the
host unceremoniously leads Bar Kamtsa out of his home.

The story reflects a lack of peace among the Jewish community in Jerusalem. The

antagonism between the host and Bar Kamtsa is palpable. The unpleasant scene at the party was
witnessed by others—including “the rabbis”; obviously, “the rabbis” were included on the
party’s guest list. They were part of the host’s social network. When Bar Kamtsa was ejected
from the party, he did not express rage at the host. Rather, he was deeply wounded by the fact
that rabbis had been silent in the face of the humiliation he had suffered: “Since the rabbis were
sitting there and did not stop him, this shows that they agreed with him.” He might have

understood the host’s uncouth behavior, since the host hated him. But he could not understand
why the rabbis, through their silence, would go along with the host. Why didn’t they stand up
and protest on behalf of Bar Kamtsa? Why didn’t they attempt to increase peace? Bar Kamtsa
was so disgusted with the rabbis that he decided to stir up the Roman Emperor against the Jewish
people. If the rabbinic leadership itself was corrupt, then the entire community had to suffer.
Why didn’t the rabbis speak up on behalf of Bar Kamtsa?
Apparently, the rabbis kept silent because they did not want to offend their host. If the
host wanted to expel a mistakenly invited person, that was his business—not theirs. The host
seems to have been a wealthy patron of the rabbis; he obviously wanted them included on his
invitation list. Why should the rabbis offend their patron, in defense of an enemy of their patron?
That might jeopardize their relationship with the host and could cost them future patronage.
The rabbis kept silent because they thought it socially and economically prudent for their
own interests. They could not muster the courage to confront the host and try to intervene on
behalf of Bar Kamtsa. By looking out for their own selfish interests, the rabbis chose to look the

other way when Bar Kamtsa was publicly humiliated.
Rabbi Binyamin Lau, in his review of the rabbinical and historical sources of that period,
came to the inescapable conclusion that
the rabbis were supported by the wealthy [members of the community], and consequently
were unable to oppose their deeds. There is here a situation of economic pressure that
enslaved the elders of the generation to the officials and the wealthy…. The Torah infrastructure depended on the generosity of the rich.
When rabbis lost the spirit of independence, they also lost their moral compass. They
were beholden to the rich, and could not afford to antagonize their patrons. They remained silent
even when their patrons behaved badly, even when their silence allowed their patrons to
humiliate others. Bar Kamtsa was outraged by the moral cowardice of the rabbis to such an
extent that he turned traitor against the entire Jewish people.
The story goes on to say that Bar Kamtsa told the Emperor that the Jews were rebelling.
To verify this, the Emperor sent an offering to be sacrificed in the Temple. If the Jews offered it
up, that proved they were not rebelling. If the Jews refused to offer it up, this meant that they
were defying the Emperor and were rising in rebellion. Bar Kamtsa took a fine calf on behalf of
the Emperor, and put a slight blemish on it. He was learned enough to know that this
blemish—while of no consequence to the Romans—would disqualify the animal from being
offered according to Jewish law.
When Bar Kamtsa presented the offering at the Temple, the rabbis were inclined to allow
it to be offered. They fully realized that if they rejected it, this would be construed by the
Emperor as a sign of disloyalty and rebellion. Since there was so much at stake, the rabbis
preferred to offer a blemished animal rather than incur the Emperor’s wrath. This

was a sound,
prudent course of action. But one of the rabbis, Zecharyah b. Abkulas, objected. He insisted that
the rabbis follow the letter of the law and not allow the offering of a blemished animal. He cited
public opinion (“people will say”) that the rabbis did not adhere to the law and therefore allowed
a forbidden offering. The rabbis then considered the extreme possibility of murdering Bar
Kamtsa, so that this traitor would not be able to return to the Emperor to report that the offering
had been refused. Again, Zecharyah b. Abkulas objected. The halakha does not allow the death
penalty for one who brings a blemished offering for sacrifice in the Temple. Murdering Bar

