

Amnesty for Whoopi Goldberg

Parashat Terumah

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I have a confession to make. I don't watch what used to be called "daytime TV." (See: [Daytime television - Wikipedia](#) .) I've never watched daytime soaps like "General Hospital," daytime game shows like "The Price is Right," or daytime talk shows like "The View."

And so, I didn't see, in real time, Whoopi Goldberg's recent comments on "The View" about racism and antisemitism. But, of course, I heard a lot about them in the ensuing days.

The comments themselves are actually not my focus this morning.

Don't get me wrong: I'm hardly endorsing them as an accurate depiction of the nature of racism or antisemitism. Do the Jews constitute a "race"? Was Nazi antisemitism in fact racist? Well, it depends on how you define race and how you understand Jewishness. We Jews today certainly don't consider Jewishness a racial classification -- but Hitler certainly did. In Jeff Jacoby's op-ed piece in yesterday's *Globe* (see: [It's not just the Holocaust that Whoopi Goldberg got wrong - The Boston Globe](#)), he points out that the very first sentence in the graphic novel, "Maus," -- which also, of course, was prominently in the news this week (See: [School Board in Tennessee Bans Teaching of Holocaust Novel 'Maus'](#))-- is a quote by Adolf Hitler which goes as follows: "The Jews are undoubtedly a race...." It then chillingly concludes, "but they are not human." So, needless to say, those who were watching The View when Whoopi Goldberg spoke were indeed exposed to an uninformed perspective on Nazism that requires clarification, and I'm grateful that that clarification ensued.



What I want to focus on is what happened after the show aired. What happened next -- very soon, in fact -- is that Whoopi apologized. (See: [Whoopi Goldberg apologizes for saying the Holocaust was not about race](#) .)

Now, I know that it isn't the High Holiday season. But apologies interest me all year 'round, because we make mistakes all year 'round. And even though, on the High Holidays, we spend more time than usual focusing on things we've done wrong during the whole previous year that we haven't yet atoned for, that's hardly the ideal. The ideal is that when we realize we've made a mistake, we should apologize right then and there, and not wait until the Days of Awe.

And that's just what Whoopi Goldberg did. She apologized. She said the following:

“On today’s show, I said the Holocaust ‘is not about race, but about man’s inhumanity to man.’ **I should have said** it is about both. As Jonathan Greenblatt from the Anti-Defamation League shared, ‘The Holocaust was about the Nazi’s systematic annihilation of the Jewish people — who they deemed to be an inferior race.’ **I stand corrected.**”

“The Jewish people around the world have always had my support and that will never waiver. **I’m sorry for the hurt I have caused.** Written with my sincerest apologies, Whoopi Goldberg.” [emphasis added]

Now, I first learned about this whole brouhaha on one of the listservs that I’m on. It’s a listserv of Jewish leaders. Some are congregational rabbis. Others work in other Jewish institutions. What puzzled me is how one person after person on that listserv rejected Whoopi’s apology: They used words like, “**insincere,**” “**disingenuous,**” and an attempt at “**appeasement.**”

I read and re-read Whoopi’s words and I thought to myself: Here is someone who - as I see it -- is forthrightly taking responsibility for what she’s done. She is acknowledging that she said things that were wrong. (As she put it, “I stand

corrected.”) She is neither defensive, nor attempting to cover up or make excuses for what she did. Rather, she is appreciating, and apologizing for, the hurt that she caused.

I found no fault with the words of that apology. And yet, ... on that Jewish listserv, one person after another rejected it.

That bothered me. And it still bothers me. It’s as if we -- we Jews -- couldn’t let go of it. We couldn’t allow someone to make a mistake and apologize for it. We had to keep at it, for our own reasons.

Now, maybe you could understand our over-reaction as the result of a collective trauma: We Jews understandably become furious when people don’t recognize the nature of the Holocaust, when they see it as just another banal example of “man’s inhumanity to man.” That can drive us crazy. To us, such seemingly willful ignorance is insidious. Maybe we just cannot believe that in the twenty-first century, we’re still having to defend the veracity of the monstrous inhumanity of the Holocaust. After all, Deborah Lipstadt was forced to go to court to defend herself, because she called a Holocaust denier a Holocaust denier. That’s upsetting.

But -- if I can judge from the experience on my listserv -- there’s something about the way that some in the Jewish community have been dumping on Whoopi Goldberg that I find way out of line.

During the same week that Whoopi Goldberg made her comments about racism and then apologized for them, Amnesty International came out with a report that described Israel as, essentially, a racist regime practicing, on behalf of the Jewish people -- that is, *on our behalf* -- among the most heinous of state-sponsored sins, namely: **apartheid**. That harsh report, which described Israeli behavior as cruel and brutal, evidenced a **rejection**, a **dismissal** and a **disparagement** of the nobility and moral worth of the Zionist project in spiteful language. It reeked of contempt.

I read huge chunks of that 280-page report -- I didn't read every footnote, and so I didn't read every word, but I read many of them -- and I couldn't find anything other than that harsh condemnation. By my lights, there was no effort to present the context and complexity of the struggle -- a struggle that the Jewish people have waged for well over a hundred years -- for self-determination and national sovereignty. Especially given that there doesn't seem to be very much in the report regarding the behavior of Palestinian authorities, the only reasonable conclusion that one can come to from reading the report is that the Israeli actions described within it are the result of imperialistic, oppressive and racist intent.

