

The Horseshoe Theory, Christmas, & the Jews

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Rabbi Adam J. Raskin, Congregation Har Shalom

There is an idea in philosophy called the “Horseshoe Theory.” Now this theory has nothing to do with a lawn game or throwing ringers at a stake in the ground. The Horseshoe Theory, originally promoted by the 20th Century French philosopher Jean Pierre Fay posits that beliefs, opinions, political positions, of the far right and the far left are actually closer to one another than those in the political or ideological center. Rather than beliefs being charted along a straight line, think of the shape of a horseshoe. The two ends of the horseshoe curve in toward one another. So in terms of ideology, the extreme ends of the spectrum are actually closer to one another than they realize or probably care to admit. While the Horseshoe Theory has plenty of detractors, I think we can see its veracity in the modern manifestations of anti-Semitism...The anti-Semites on the far left [think: Jeremy Corbyn, Tamika Mallory, or Louis Farrakhan] and the anti-Semites on the far right [think: all those marchers at the Unite the Right riot in Charlottesville, or nativist political movements popping up all over Europe] are not all that different when it all boils down to their disdain for Jews, Judaism, and Israel.

I encountered the Horseshoe Theory again this week, though in a very different context. One of my kids came home from school this week and shared something rather startling that a teacher had mentioned in class. Not let me say as an aside, we have willingly chosen a Modern Orthodox Jewish education for our children because of its emphasis on strong Jewish text skills, its promotion of a life of deep faith and the commitment to mitzvot and religious practice, and the way that the school’s culture celebrates traditional Jewish life and values. Sometimes, as I imagine is the case in public school or other private schools, a teacher will say something that sounds totally outlandish, which the student will then report to his or her parents. So here’s what happened...one of my kids teachers let slip a few days ago that Jesus was not a Jew, that he didn’t practice Judaism, and that he was the founder of another religion altogether. Now I don’t know if this teacher, who is also a rabbi, happened to have heard one too many Christmas songs on the radio, or was getting a bit defensive as we approach December 25th. Whatever he thought he was doing, my daughter sensed that it was off-base. Not that she is such a scholar of Christianity, but somewhere in the recesses of her education and experience in the world, she had also heard that Jesus was a Jew. So which is it? Are we Jews to regard Jesus as a heretic, an apostate, or never even a Jew to begin with; or do we acknowledge that another religion’s messiah was in fact a practicing, knowledgeable Jew himself? Before reaching out to the teacher, I decided to consult with two experts. First, I emailed the eminent New Testament scholar, who also, by the way, sent her kids to an Orthodox day school, Vanderbilt professor Amy-Jill Levine. She corroborated why I assumed to be true: the overwhelming consensus of academic scholarship about Jesus is that he was not only Jewish, but a rabbinic Jew and a devout practitioner of his faith. There is no serious scholar of this period who regards Jesus as having been anything but Jewish.

Then I reached out to my friend Rabbi Ysoscher Katz, who chairs the Talmud department at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah in New York. To my surprise, he confirmed that among Haredi Jews and even conservative elements of the Modern Orthodox community, Jesus was a Christian, and a maybe even worse. He pointed me to a vignette in Tractate Sanhedrin 43a, where the Talmud says about a person called Yeshu, which is Aramaic for Jesus, “*she’kishef ve’heiseet*,

ve'heidiach, et Yisrael,” meaning he practiced sorcery, incited people to idolatry, and led the Jewish people astray. There are a handful of stories about people named Yeshu in the Talmud, and many scholars are unconvinced that they are necessarily references to the Jesus of the Christian Bible. Remember *Yeshu* can also mean *Yehoshua*, or Joshua, a very popular name both then and now. But for our ultra-Orthodox brothers and sisters, this is an incontrovertible reference to Jesus of Nazareth, who I imagine they need to regard as being totally other, rather than somehow one of us, and yet simultaneously the focus of another religion’s belief system.