Kamtsa, thus, would be unjustified and illegal. This was “check mate.” The rabbis offered no
further ideas on how to avoid antagonizing the Emperor. The offering was rejected, and Bar
Kamtsa reported this to the Emperor. The result was the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and
razing of the Temple. “R. Johanan thereupon remarked: Through the scrupulousness of R.
Zechariah b. Abkulas our House has been destroyed, our Temple burnt and we ourselves exiled
from our land.”
Rabbi Johanan casts R. Zecharyah b. Abkulas as the villain of the story. R. Zecharyah
was overly scrupulous in insisting on the letter of the law, and he lost sight of the larger issues
involved. He did not factor in the consequences of his halakhic ruling; or if he did, he thought it
was better to suffer the consequences rather than to violate the halakha. Rabbi Johanan blames R.
Zecharyah’s “scrupulousness” for the destruction of Jerusalem, the razing of the Temple, and the
exile of the Jewish people. The moral of the story, according to Rabbi Johanan, is that rabbis
need to have a grander vision when making halakhic decisions. It is not

proper—and can be very
dangerous—to rule purely on the basis of the letter of the law, without taking into consideration
the larger issues and the consequences of these decisions. Technical correctness does not always
make a halakhic ruling correct. On the contrary, technical correctness can lead to catastrophic
results. To follow the precedent of Rabbi Zecharyah b. Abkulas is a dangerous mistake.
Yes, Rabbi Zecharyah b. Abkulas was overly scrupulous in his application of halakha,
when other larger considerations should have been factored in. His narrow commitment to legal
technicalities caused inexpressible suffering and destruction for the Jewish people. But is he the
real villain of the story?
Rabbi Zecharyah was only one man. The other rabbis formed the majority. Why didn't
they overrule Rabbi Zecharyah? The rabbis surely realized the implications of rejecting the
Emperor's offering. They were even willing to commit murder to keep Bar Kamtsa from
returning to the Emperor with a negative report. Why did the majority of the rabbis submit to
Rabbi Zecharyah's "scrupulousness"?
The story is teaching not only about the mistaken attitude of Rabbi Zecharyah b. Abkulas,
but about the weakness and cowardice of the rest of the rabbis. The other rabbis were intimidated
by Rabbi Zecharyah. They were afraid that people would accuse them of being laxer in halakha
than Rabbi Zecharyah. They worried lest their halakhic credibility would be called into question.
Rabbi Zecharyah might be perceived by the public as the "really religious" rabbi, or the
"fervently religious" rabbi; the other rabbis would be perceived as compromisers, as religiously
defective. They recognized that Rabbi Zecharyah, after all, had technical halakhic justification

for his positions. On the other hand, they would have to be innovative and utilize meta-halakhic considerations to justify their rulings. That approach—even if ultimately correct—requires considerable confidence in one's ability to make rulings that go beyond the letter of the law.

Rabbi Zecharyah's position was safe: it had support in the halakhic texts and traditions. The rabbis' position was risky: it required breaking new ground, making innovative rulings based on extreme circumstances. The rabbis simply were not up to the challenge. They deferred to Rabbi Zecharyah because they lacked the courage and confidence to take responsibility for bold halakhic decision-making.

When rabbis lose sight of their core responsibility to bring peace into the world, the consequences are profoundly troubling. The public's respect for religion and religious leadership decreases. The rabbis themselves become narrower in outlook, more authoritarian, more identified with a rabbinic/political bureaucracy than with idealistic rabbinic service. They become agents of the status quo, curriers of favor from the rich and politically well-connected.

When rabbis lack independence and moral courage, the tendencies toward conformity and extremism arise. They adopt the strictest and most fundamentalist positions, because they do not want to appear "less fervent" than the extremist rabbinic authorities.

When rabbis fear to express moral indignation so as not to jeopardize their financial or political situation, then the forces of injustice and disharmony increase. When rabbis adopt the narrow halakhic vision of Rabbi Zecharyah b. Abkulas, they invite catastrophe on the community. When the "silent majority" of rabbis allow the R. Zecharyahs to prevail, they forfeit their responsibility as religious leaders.

