

## EDITOR'S NOTE

# IS CONTEMPORARY ORTHODOX JUDAISM RACIST? SOME INFORMAL REMARKS

Dear Rabbi Stone,

**T**rying to define “racism” will only engender an endless debate. For purposes of this discussion let’s categorize racism as the adoption of egregiously wrong moral, metaphysical, and/or factual opinions, attitudes, and behavior towards other ethnic groups.

Some hold that the fundamental belief in the singular relationship between God and the Jewish people (*behirat Yisrael*) is racist. Some would go further and allege that maintaining significant separation between Jews and Gentiles is itself racist. On this view, Judaism is self-evidently racism and there is nothing more to say.

If these fundamental Jewish tenets are not inherently racist, are other propositions allied to fundamental Jewish doctrine in fact racist? Are these auxiliary beliefs necessary in order to maintain the essential doctrine? In other words, does *behirat Yisrael* presuppose racist views?

Does the notion that God elected the Jews, of all the nations of the earth, to be His people, presuppose that Jews bear some distinguishing characteristic that makes them superior to all others? Rationalists and mystics (who have more in common than you would think) answer: Jews must be superior, of course. What else would justify the divine preference? But this does not follow logically. The election of Israel is a mystery—God’s ways are not our ways. For all that theologians may attempt to understand God’s ways in terms that make sense to us—usually by analogy to personal relations—His choice of Israel, like His choice to create a world to begin with, is rooted in His sovereign will and need not supervene on any natural or supernatural property. Such choice does not imply lack of divine concern and love towards other nations. As Michael Wyschogrod noted, a father or mother often has a favorite among their children with whom they share a particular intimacy. Of the distinguished child much is expected and with responsibility come both glory and suffering but this does not negate or diminish their love for their other children. Modern liberals may object and insist that all human relationships must reflect total impartiality so that any deviation from strict quasi-bureaucratic impersonality is a moral flaw and offense against the letter of justice.

## TRADITION

Wyschogrod would respond that this view is bad philosophical anthropology and belief in the particular connection between God and the Jewish people in truth validates, rather than negates, the claim to distinctiveness of other peoples as well. Personal relationships are unique inherently.

The Torah (Bible and rabbinic literature) ascribes merit to our father Abraham and we rightly assume that his virtue has some connection to the covenant God makes with him and his progeny. For that reason readers are puzzled that God's initial summons to Abram (Genesis 12) contains no mention of his righteousness. Even if we did not have rabbinic traditions about his integrity and self-sacrifice prior to God's revelation to him, we would surely have expected the Torah to preface that initial revelation by recounting mighty actions which earned him special divine attention. At the very least one would anticipate the kind of introduction we get to Noah (Genesis 6), which attests to his righteousness as a man of integrity (*tamim*) who walked with God. This introduction is omitted for the father of our people because, as Maharal noted, the special covenant between God and Israel is a mystery, rooted in the divine will. Testimonials to Abram's worthiness would diminish the unfathomableness of God's choice. God's call is abrupt. Only several chapters later, when God commands Abraham to circumcise, does the Torah allude to this description of Noah, as God demands of Abram to "walk before me and become *tamim*" (Genesis 17).

Nonetheless, it is natural that Jewish thinkers have attempted to complement the laconic voluntarist account of Genesis by linking Abraham's status to his attributes. Human love combines reason and passion, elements of ascription (love because the beloved has certain attractive qualities) and elements of bestowal (love because the lover chooses to invest the beloved with value). God's love is an expression of His will but it is not arbitrarily bestowed. For Rambam, for example, the devotion of Abraham grounds God's covenant with Israel, a covenant that that came close to being forfeited during Israel's idolatrous period of Egyptian bondage. By contrast the Kuzari and certain mystical trends in Judaism speak of some supernatural metaphysical essence that is transmitted in a quasi-genetic manner. The essentialist formulations are not without value. The mystery of the divine will transcends simple human concepts and these approaches avoid a one-sided emphasis on the idea of merit presented by Rambam and others. It is also understandable that such attempts to make the divine will accessible to human reason are likely to import scientific ideas as explanatory categories. These analogies become dangerous when they lead to one-dimensional identification of Jewish distinctiveness with reified categories, especially those borrowed from physical-biological theories of their time.

All this requires much further study and analysis. However the racism you asked me about is not about the relation of Israel to humanity as a whole but about judgments regarding particular subgroups within humanity. I have briefly alluded to Jewish views of *behirat Yisrael* only because they may have an impact on these more particular ethnic attitudes. If one's idea of Jewish singularity is primarily theological, relating to God's plan for the world, without adding non-theological principles, or mentioning them only in passing, it implies nothing about the inherent character of different ethnic groups. *Behirat Yisrael* would then be, in yeshiva parlance, a *gezerat ha-katuv*. If one rationalizes Jewish uniqueness along Maimonidean lines the concrete history of the Jewish people's relationship with God takes on great significance—what has God demanded of us and how have we responded? Again this would entail no biological or metaphysical conclusions about other nations. If, however, the difference between Jews and non-Jews is not about the unique historical relationship between God and Israel centrally expressed by the covenants of Genesis and Sinai, but derives from another set of ethnic qualities, natural or supernatural, then one may reasonably hypothesize additional distinctions among various national groupings.

