

Do Not Hide Yourself: The Uighurs and Rohingya

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There are times when we are inclined to look at a situation or problem and then turn aside, saying, “It’s not my problem.” Maybe we observe something happening on the street with people we don’t know, or maybe it happens in a social situation in which our intervening will be awkward. Or it might be events happening far away which we don’t see as related to ourselves. We tend to focus on people we know or with whom we share an identity.

The issue of the Uighurs, a group of ethnic Muslims that is being persecuted by the Chinese government, might seem like the furthest thing from Jewish concerns. In case you haven’t been following the issue, recently European governments were joined by Japan, Australia, Canada and New Zealand to protest the treatment of the Uighurs before the United Nations. It is estimated that a million or more Uighur people have been detained in re-education centers and that the community is under intrusive surveillance. The United States has not commented on this or other human rights issues since 2016, though Representative Steve King of Iowa recently commented on the issue in the context of a statement of opposition to abortion, in which he mentioned the Uighurs and mocked people not eating bacon, insisting that “everybody ought to eat pork.”

Since Muslim countries, presumably because of their economic ties with China, have not spoken out, it might seem that the Jewish obligation to act is minimal. Yet the Jewish community has played a role in the defense of a similar ethnic minority, the Rohingya, a group of ethnic Muslims from Myanmar who have been forced by persecution to flee to refugee camps in Bangladesh where the resources are not adequate to care for them. The US Holocaust Museum reported that there was “compelling evidence of genocide” against the Rohingya, and 17 Jewish organizations have banded together—groups including the American Jewish World Service, The American Jewish Committee, HIAS, and the ADL, as well as religious organizations including the Union for Reform Judaism, the Rabbinic Assembly of Conservative Judaism, and the Orthodox Union. Clearly, even without an ethnic or religious connection, the Jewish community has recognized that our words “Never Again,” require us to speak out when others are in danger of ethnic cleansing.

I will admit I hadn’t thought much about the Uighurs and would be hard pressed to place them on a map, until Robin Adelman, our Early Childhood Director, mentioned to me that we had a family with Uighur connections in our preschool. They had mentioned to her their concerns about family members who remained in China. Was the Jewish community doing anything about this? Doing some research, I was pleased to see that the cause of this ethnically Turkish Muslim minority had found its way to The Times of Israel and to the Jewish community. As Amy Woolfson wrote in a recent article:

“The Jewish people don’t need to be warned about genocide. We know it doesn’t happen overnight. We know it starts with a culture

being demonized, and with hate and repression becoming normal.

Then people start disappearing.”

Our Torah portion this week included 72 different commandments, covering every topic under the sun. Some seem relevant today, others, as the Cantor mentioned, less so. One of the commandments concerns the return of lost property. It is found at the beginning of Deuteronomy Chapter 22, the chapter from which the Cantor chanted this morning:

“If you see your fellow’s ox or sheep gone astray, do not ignore it.

You must take it back to your fellow. If your fellow does not live near you or you do not know who he is, you shall bring it home and it shall remain with you until your fellow claims it, then you shall give it back to him. You shall do the same thing with his donkey, you shall do the same thing with his garment and so too shall you do with anything that your fellow loses...”

This is not an insignificant burden. When you find something lost, whether it belongs to friend or foe—and the text goes out of its way later to remind you that this includes your enemy—you cannot just leave it where it is. You have to take care of the lost item until you have the opportunity to return it. This commandment might have been partially prompted by kindness to animals, who might starve or hurt themselves if lost on the road. But this commandment is more than that—it includes inanimate property and concludes with the words *Lo Tochal Lehitalem*. YOU MAY NOT *HITALEM*. *Hitalelem* is an unusual word. It comes from the root meaning “to disappear” and is in the reflexive form. Onkelos, one of the early translators of the Bible into Aramaic, renders it as “You have no right to

hide yourself.” More modern translations render it as “You may not remain indifferent” or “You may not withhold your help.”

We all have the impulse to allow some things to get away from us—to conveniently not see that which might impose a burden on ourselves if we were to notice it. Yet the commandment of this Torah portion is so important that it will be echoed in the reading from Isaiah on Yom Kippur morning, with the same words, *lo titalam*: “Is not this the fast that I have chosen, to unlock the shackles of injustice, to loosen the ropes of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free and to tear every yoke apart? Surely it is to share your bread with the hungry, and to bring the homeless poor into your house, when you see the naked to cover them,” *UMIBSARECHA LO TITALEM*, literally, and not hiding yourself from those also of flesh, or more poetically, never withdrawing yourself from those who are your kin.

As the new year begins, may we remain sensitive to our moral obligation, to allow the lonely to catch our eye for a moment of conversation, to notice the needy in our community, and not to hide ourselves from the pain of those far away.