Now for the Horseshoe Theory...Prof. Levine mentioned to me in her email, that there was an attempt among non-Jews as well to de-Judaize Jesus. To sanitize both Christianity and him of any Jewish identity, history, or content. When did this happen? During the Third Reich, when theologians and Bible scholars within German Protestantism convened the “Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on German Religious Life,” in 1939. A good Nazi could never worship the Jewish God, or a messiah who was referred to as “the King of the Jews.” The members of the Institute argued that all the Jewish content in the New Testament was insidiously added to the text by early Jewish converts to Christianity, but that in truth, Jesus and his religion were out to destroy Judaism altogether. Jesus was not a Jew, but an Aryan; the Gospels had been corrupted, and needed to be recovered. A year later, in 1940, *Die Botschaft Gottes*, which means “God’s Message” was published...it was a Bible that had totally purged the New Testament of any Jewish content (and dropped the Old Testament altogether). Even Hebrew words like *Halleluyah* were eliminated from the text. So on one end of the horseshoe are ultra-Orthodox deniers of the Jewishness of Jesus, and on the other end of the horseshoe, Nazi, German Protestant deniers of the Jewishness of Jesus.

After I presented some of this information to Mia’s teacher, I urged him to consider the following...The more that Christians understand the Jewish origins of their faith and their savior, the better it is for the Jewish people. The reclaiming of the Jewishness of Jesus in many denominations today has been nothing less than a blessing for Jews because it has generated an intense interest in understanding Judaism in a more serious way, which in turn has created tremendous respect for Jews, Judaism, and Jewish civilization. And the more interest, the more respect, the more sensitivity about Jews and Judaism, the result will be less anti-Semitism, fewer stereotypes about Jews and Judaism, and probably a decrease in proselytizing as well. I am reminded of the revolutionary words of *Nostra Aetate*, the Second Vatican Council’s 1965 teaching about interfaith relations: “the Church, mindful of the patrimony she shares with the Jews...decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone.” If that patrimony were to be rejected, the Church would lose a major weapon in its arsenal against anti-Semitism.

Since we read Parashat Vayechi today, I want to point out something fascinating in this morning’s reading...

Out of respect for Jacob’s expressed wish to be buried in the land of Israel, and not Egypt, Joseph, his brothers, and their families took Jacob’s remains to *Ma’arat Ha’Machpelah*, to be buried alongside his parents and grandparents. Along with the family, *kol avdei Paro, ziknei beito, ve’chol ziknei eretz Mitzrayim*...all of Pharaoh’s officials, the senior members of his court, and the dignitaries of Egypt came up for the funeral as well. Chariots, horsemen, came too. It

was a huge funeral cortege. Here's the funny part...the local people, when they see all these Egyptians, say to each other (Gen. 50:11): "*Evel kaved zeh le'Mitzrayim!*" This is some major Egyptian funeral going on here! But of course, it's not an Egyptian funeral, it's a Jewish funeral. The deceased is Jewish; the mourners are Jewish; the gravesite is Jewish. What they assume from external observation is actually quite inaccurate. So too in terms of the central figure of the Christian faith. From the outside looking in, he might be assumed to be anything but Jewish. But peeling away those false assumptions reveals that he was very much one of us.

As we enjoy our movies and our Chinese food next Tuesday, I think we should hope that more Christians understand the Jewish origins of their faith. Abraham Joshua Heschel once said in an interview at Notre Dame when he was asked about Jewish expectations of Christianity, "I would say that the most that Christianity can do is to be faithful to its ultimate roots." Obviously we Jews don't add anything extra to our daily services on December 25th. But Heschel's words might be worth considering on that day. Let us all pray that on that holy day for many of our neighbors that they grow in their understanding of the ultimate roots of their faith. And may that understanding lead to mutual respect, collaboration for goodness in the world, and to borrow the words from the Christmas hymn: "Peace on earth good will to men [*and women*]!"
Shabbat Shalom.