As we all know, such distinctions have been common in Western scientific, humanistic, and popular culture. In the nineteenth century, two psychologists (who were brothers-in-law) Hermann Steinthal and Moritz Lazarus, who played active roles in German Reform Judaism, established *Völkerpsychologie* (the psychology of nations) as an academic discipline. Down to the present day, books are written containing breezy generalizations about sunny Italians and morose Scandinavians, mixing speculations about biological nature with social and geographical factors. We are all familiar with the kind of joke that associates Germans with beer, Frenchmen with wine, Englishmen with gin and tonic, and Jews with diabetes.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes the speaker is earnest and chauvinistic and the humor appears only in retrospect: historians of hay fever smile at the influential Victorian physician Sir Andrew Clark's *havdala*-like glorification of the malady that supposedly chooses “the man before the woman, the educated before the ignorant, the gentle before the rude, the courtier before the clown... and out of every climate that it visits it chooses for its subjects the Anglo-Saxon, or at least the English-speaking, race.”

As a rule these productions are benign and occasionally they are insightful. Other times they are toxic. I need not rehearse for you the

<sup>1</sup> For the unfamiliar see <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/booker-prize/8063053/Booker-Prize-Its-a-funny-old-thing-Jewish-humour-....html>

## TRADITION

history of race science and how it was employed to establish the superiority and inferiority of ethnic groups and to justify eugenics, restrictive immigration laws, and ultimately extermination. These theories were prevalent among social scientists, natural scientists, and the intellectually enlightened political leaders who took their cues from them. They were discredited morally by Nazism and eventually lost scientific credibility as well. From a scientific point of view we cannot take it for granted that all such theories are humbug; we cannot rule out *a priori* the existence of significant practical differences among groups that are discoverable by genetic science, though it is unlikely that these will turn out to correlate closely with such superficial characteristics as skin pigmentation. However that may be, the religious doctrine of universal human dignity transcends scientific investigations: from a religious perspective we are not allowed to assign decisive moral significance to potential empirical differences.

You refer to texts that generalize about the endowments of various groups and countries. *Kiddushin* 49b, for example, speaks of ten measures of strength that descended to the world, of which the Persians took nine; ten measures of lice, of which Media took nine and so forth. These rabbinic statements reflect the opinions of certain Talmudic rabbis about the peoples and places of their time. I wrote above about their popularity in the modern world that such broad statements sometimes convey true impressions as long as they are not reified. As also noted earlier the tendency to interpret *behirat Yisrael* as a matter of non-theological natural or supernatural qualities also increases the impulse to interpret other global statements about groups in terms of rigid ontological categories. Such an orientation, by magnifying putative differences among human beings, threatens to weaken the central universal teachings of Judaism about the unity and dignity of the human race.

Many Jews who define Jewishness in terms of ethnic pride rather than special responsibility to God enjoy magnifying Jewish superiority or conspicuousness in a wide range of mundane pursuits. The Jews are the captains of capital and the prophets of socialism; they are the great humorists and entertainers, at least before other ethnic groups superseded them and likewise they are disproportionately represented at the highest levels of art and science and so forth. None of this has much bearing on Judaism as the service of God.

## II

In America today, and for those to whom you teach Judaism, racism is not about scientific or pseudo-scientific theories of human variation. We

cannot escape African slavery and its seemingly endless aftermath. This is not the place to revisit that bitter history. Following a bloody Civil War precipitated by the institution of racial slavery, after another century marked by blatant discrimination and indignity and then over half a century of struggle to undo the evil that was done, America is still severely plagued by the aftereffects. We may disagree as to why all the solutions and schemes advanced to relegate this intractable curse to the past have not fully succeeded. Yet we cannot deny the simple truth stated by Justice Thurgood Marshall, dissenting in the *Bakke* case, even if we doubt his practical conclusions about affirmative action: “The experience of Negroes in America has been different in kind, not just in degree, from that of other ethnic groups.” This is why the RCA Proclamation on Racism (October 30, 2015) moves from statements about the universal dignity of the human race and the Jewish legacy of sympathy for the persecuted to recognition that “the centuries-old American problem of white racism against African Americans continues to be a disgraceful, explosive contemporary reality, with both overt and insidious manifestations.”<sup>2</sup>

A senior rabbi, to whom many of us are indebted, once told me how he explained this to his congregation. He wove a yarn about an American GI, midway through basic training, who brought his shoe to the local shoemaker for fixing and was told to come back in a week. The weeks went by and each time he was put off with the same promise. He shipped out without the mended shoe. Decades later, just happening to be back in the same town, he couldn’t pass up the opportunity to check on the fate of his shoe. The shoemaker looked at the shelf and said: “Please come back next week.” The moral: justice deferred indefinitely is justice denied.