The irony is that in the same week that Whoopi was criticized for *not* seeing anti-Jewish animus as racism, Amnesty International arguably deserves condemnation for seeing racism where it may not exist.

I recently read an interview published in *Times of Israel* with two Amnesty International leaders. (See: [Amnesty to ToI: No double standard in accusing Israel, but not China, of apartheid | The Times of Israel](#) .) I highly recommend that you read it. It's absolutely appalling. The leaders -- who seem to be dedicated, principled champions of human rights -- can't seem to be able to explain why, of all the countries in the world, only two stand accused of apartheid: Israel and Myanmar. Not, for example, Turkey (notwithstanding its treatment of the Kurds) or China (notwithstanding its treatment of the Uyghurs [pronounced WEE-GERS]). (Regarding the former, see: [Kurdish-Turkish conflict \(1978-present\) - Wikipedia](#) . Regarding the latter, see the extraordinary story that ran in the *New Yorker* last April: [Surviving the Crackdown in Xinjiang | The New Yorker](#) .)

I was reminded of a conversation I once had many years ago with the great scholar of linguistics, Noam Chomsky. He had just given a talk about what he saw as Israel's oppression. I suggested that he wasn't sufficiently acknowledging how vulnerable and contingent Israel's existence was. His response was simple: Every country's existence is contingent. That kind of dismissive, reductionist thinking made me feel as though I were speaking to a clever, ingenious master of words. I guess I was.

Again, it was during the week that that Amnesty International report was issued that colleagues of mine in the Jewish community *couldn't stop talking about Whoopi Goldberg, couldn't stop criticizing what she had said, couldn't stop suggesting that it was insincere* -- and couldn't stop pushing her to do more. (One colleague suggested that she should make a nice donation to the Holocaust memorial museum.)

I thought that that was wrong -- and I still do. If we reject apologies that check off all of the boxes that distinguish good ones from bad ones, how does that ever encourage people to do *teshuvah*? It doesn't make any sense to me.

If that Amnesty International report reminded me of my conversation with Noam Chomsky, Whoopi Goldberg's comment reminded me of a different experience I once had in Israel. I've spoken about this on several occasions. I once brought a group of local, Boston-area Christian ministers to Israel. Most of them happened to be African-American. On this particular day, we spent the morning at Yad Vashem. Afterwards, we gathered in a circle to process what we'd seen. Several of the ministers were visibly moved. One of them, a woman who is a minister in a congregation in Roxbury, for whom I'd come to feel a real warmth, could barely get the words out of her mouth. "I knew about the Holocaust," she said. "But I never knew that the Nazis killed children."

That was such a powerful revelatory experience for me. At that moment I realized that what probably all of us here -- either in person or virtually -- know about the Holocaust is simply not known to many -- indeed, most -- other people. Even *educated, well-meaning* people -- who, we might think -- and we might wish -- should know better.

When Whoopi Goldberg made her original comment, it appears that she did not know that the Jews were deemed an inferior race by Hitler. That comment -- which doesn't appear to have been mean-spirited -- reflected the way in which she, as a Black woman, understands and experiences racism.

Many years ago, Whoopi Goldberg starred in a movie called Sister Act. (She then went on to star in several sequels.) In the film, she played a nightclub singer who, for her own protection, dresses and “passes” as a nun. It is hilarious.

But that was a movie! Whoopi Goldberg knows that, as a Black woman, she herself can’t ever pass as white -- whereas the Jews she knows certainly can. Ergo: any discrimination, persecution, or inhumanity against us as Jews doesn’t, at first glance, look like **racism** to her. It’s as simple as that.

Now, we know that it isn’t as simple as that. After all, all of us probably grew up hearing it said that Jews are not a race. And objectively speaking, we come from all over the world, and there’s no distinguishing physical feature about us. Now, again, that didn’t stop Hitler from calling us a race, but if we Jews don’t consider ourselves a race, why does it surprise us that Whoopi Goldberg -- and apparently many other people -- don’t understand the complicated nuances of this?

In the midst of this complicated question, one thing *is* simple and straightforward, namely: **the apology that Whoopi Goldberg offered.**

In a world in which the battles that we Jews have to wage on our behalf have very high stakes, there are many more worthy things that we should be spending our time and attention on rather than needling Whoopi, and pushing for more and more and more.

Tonight, as Shabbat draws to a close, we’ll acknowledge the importance of making distinctions. *Hamavdil bein kodesh l’khol, bein or la-hoshekh, bein yisrael la-amim*: the difference between the holy and the profane, between light and darkness, between Israel and the nations, between Shabbat and the other six days of Creation.

We’re making distinctions all the time. We should be making distinctions in this area as well.

There’s antisemitism in the world. Terrible antisemitism. There’s also ignorance about Jews. **They’re not the same thing.** There are people in the world who, no

matter what you say to them, persist in thinking that Jews and Judaism are poisonous. And then there are people who have an appreciation of Jews and Judaism, who you could actually describe as philosemitic. There are people who are arrogant; and there are people who can admit when they're wrong.

In Pirkei Avot, Yehoshua ben Perachya teaches us an important lesson.

Here's what he says: *"hevei dan et kol ha-adam l'khaf z'chut."* "Judge all human beings favorably." Give people the benefit of the doubt.

We should take his words to heart.

I would hope that, even if Whoopi Goldberg hadn't convincingly played a righteous, pious person -- a nun -- in Sister Act, we would give her the benefit of the doubt, and believe her when she says she's sorry.

Let's do just that.

Shabbat shalom.