The contemporary Hareidization of Orthodox Judaism, both in Israel and the Diaspora, has tended to foster a narrow and extreme approach to halakha. This phenomenon has been accompanied by a widespread acquiescence on the part of Orthodox rabbis who are afraid to stand up against the growing extremism.

In the summer of 1984, I met with Rabbi Haim David Halevy, then Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv. He was a particularly independent thinker, who much regretted the narrowness and extremism that had arisen within Orthodox rabbinic circles. He lamented what he called the rabbinic "mafia" that served as a thought police, rooting out and ostracizing rabbis who did not go along with the official policies of a small group of "gedolim," rabbinic authorities who are thought to have the ultimate power to decide halakhic policies. When honest discussion and diversity of opinion are quashed, the religious enterprise suffers.

The Orthodox rabbinic establishment in Israel, through the offices of the Chief Rabbinate, has had the sole official religious authority to determine matters relating to Jewish identity, conversion, marriage, and divorce. It has also wielded its authority in kashruth supervision and other areas of religious law relating to Jewish life in the State of Israel. This religious "monopoly" has been in place since the State of Israel was established in 1948. With so much power at their disposal, one would have expected—and might have hoped—that the rabbinate would have won a warm and respectful attitude among the population at large. The rabbis, after all, are charged with increasing peace between the people of Israel and their God; with applying halakha in a spirit of love, compassion, and understanding; with creating within the Jewish public a recognition that the rabbis are public servants working in the public's interest.

Regrettably, these things have not transpired. Although the Chief Rabbinate began with the creative leadership of Rabbis Benzion Uziel and Yitzchak Herzog, it gradually sank into a bureaucratic mire, in which rabbis struggled to gain political power and financial reward for themselves and/or for the institutions they represent. The Chief Rabbinate is not held as the ultimate religious authority in Israel by the Hareidi population. It is not respected by the non-Orthodox public. It has scant support within the Religious Zionist camp, since the Chief Rabbinate seems more interested in pandering to Hareidi interests than in promoting a genuine Religious Zionist vision and program for the Jewish State.

Recent polls in Israel have reflected a growing backlash against the Hareidization of religious life and against the political/social/religious coercion that has been fostered by Hareidi leadership. Seventy percent of Jewish Israelis are opposed to new religious legislation. Fifty-three percent oppose all religiously coercive legislation. Forty-two percent believe that the tension between the Hareidim and the general public is the most serious internal schism in Israeli Jewish society—nearly twice as many as those who think the most serious tension is between the political left and political right. Sixty-five percent think the tensions between Hareidim and the general public are the most serious, or second most serious, problem facing the Israeli Jewish community. An increasing number of Israelis are in favor of a complete separation of religion and State, reflecting growing frustration with the religious status quo.

In recent decades, Orthodox Judaism has become increasingly narrow, authoritarian, and sectarian. We have argued that the Modern Orthodox/Religious Zionist communities must energize themselves to reclaim Orthodoxy as an intellectually vibrant,

compassionate, and
inclusive lifestyle that has a meaningful message for all Jews—and for humanity as a whole.
While working to improve the spiritual climate in Israel and the Diaspora, we must concurrently foster specific policies that increase our representation in rabbinic roles, in lay
leadership, in Jewish education—and indeed in general involvement in our societies. We must
demonstrate our unflinching determination to resolve the halakhic controversies surrounding
conversion, agunot, and other problems—by employing the full range of halakhic options, and
by keeping in mind the ethical and national dimensions of our decisions.
The ways of the Torah are ways of pleasantness; all its pathways are peace. Orthodox
Judaism must cling to this principle and demonstrate to itself and to the world that the Torah way
of life is sweet and beautiful, and that Torah scholars indeed increase peace and harmony in the
world.

