The Dangers of Relativism

Rabbi Melanie Aron

July 10, 2020

When a speaker with a significant position within our Reform movement gives a talk to hundreds of rabbis, cantors, educators, and lay leaders of our congregations, the words he speaks carry a great deal of weight.

Therefore I was quite upset when last week in a talk on Jewish political thought, I heard a leader of our movement say that, though he himself personally supported all of these issues, one could not make the case that Black Lives Matter is a Jewish value or that wearing a mask relates to the Jewish ethical principal of *pikuach nefesh.* He also went on to question human rights as a Jewish value in Israel's declaration of independence.

I am not using his name this evening as I just this afternoon received the recording of his public lecture and I could not review it to be able to quote him verbatim, but I feel compelled to respond, particularly to the first two issues that are of great domestic significance in the United States right now. To leave the impression that Judaism has nothing to say on these issues, and that it is just a matter of personal preference, is a misrepresentation that sows doubt in people's minds about the clarity that exists within Jewish teaching on these issues, even given the challenge of speaking for Judaism when with our long history there are actually many "Judaisms." To claim to personally support them while providing an opening—*pitchon peh*—to those who would dispute these issues is to allow the claim that the opposing view is just as Jewish. It feeds the perception that

Progressive Jews are heavy on the progressive and light on the Jewish, while in these cases, the Progressive views stand well within the mainstream of Jewish teachings.

The principle of *pikuach nefesh* creates a hierarchy of values such that saving a life overrides the fulfillment of other Jewish obligations. The classical statement is, *Pikuach nefesh docheh et haShabbat,* the saving of a life overrides the Sabbath restrictions, but it is also quoted classically with regard to eating on a fast day when health is endangered. The story frequently told in this regard is about Rabbi Israel Salanter, who, when criticized for being lax in his observance because he permitted eating on Yom Kippur during a cholera epidemic, demurred; he explained that he was not lax on the issue of fasting, but *machmir,* exceptionally strict, on the issue of saving a life.

With regard to the Sabbath, what is most relevant to our situation is that one is allowed to dig through rubble as part of a rescue effort on the Sabbath, even if you don't know whether someone is under the rubble and even if you don't know whether that person is still alive. Digging on the Sabbath is normally forbidden. If this forbidden digging is a religious obligation, even if it is not clear that it will directly save a particular life, how much the more so are we obligated to wear a mask that also can potentially save a life and requires no violation of Jewish law.

Further, in the Biblical text, we are told that Moses wears a mask. After sharing God's revelation, he has become too holy and is a danger to the community. Therefore, when Moses isn't speaking with God face to face, he wears a mask for

the protection of those he might encounter, lest they end up like Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu, consumed by a fire from God.

In terms of public health, there is also a related legal text from the Bible: the commandment to put a fence around the roof. What was that about? Who was that to protect? Not necessarily yourself, but rather those who might be up on your roof on a hot summer night, either for dinner—outdoor meals were common then as well—or to sleep, and could potentially fall off. In general, Jewish law holds that even if there was only a *safek,* a chance, that something was dangerous, it was forbidden, as we are commanded to be very careful in protecting life. How can anyone say that Judaism has nothing to say about our obligation to safeguard life in this current pandemic?

Modern scholarship stresses that race was not understood in Biblical times in the ways we think about it today, and there is much evidence that prejudice against individuals based on the color of their skin was not known in the ancient world. Noah's curse of his grandson Canaan, son of Ham, had no racial association in any text until the eighth century of the Common Era. Further, Noah's curse being related to people of African descent was not a common understanding of the text until the 16th and 17th century, though later it was used in the American South to justify slavery. A core Jewish belief is in the creation of one Adam, so that as Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5 teaches, no racial or ethnic group could claim superiority: "[But a single person was created] for the sake of peace among humankind, that one should not say to another, 'My father was greater than your father'." This is enunciated also in the Prophets where Malachi (2:10) asks rhetorically, "Have we not one father? Has not one God created us all?" Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

put it bluntly: “You cannot worship God and at the same time look at a man as if he were a horse.”

Rabbi Louis Jacobs, a prominent British rabbi, writing back in 1973, explained: “Racial discrimination is rightly seen as opposed to the spirit of Judaism.” It is true that there are some Orthodox, influenced by Jewish mysticism, who believe the Jewish soul is superior to the non-Jewish soul, but this is not a racial issue nor is it a mainstream Jewish view.

In the first chapter of Pirke Avot we find a warning from one of the earliest teachers, a predecessor of the great rabbis of the Talmud. Avtalyon would say: “Scholars, be careful with your words . . . lest you desecrate God’s name.” So too today, to leave the impression that racial justice and public health are merely issues of personal preference, is to pervert Jewish tradition.