

Biblical Wisdom for the Contemporary Rabbi

BY MICHAEL M. REMSON

One day two prostitutes came and presented themselves before King Solomon. One of them said, "Your majesty, this woman and I live in the same house, and I gave birth to a baby boy at home while she was there. Two days after my child was born she gave birth to a baby boy. Only the two of us were in the house—no one else was present. Then one night she accidentally rolled over on her baby and smothered it. She got up during the night, took my son from my side while I was asleep, and carried him to her bed; then she put the dead child in my bed. The next morning, when I woke up and was going to nurse my baby, I saw that it was dead. I looked at it more closely and saw that it was not my child."

Then the other woman said, "No! The living child is mine, and the dead one is yours!"

Then King Solomon said, "Each of you claims the living child is yours and that the dead child belongs to the

other one." He sent for a sword and when it was brought he said, "Cut the living child in two and give each woman half of it."

The real mother, her heart full of love for her son, said to the king, "Please, your majesty, don't kill the child! Give it to her!"

Then Solomon said, "Don't kill the child, give it to the first woman for she is its real mother."

(I Kings 3:16-27)

Solomon's Wisdom

Throughout Jewish tradition this narrative has been offered as evidence of the wisdom of Solomon. Solomon used a ruse to determine the true birth mother, and the rabbis whose opinions are recorded in the Talmud and Midrash shared this understanding.

Nevertheless, there may be another way to understand what has happened. If his goal was to determine the birth mother, Solomon might have asked for witnesses or looked to see which woman the child resembled.

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Solomon seemed to have something else in mind; and if this is so, there may be a different understanding of Solomon's wisdom.

The two women in the story were involved in a highly emotional dispute. When a disagreement ceases to be based on rational thought one or both parties may try to bring in a third person and give that person ownership of the problem. As Peter Steinke explains, "When two people or parties are anxious and they cannot resolve their anxiousness between themselves, one of them will bring a third party into the relationship. [This is] a naturally occurring phenomenon."¹ People hope that the third party will help resolve the dispute in their favor. That is what happened here. The two women could not solve their problem and tried to bring Solomon into the middle of it, each hoping that he would take her side.

According to the explanation given at the end of the narrative Solomon eventually took ownership of the dispute and settled it, but that was not his first response. His initial act was to call for a sword and have the child cut in half. This response was clearly untenable, and therein was its brilliance. It freed Solomon from ownership of the dispute. He offered a silly suggestion, hoping that the women would shake their heads and solve their own problem.

Unfortunately, only one of the women reacted in a mature, moral, and rational way. She refused to let the child be killed and offered it to the other woman. He could not allow the child to go to a woman who was will-

ing to have it killed. As a last resort he stepped in and decided the case.

Congregations As Emotional Systems

During the last two decades creative thinkers such as Edwin Friedman, Peter Steinke, and Ronald Richardson² have taught us to understand that congregations are emotional systems. They are made up of individuals and factions, each with their own goals and needs. They all come with their own emotional baggage, based on the experiences of their lifetimes.

When there are disagreements among the members of a congregation, people will behave emotionally as well as rationally. Anxiety may rise, and then the disputing sides (like the women in the story) will try to involve others. The rabbi and the lay leaders will be asked, directly or indirectly, to take sides.

This is not pathological; it is normal, and in a similar fashion, every congregation will behave this way. What will vary among congregations is the way the leaders respond. Indeed, the well-being of a congregation can depend upon how these disputes are handled, as the case below will illustrate.

A Congregational Example

Jerry Golden is a respected past president of Temple Beth El. Last year as an "elder statesman" Jerry was asked to chair the Rabbinical Selection Committee and he was very pleased to bring in Bill Silverman as

the community's new rabbi. In the process, Bill and Jerry became friends.

When Jerry's older children were in religious school, he monitored their work and they were excellent students. His youngest child, Sarah, is now in sixth grade, and since she was born Jerry has been more lenient with her. She is an outstanding athlete, and in order to participate in school athletic events she has been absent from Hebrew School more than 50% of the time. Her teacher, following school policy, assigned work to be made up but Sarah never had the time to do it.

Throughout the year the principal of the religious school, Anne Bergman, called Jerry to tell him what was happening, and Jerry repeatedly promised to get on Sarah's case. Nevertheless, the work was never made up.

At the end of the year Anne called Jerry to tell him that according to school regulations (which have been in place since before Jerry's term as president, and which have been published each year in the school's "Parents' Manual") she has no choice but to hold Sarah back. Jerry was furious. He went to a meeting of the Education Committee and then to a meeting of the Board. He reminded them of all that he had done for the congregation and threatened to resign if Anne did not promote his daughter.

Three Possible Scenarios

Scenario No. 1: When Bill Silverman, the rabbi, heard about the dispute he called Jerry and tried to calm him down. Jerry would accept nothing less than a promotion for his

daughter to the seventh-grade class, and he insisted that he was going to bring this before the board.

At the next board meeting Jerry came in with his voice loud and his face red. After he made his case, Bill pointed out that Sarah had been given homework assignments which she did not do, that Jerry had been called several times by Anne, and that Jerry had known about the policies. Jerry responded by talking about all that he had done for the congregation, and then made some negative comments about Anne. A number of people, including Bill, came to Anne's defense, and soon the room was filled with loud voices, everyone talking at once.