### III

The rabbi added that his speech was not well received because his *shul* was situated in a “changing neighborhood.” He meant a neighborhood where blacks were moving in and whites were moving out as fast as they could. Less euphemistically it meant that Jews who lacked the mobility or the money to escape lived in constant fear of violent crime whenever they ventured out by day; by night they were confined behind double or triple locks that too often failed to ensure their safety. These were the elderly and the low income Jews. In my youth, families worried about evacuating

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.rabbis.org/news/article.cfm?id=105832>

## TRADITION

their aging relatives before it was too late. I have written in these pages of my childhood at 715 Saint Marks Avenue in Brooklyn.<sup>3</sup> Only a few years later, by the '60s and early '70s, one visited the family still there with trepidation—more than once a bottle whizzed past the visitor's ear and shattered on the pavement, accompanied by the hurler's hearty advice that Jews get off his turf. One of my aunts was forced to flee three times in twenty years. My mother bore the marks of several beatings.

Can you imagine such experiences not engendering resentment and bitterness among the victims and those who absorbed indirectly what they suffered? Such memories, of course, do not justify racism. There was no black conspiracy to expel the Jews. If the eventual outcome was a kind of "ethnic cleansing" of the Jewish population, no small blame rests with real estate companies knowing that the Jews, especially the traditional Jews, could not fight "blockbusting," unlike other whites who would forcefully resist integration. As the situation worsened, well-meaning politically correct politicians hesitated to give the police a free hand. Not all the Jews fled: the Lubavitcher rebbe instructed his followers to hold the line in Crown Heights, only a short walk from my Bed-Stuy; Yeshiva University chose not to leave Washington Heights; various Jewish self-defense organizations, including Meir Kahane's JDL, were established to protect Jews as the police could not. Surely the evolving political consciousness of traditional Jews reflects an awareness of these factors. All the same, the language of broken bones, though eloquent, is not nuanced. The old abandoned Jews of whom I speak, quite a few of them refugees of European persecution, felt their oppression in its most proximate and visible form. The American scene was rife with prejudice which, once confirmed by experience, was not easily set aside. They did not have the knack of protesting attractively by chanting and shimmying in the approved manner. But in their helplessness, under their breaths, they knew how to curse...

When you ask about Orthodox Judaism and racism, speaking in your role as an educator of young Jews, at the root of your vexation are these insidious muttered imprecations amplified around dinner tables, in classrooms and shuls, often regurgitated by people who have suppressed or never knew the pain and betrayal whence they may have originated. Modern Orthodox identity, for many of your students, is more about these scenes of socialization than it is about religiously formed convictions and theological propositions. That socialization supposedly enables our young people to uphold the reality of a transcendent God, whose commands override human preferences, devotion to the singular destiny of a people

<sup>3</sup> "The House I Lived in: A Taste of Gooseflesh" *Tradition* 44:2 (2011), 1-7.

separate from the nations of the world, and a way of life sharply at odds with secular values, and to resist the powerful attractions and pressures of that world. When our socialization indulges and even encourages racist utterances, the Orthodox community finds itself in the wrong on a clear-cut moral question, the one question that, in the eyes of liberal secular culture, takes precedence over all other moral questions.

If our only challenge is to state Jewish belief clearly then the RCA declaration cited above is adequate to the task. For many years my response has been to adhere firmly to the principles outlined above, which echo those of our *rebbeim*. That is enough for me but I am no longer sure it's enough for our community. The problem is that the hypercritical society to which our students are attuned judges not by what Judaism preaches but by what the community tolerates. Those who perform racist language within our community may be too sunk in bitterness to care how many young people they alienate from Judaism; some may be too enveloped in their shared social world to notice. You and I must pick up the pieces.

Many of my students, not least those who are most outraged by racist speech, know nothing of the violence that dislocated and tortured the low income Jews of New York, Boston, and other cities. There are reasons we speak so little of it. I have always opposed Jewish preoccupation with persecution, precisely because it promotes excessive bitterness and distracts from the service of God. Playing on old grudges is morally and religiously dangerous. Perhaps I regret we were not militant in speaking up for the victims. Some of us, perhaps, prefer to dim the lights on this episode because we are afraid for our children who aspire to find their place in the higher echelons of American society, where political correctness is the rule. If made aware of the complex history of good and evil, we fear, it will be harder for them to fit in.

And so I am torn. On the one hand those who accept the opening section of this essay must continue to marginalize interpretations of *behirat Yisrael* that bring Judaism into agreement with racial ideology. We must continue to stress the centrality of universal human dignity in Jewish teaching. We cannot avoid facing the shadow of slavery and the failure to overcome its legacy in American life. We cannot excuse the tolerance of racist language in some segments of Orthodoxy that has hurt our position in the world, vitiated our own *yirat Shamayim* and driven young people away from religious faithfulness. On the other hand, amnesia about the difficult historical context is neither possible nor healthy. The failure of our American Orthodox community to have that conversation may be more harmful, in many ways, than the consequences we might fear.