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Resisting the Bullies

When the Israelites pressed Aaron to make them an idol of gold, the Torah informs us:
“And all the people broke off the golden rings which were in their ears and brought them unto
Aaron” (Shemoth 32:3). It seems that “all the people” participated in idolatrous behavior.
Yet, when it came to contributing to the building of the Mishkan, the sanctuary of God,
the Torah states that donations were to be given only by those with generous hearts, “of every
person whose heart was willing” (Shemoth 25:2). The donations came not from “all the people”
but from a smaller group of willing donors.
Professor Yeshaya Leibowitz, in his book Yoke of Torah, offers his interpretation as to
why these events differed. Simply stated, it is much easier to get drawn into doing evil than into

doing something righteous. Once the Israelites went into a frenzy to make an idol, “all the
people” were swept up in the excitement; all of them contributed quickly and generously. But
when it came to building the Mishkan, many were reluctant to part with their valuables. There
are mental obstacles to contributing to a worthy cause. Donors need to battle with internal
resistance. They need to let their generosity overcome their possessiveness.
Professor Leibowitz’ observation is bolstered by the Midrash. At the time of the golden
calf, the Israelites had two main leaders in the absence of Moses: Aaron and Hur. The Midrash
posits that Hur resisted the idolatrous masses, and they murdered him! Seeing this, Aaron
decided it was safer to go along with the crowd rather than to stand up against them. Hur, who
stood for courageous righteousness, died a martyr’s death. Aaron, who went along with the
sinning crowd, survived and even went on to serve as High Priest.
Yet, I wonder if “all the people” who contributed their gold earrings really were
ideologically convinced to engage in idolatry. I suspect that a rather small group made the

decision and usurped the leadership. When no one (other than Hur) stood up against them, they
became increasingly arrogant. They murdered Hur to set an example: Resistance doesn’t pay.
They cowed the masses of Israelites, who handed in their gold earrings because they were too
afraid to resist—or because they were too apathetic to fight the in-group. Their participation
wasn’t enthusiastic and ideologically motivated; it was more like a passive going along with the
tide.
It is easier to go along with evil than to stand up defiantly against evil.
It is easier to join with bullies or to look the other way, rather than to confront them.
A recent study has reported that severe bullying is quite common for many students.

Forty-one percent of middle school and high school students in the United States report that they were bullied at least once during their current school term. About eleven percent of boys report that they are bullied once a week or more. Of the boys who report being bullied, nearly eighteen percent are hit, slapped or pushed once a week or more. (Michael E. McCullough, Beyond Revenge, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 2008, p. 35)

The easier it is for bullies to cow their victims, the easier it is for them to continue their bullying. If the victims are too weak or too afraid to resist, the bullies are emboldened to increase their arrogance and their violence.

But it's not just the inability of victims to resist: it's the inability or unwillingness of all the witnesses to come to the aid of the victims. The masses, by their passivity, allow the bullies to flourish and to create an environment of fear. Some attempt to befriend the bullies, so as to protect themselves from being bullied themselves. Others feel too weak to confront the bullies, so they look the other way. Those who stand up to the bullies run the risk of being beaten up and humiliated in the eyes of others.

It is easier to go along with the tide than to stand up in righteous opposition. It is easier to donate gold earrings for a golden calf than to incur the wrath of the bullies who are leading the idolatrous movement.

From the days of the golden calf to our own times, bullies have attempted to assert their leadership by means of violence and the instilling of fear. They have depended on the weakness of the victims to resist. Even more, they have depended on the "silent majority" that lacks the courage to stand tall.

Bullying takes many forms in our society. Sometimes it is overtly violent. Sometimes it is

the surreptitious usurpation of power by undermining all opposition. Sometimes it shows itself in tyrants and dictators; and sometimes it shows itself in power hungry individuals in all walks of life. The common denominator is that bullies prevail by crushing or intimidating opposition.

There are many people today, in all walks of life, who call on us to donate our "gold earrings" to create all sorts of "golden calves." Are we donating or are we rallying our courage and our morality so that we can resist?

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The Dangers of Groupthink

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.