Two things happened after Jerry responded to Bill. First, the focus was shifted away from Sarah's performance. Instead, people were talking about Jerry's contributions to the congregation and Anne's abilities as principal.

In addition to this, Jerry's anxiety spread to almost every person in the room. When the president gavelled the room to silence, someone moved that Sarah be promoted with her class. The motion was defeated, but everyone walked out feeling upset and anxious.

Scenario No. 2: Bill Silverman knew, of course, that the dispute was coming to the board. He also knew that Jerry was popular and that people might line up on his side. Furthermore, he had only been in town for a few months, and he was very nervous about losing a friend and significant member. Jerry might not only leave the congregation; he might urge his friends to help start a new one.

As soon as he heard about the problem Bill called Sam Ruben, the president of the congregation. They decided that a few homework assignments were not worth losing a member, particularly one as valued as Jerry. They decided to meet with Anne to see if some compromise could be worked out. Perhaps Sarah could write an essay over the summer.

Anne said that there was a great deal of work to be done. Even if Sarah were willing to work over the summer, it would not be fair to ask the teacher to come back in the fall with a stack of her overdue papers to read. Anne also pointed out that the school has a policy, and that Jerry knew about the policy and that policies are meaningless if they are not enforced.

Sam told her that the Temple Beth El is about people and not about rules, and that he wanted Sarah to be in the seventh grade class in September. Anne asked if this was final, she was told that it was, and she submitted her resignation.

Scenario No. 3: When Bill realized that the issue was going to come before the board, he prepared himself emotionally so that he could remain calm. After Jerry presented his case, board members began to take sides and Bill asked to speak. He waited until the room was quiet and then he reframed the question.

Bill expressed appreciation for all that Jerry had done, and he expressed admiration for Sarah as a person and as an athlete. He made it quite clear, however, that this was not about Sarah Golden nor was it about what Jerry had done for the congregation.

Neither was this about whether Anne was doing a good job running the Religious School. He urged the board to disregard personalities and to think about the kind of congregation they want. They want a congregation that considers the wishes of its members, but they also want one that takes education seriously. Those two goals now seem to be in conflict, but one thing is clear: if the rules are not enforced now they will never be enforceable.

Seeing that the rabbi and the president were calm, most of the other board members calmed down. The president kept the subsequent discussion focused on the congregation and its goals. After a short debate the board voted 12 to 5 to enforce the rules of the religious school. When Jerry stormed out in anger, most board members were sad, but not anxious.

Comparing the Scenarios

Conflict is a normal part of every congregation. As we have seen, when there is an emotional dispute anxiety can rise. The anxious parties can try to bring others into the conflict and the anxiety can spread. By remaining calm and by focusing on their vision, the leaders of a congregation can manage conflict with a minimum of disruption.

In the first scenario, Jerry's anxiety was allowed to spread through the board until the meeting was out of control. It is likely that this anxiety would permeate other meetings, and that the alliances that were created and the factions that formed would

continue to do battle over other issues.

In the second scenario the anxiety was less visible, but it was still a controlling factor. Bill's desire to prevent any kind of disagreement caused him to lose the services of a fine education director. Peacemaking lay leaders often sacrifice rabbis, educators, and other staff, rather than confront a congregant with the need to compromise. A congregation that cannot deal with conflict is destined to follow the will of the loudest and least mature members.

In the third scenario the rabbi and president remained calm and kept their anxiety under control. Their calm demeanor spread and a decision was made rationally. They understood that everyone in the congregation will not be happy all of the time. They were willing to accept conflict as a reality of life in a healthy congregation. Edwin Friedman taught that remaining a non-anxious presence is one of the most important things a rabbi can do. By remaining calm the rabbi teaches others that there is no reason to be anxious. In this way the rabbi can help the congregation remain focused on its vision.

This is not a panacea. Even with wise, calm, and focused leadership some people will be angry, and some good rabbis will still get fired. Still, with calm leadership congregations will ultimately be much healthier. Conflict will be managed better, decisions will be more rational, and the

congregations can progress toward their goals.

The story of King Solomon and the two prostitutes is preceded by Solomon's prayer for wisdom (1 Kings 3:9) and is followed by a description of Solomon's accomplishments. Solomon was, indeed, granted wisdom. It was that wisdom that allowed him to get past small disputes and to focus on the things he wished to do during his reign. No one can always follow this example. Almost everyone will lose emotional control from time to time. Anxiety is part of human existence.

Nor can we always be focused on the goals of a congregation. We are all subject to distraction. Someone will always be trying to involve us in emotional disputes.

Still, as Solomon and our modern teachers tell us, among the goals of the rabbi—in addition to being a teacher, an advisor, a comforter, and more—is to remain a non-anxious presence. The rabbi who can accept conflict as normal, and remain calm in its face, will be better able to help a congregation focus on its goals and progress toward its vision.

1. Peter L. Steinke, *Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach* (Bethesda: The Alban Institute, 1996).

2. Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1985), Steinke, *Healthy Congregations* . . . ; and Ronald W. Richardson, *Creating a Healthier Church: Family Systems Theory, Leadership and Congregational Life*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996).