



The Dangers of Incitement

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Parashat Re'eih 5786

In Parashat Re'eih, the Torah warns against a uniquely insidious threat: the *mesit* or inciter. In Hebrew, this act of enticing or manipulating another person toward harm is known as *hasatah*, “incitement.” The discourse of incitement is one of the most central and sensitive topics in social and political interaction in Israel. The term *hasatah* is used by the Israeli public both as a formal legal definition (a prohibited call for violence, racism, or terrorism) and as a popular political tool designed to invalidate the other side's position and label it as dangerous. The Torah approaches *hasatah* as well, indicating that incitement is dangerous because it is confusing, powerful—and primarily because it works.

The verses of the *parashah* describe that the source of incitement may be those close to you:

דברים יג:

כִּי יִסִּיתְךָ אֲחִיךָ בֶּן אִמְךָ אוֹ בֶּןךָ אוֹ בִּתְּךָ אוֹ אִשְׁתְּ חֵיקְךָ אוֹ רֵעֶךָ אֲשֶׁר כְּנַפְשְׁךָ ...



Deuteronomy 13:7

If your brother, the son of your mother, or your son or your daughter, or the wife of your bosom, or your friend who is as your own soul, incites you (*yesitkha*) ...

Incitement is an action with immense power, precisely for this reason it is important to ask: what is *hasatah* and how does it work?

A *midrash* in Sifrei Devarim struggles with the nature of the act of *hasatah*, and offers two definitions. Each definition refers back to a biblical story which we will explore.

ספרי דברים פסקא פז

אין הסתה אלא טעות, כענין שנאמר (מלכים א כא:כה): "אשר הסתה אותו איזבל אשתו".
אחרים אומרים: אין הסתה אלא גריי, שנאמר (שמואל א כו:יט): "ועתה ישמע נא אדני המלך את דברי עבדו, אם ה' הסיתך בי ירח מנחה".

Sifrei Devarim #87

Hasatah means error, just as it is said, "whom Izevel his wife incited" (1 Kings 21:25).

Others say: *Hasatah* means provocation, as it is said: "Now therefore, let my lord the king hear the words of his servant. If God has incited you against me, let God accept an offering" (1 Samuel 26:19).

The Sifrei Devarim brings two interpretations for the act of *hasatah*: **error** or **provocation**. Both focus on the qualities of the act of incitement from the standpoint of the person being incited. Both types of *hasatah* are anchored in rich biblical narratives that reveal different aspects of how *hasatah* works and its dangers.



I. Incitement as error

According to the first interpretation, incitement is causing a person to make a mistake, take the wrong moral path. This interpretation rests on the story of Navot's vineyard. Ahav the king seeks to buy the vineyard of Navot the Jezreelite, but Navot refuses because it is his ancestral heritage. Ahav returns to his house "sullen and displeased" and does not eat. Izevel his wife, who identifies in his acceptance—even if with disappointment—of the situation, a royal weakness, says to him, "Do you now rule Israel?!" and promises to obtain the vineyard for him. She does this through a false accusation, having "scoundrels" testify against Navot that he cursed God, leading to his being put to death.

In the summary of the chapter it is said:

מלכים א כא:כה

רק לא היה כאחאב אשר התמכר לעשות הרע בעיני ה' אשר הסתה אתו איזבל אשתו:

1 Kings 21:25

But there was none like Ahav, who did sell himself to work wickedness in the sight of God,
whom Izevel his wife incited him.

The verse is not said by one of the characters but by the biblical narrator, granting the statement a broad perspective of the entire story. What is the *hasatah* here, and what are its qualities and characteristics?

The incitement is expressed in the change of Ahav's perception: initially he understands that there is a limit to his power as a king. He is frustrated and perhaps even despairing, but



accepts the judgment and boundaries. Izevel convinces him that his behavior does not befit the status of a king (“Do you now rule Israel?!”); she argues in a certain sense that a king is not subject to the law but stands above it. This is the error of which she convinces Aḥav. To be incited, according to this interpretation, means not only to do a bad deed, but to be convinced that it is justified. In such a state, the judgment of the person is undermined and they lose their internal compass.

