Growing or Flip-Flopping?

Shabbat Vayeishev 5783

December 16, 2022 Rabbi Barry H. Block

Believe it or not, some good things happen on Facebook.

A couple months ago, corporations cut ties with Kanye West over his grotesque antisemitic comments. A young man Jewish man I know from our URJ camp in Texas posted that "cancelling people is a losers' mindset." He argued that constructive engagement would be more effective. I responded by asking what "cancelling people" meant in that context. I continued, "It's only appropriate and healthy to remove people from one's life if those people are abusive, deny one's humanity, are a bad influence, or even just unpleasant to be around. Similarly, it's appropriate for a business to disassociate itself from a person who harms its people or its brand."

A few weeks later, the same young man posted that he was done with Ye. He took some ribbing from friends who noted his earlier position, but not from me. I commented: "You are to be commended for changing your mind. Too often, our society views changing one's mind as a sign of weakness or a lack of principles. That's wrong. It's evidence of willingness to learn, to take new circumstances into account, and to grow."

My sermon tonight is not about antisemitism and how to respond to it. I have written and spoken about that critical topic and will return to it. Tonight, instead, I would like to focus on the way our society regards people who change their minds—in particular, when they change their minds for the better.

As Professor Andrew Gooch wrote last month, "An enduring part of American politics is that politicians often switch positions from one side of an issue to another throughout their careers, often dubbed negatively as 'flip-flopping.'"[i] He cites the first President Bush's campaign promise, "Read my lips: No new taxes," followed by Bush's decision, as president, that a tax increase was an unavoidable component of compromise legislation to prevent economic disaster. New circumstances led President Bush to change his mind, but pundits widely attribute his 1992 election defeat to the perception that he was unreliable and unprincipled.

Gooch has devoted his scholarly research to examining how voters actually respond to politicians who change their minds. He has found: "When politicians use persuasive justifications, they are…able to ease the negative effects of flip-flopping. The timing of the flip-flopping also matters." A dramatic change of

position in a short period of time is viewed negatively. However, Gooch notes that "voters are more forgiving of politicians who might have 'evolved' on an issue over a longer period."[ii]

Over a period of several decades, more than a few of our elected leaders have changed their minds about same-sex marriage. CNN reported that, in 2011, some one hundred graduates walked out on Senator Rob Portman's University of Michigan law school commencement address "to protest his…'openly hostile'…position on gay rights." Only two years later, after Portman's son came out as gay, he said, "I've come to the conclusion that…this is something that we should allow people to do, to get married, and to have the joy and stability of marriage that I've had over 26 years." With his son's support, Portman made no attempt to hide that his son's coming out was the impetus for his change. Among others, he spoke with former Vice President Cheney, who had begun to favor same-sex marriage in support of his daughter Mary, who is married to another woman.[iii] Presidents Clinton, Obama, and Biden also opposed same-sex marriage before they supported it. **Senator** Biden voted for the so-called Defense of Marriage Act, which President Clinton signed into law in 1996. This week, **President** Biden signed its repeal.

Closer to home, in 2015, his first year as governor, Asa Hutchinson changed his mind about a so-called "religious protection" bill. Governor Hutchinson had initially supported the bill, which many of us opposed, because we understood that the legislative intent was to enable people to use religion as their legal excuse to discriminate against gay, lesbian, and transgender Arkansans. After both houses of the legislature adopted the bill with the Governor's support, Hutchinson received pushback from significant Arkansas employers and from his own son, a union organizer who lives in Austin and is incidentally a Reform Jew. The governor tasked the General Assembly to modify the bill, and they did. While some would argue that Governor Hutchinson gave in only in response to influential donors, I prefer to take the Governor's word for the reason he changed his mind: "It was a learning process."[iv]

This week, reading *Parashat Vayeishev*, we get to know Joseph for the first time. We also see an evolution.

When Joseph is young, his father Jacob "loved Joseph better than his other sons," favoritism symbolized by the gift of a coat of many colors. Joseph takes his father's special love to mean that he's better than his brothers. He imprudently tells them about his dreams, beginning, "There we were, tying up sheaves of wheat in the field, when my sheaf rose up and stood up straight! Your sheaves then paraded in a circle around mine and bowed down to my sheaf." It only gets worse in the

second dream, when "the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down" to Joseph.

Here we have a young man devoid of humility. Though we can fault his brothers for selling him into Egyptian bondage, we cannot criticize them for despising a brother who lords his superiority over them.

Joseph is fascinated by his early dreams. They require little interpretation, but he provides it himself. Years later, though, in this same portion, Joseph has a new attitude about his power of dream interpretation. Thrown into prison on a false charge, Joseph is incarcerated with Pharaoh's wine steward and chief baker. Finding them distressed one morning, he asks what's wrong. They are agitated by their dreams, which nobody can interpret for them. Joseph responds, "Surely interpretations are in God's domain; tell them to me." Yes, Joseph will interpret the courtiers' dreams, but he now views himself as little more than God's vessel. Instead of seeing others bowing down to him, he humbles himself before God. In next week's portion, Joseph is called to help Pharaoh, distraught by his own dreams. Pharaoh says, "I have heard this about you: you have but to hear a dream to interpret it." This time, Joseph's response is even more humble: "Not I—it is God who will answer for Pharaoh's wellbeing."

They say that you never get a second chance to make a first impression. That's true, and we should take the maxim to heart when we meet others for the first time. On the receiving end, though, we would do well to give most people second and third chances. Joseph and his brothers don't offer each other that flexibility as young men, and the consequences are disastrous, at least initially. Torah, though, gives Joseph the space to grow into a much better man than the youth we meet at the outset of this week's portion. Eventually, as Genesis unfolds toward its conclusion, Joseph and his brothers come to know each other again. They change their minds about one another. They have grown. And now, they face the future—of their family and of the Children of Israel—together.

Amen.

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[i] Andrew Gooch, "While the public punishes politicians who 'flip=flop', criticism from the medica may backfire," While the public punishes politicians who 'flip-flop', criticism from the media may backfire | USAPP (lse.ac.uk).

[ii] Gooch.

[iii] Dana Bash, "CNN Exclusive: One conservative's dramatic reversal on gay marriage," *CNN*, May 15, 2013. CNN Exclusive: One conservative's dramatic reversal on gay marriage | CNN Politics.

[iv] Benjamin Hardy, "What HB1228 was really about," *Arkansas Times*, April 9, 2015, What HB 1228 was really about - Arkansas Times (arktimes.com).