From here several implications derive. First, it reveals the extent to which language of mockery, shame, or undermining identity (“what kind of king are you?”) can become a powerful tool. Second, not only is the inciter (*mesit*) responsible and punished; the incited person is also not exempt from responsibility, because they accepted the new worldview upon themselves and acted from within it. Third, *hasatah* of this kind is particularly dangerous because it changes the way a person interprets reality: injustice seems to them like a right, violence as the realization of power, and law as an obstacle to be bypassed.

II. Incitement as provocation

The second interpretation in the Sifrei Devarim defines *hasatah* as provocation. Here the incitement does not necessarily change the person's perception, but rather awakens in them an impulse, fear, anger, or desire, until they act contrary to what they know to be correct.

The *midrash*'s quote from the book of Samuel takes us to the last direct confrontation between David and Shaul. David receives a second opportunity to kill Shaul who is pursuing him, but chooses once again to spare his life out of respect for his status as “God's anointed.”



Shaul learns where David is hiding and goes there with 3,000 warriors. At night, David enters Shaul's camp, finds Shaul sleeping in the center of the camp, and takes the spear and the jar of water that were at his head as proof of the opportunity he had to kill him.

David, trying to understand Shaul's reason for wanting to kill him, calls to Shaul and says: "If God has incited (*hesit*) you against me, let God accept an offering, if it be children of men, cursed be they before God!" (1 Samuel 26:19). This is a sincere and sharp moment; in which David is certain that Shaul is incited, acting out of an external motive. One possibility is that God incited Shaul, such that this is a sign of a theological crisis requiring repair; in such a case, David suggests reconciliation: "If God has incited you against me, let God accept an offering."¹ Another possibility is that human beings incited him, then they are cursed because they turned Shaul, the king, into a tool in their hands. Through this proclamation, David hints to Shaul that he is weak, he is being incited rather than acting as he believes.

Shaul himself immediately admits: "I have sinned... I have played the fool and have erred exceedingly" (26:21). He knows that he erred, yet was swept away. That is, according to this interpretation, incitement does not cancel the knowledge of evil. Incitement as provocation indicates a state in which a person does not lose the distinction between good and evil (unlike *Ahav*), but rather the ability to control themselves.

From here additional implications regarding this form of *hasatah* arise. First, since the person still knows that the deed is bad, their responsibility does not disappear; precisely this

¹That is, if God caused this hatred, it is possible that I or you have sinned, and I propose to offer a sacrifice that will atone for these sins. See also the *Mablim* on this verse and the discussion on *Bavli Berakhot* 62b.



knowledge obligates them to build mechanisms of stopping, distance, and caution. Second, the inciter does not have to convince with an orderly argument; it is enough for them to arouse fear, insult, envy, or a sense of threat in order to push the person to action. Third, the struggle against such incitement is not only an ideological struggle but also an emotional struggle: there is a need to weaken the impulse, and find courage.

III. Between error and provocation

The distinction between the two types of incitement that we encounter in the Sifrei Devarim—incitement as “error” and incitement as “provocation”—presents us with two entirely different challenges.

Incitement as error is a blow to identity and to the perception of reality. It works slowly and convinces the person that evil is good and that a lie is truth. The repair for such incitement is rehabilitative and educational: it requires a reconstruction of moral standards, study, and conversation that re-illuminate moral truth.

Incitement as provocation: in this case, the incited person knows what is good and what is evil, but due to various reasons and pressures, they do not stop themselves. Here, courage is required in order not to surrender to pressures.

The two interpretations of the Sifrei Devarim complement each other: sometimes incitement changes a person’s worldview, and sometimes it does not change their perception but rather overwhelms them until they act contrary to it.



Ultimately, whether incitement operates by clouding our judgment or by overwhelming our emotional defenses, it remains a test of both our moral clarity and our inner resolve. The vital takeaway for our own lives is to cultivate a dual vigilance: first, to continuously examine the worldview we hold to ensure it is rooted in truth and good; and second, to reinforce our stance to withstand social and emotional pressure.

