

Woke Judaism
Rabbi Jay TelRav
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Good Yontiv and Shabbat Shalom,

In the email marketing world, I'm told that one is doing pretty well if 10% of your recipients open your messages. So, when I saw that Temple Sinai consistently has a 70-80% open rate I flipped out – So proud of how engaged we all are with this community! Then I figured out that just scrolling through your emails on a program like Outlook sends back a “read” receipt when the preview pane shows it for a moment and the “unread” dot disappears. Oh well, we're still doing great. And I know that because earlier this year, I sent out a survey to gain clarity on the congregation's beliefs that more than 200 of you participated in. I really am so proud of you for that!

The overwhelming result showed me something unsurprising. Simply stated, when asked what you understood to serve as the enduring message of Judaism, the vast majority of you answered using some form of Rabbi Hillel's “do unto others.” It is a piece of wisdom literature presented as very similar to the widely used Golden Rule. Hillel said that the essence of Torah could be distilled down to this: “if you don't like it, don't do it to someone else.” In other words, we must consider our actions and how they impact others – what a wonderfully simple test to determine whether our behavior is appropriate. This was, of course, music to the ears of your rabbi whose core message is itself some version

of recognizing our opportunity to participate in the project of society to the extent we are able.

You've likely heard me teach that the most often repeated mitzvah in the Torah is to care for the widow, the orphan and the stranger – for you were, yourselves, strangers in the Land of Egypt. We can certainly relate: our ancestors were the ones who were vulnerable. You may not have found *yourself* there, but your family was. And Moses showed up as the mortal emissary for God who, we are told, intervened on our behalf to teach us how it feels.

I so wish that this sort of “do unto” mentality would naturally prevail but instead, our lizard brain makes us believe that our own self-interest will be sacrificed if we do not play by others’ cutthroat rules in the race for survival. Despite all evidence to the contrary, we still have not evolved beyond our animalistic fear of limited resources. And in that struggle between people, it makes it so much easier to see the world as a battleground on which we have God as our ally.

The worst outcome of that point of view is the implicit conclusion: If I have God on *my* side, then you do not and therefore, I need not be bothered by your condition...God chose me - this is the way it is supposed to be. Rabbi Art Green thinks this is preposterous. He writes, “Can we imagine a God so arbitrary as to choose one nation, one place, and one moment in human history in which the eternal divine will was to be manifest for all time?”¹ Green is suggesting that, rather than one Chosen People, the world exists in its variations by design. Our

¹ Green, Art. Judaism for the World. Pg. 209.

differences are essential to the very nature of things. Or, if you prefer, you might like to say that Diversity was God's Idea. Jonathan Sacks says there is Dignity in difference... there is holiness. Someone who feels they enjoy God's preference more than others would be free to step on the masses of humanity underfoot. We might also call that person a sociopath.

But Torah goes even further: our responsibility is not even limited to other humans.² The Torah transmits specific requirements to feed our animals before we eat ourselves and even to protect the trees during wartime stating, "trees cannot flee as a human can."³ In other words, having the power to care for that which cannot care for itself, makes them your responsibility. This precept applies whether we are considering a vulnerable animal, a helpless tree or an exposed human being. Hear me clearly, empathy is *the* fundamental principle at the center of Judaism.

But if you say, "are we not also taught that we are God's chosen people?", I'd respond that we have been lucky enough to receive a carefully crafted set of teaching that demands that we take this way of thinking, seeing and behaving out into the world and model it for others. For this cause, we accept the responsibility and, in that way, we *choose* to be chosen.

Later this year, Temple Sinai is bringing in the Jewish musical artist named Noah Aronson who wrote the words and music of introduction to the Barchu we used this morning. Before we can pray, his lyrics begin, "Am I awake, am I

² Deuteronomy 11:15. <https://www.star-k.org/articles/articles/seasonal/375/feeding-your-pet-barking-up-the-right-tree/#fC>

³ <https://www.sefaria.org/Deuteronomy.20.19-20>

prepared...” He forms the words in our mouths, having us ask the questions we should be asking in order to make the most of the prayer experience: are we paying attention and are we alert? This experience is not going to work if we just phone it in and expect anything significant to happen. Of course, this is true beyond the prayer space. Out in the world, our actions, when performed with an open and attentive mind, grow in consequence and significance.

It makes me think of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel’s famous observation that, when doing something important in the world, (in his case, marching for civil rights, arm in arm with Martin Luther King, Jr.) it can feel like “we’re praying with our feet.” I love the idea that Jews are encouraged to think of our actions in the outside world as a form of prayer – that is, when they are intentionally used to contribute to the beautiful version of God’s world in which all humans are honored as divine thanks to their diversity.

In other words, when we live an open-eyed, proactively compassionate version of life, we are living our lives as if we are the actualization of the prayer. As I said, Aronson’s words remind us that, to know what the other wants and needs, in order to make our lives into that lived form of prayer, we have to be awake to what that is.

What is he worried about on our behalf? What’s the opposite of “awake?” I suppose it would be “asleep,” and who among us would wish to go through life dozing? The mystical Zohar reads “וי לאינן דשינתא - Woe to those that sleep with eyes fast closed and do not know or consider how they will arise in the Day of

Judgment.”⁴ It makes me think of an image of the Ostrich who buries his head in the sand when the world out there gets too difficult to handle. It’s the quintessential version of, “If I can’t see it, it isn’t happening.” Or, perhaps you’ll appreciate a picture of our dog, Dave with his head under the bed. He does this all the time and seems to think that, if he can’t see you, you can’t see him and he’s safe.

Well, it is only a tiny grammatical step to make the connection from waking ourselves up to being awoken. And, right there we have the word I want to explore with you. ~Woke~ When I hear the battle waged around the work, “Woke,” this is all I can think of. Does not being awake to the challenges of our world so that we can respond seem so much preferable to sticking our head in the sand and acting asleep? I have struggled to understand how it is that this particular descriptor has come to be used as the insult intended by those who use it as a pejorative.

What does this term, slung with such venom in the conservative news media, even mean when used in contemporary context? Emerging from African-American Vernacular English, “Woke” is an adjective whose derived meaning refers to being “alert to racial prejudice and discrimination”. To claim social inequities do not exist would be like trying to stick our fingers into our ears and make noise to drown out whatever facts we would prefer not to hear. They seem to be saying, “I will not be called “woke” like those liberals... I prefer to stay asleep – pretending there are no problems.”

⁴ Zohar as quoted in S'fat Emet on Lech L'cha

Bill Maher recently told Joe Rogan that, “Woke Liberals are just like the Ku Klux Klan” because they are looking at people and seeing their differences such as race, gender and sex.⁵ At first blush, it sounds lovely – Maher seems to suggest that we should not see people through the lens of their defining differences; that we should look past that and just see people. But functionally, doing so causes us to look right past the reality of what it has been like to be in their shoes. Not only do these differences exist, I have already suggested that they are a part of our Divine Diversity.

Sometimes the conservative right will quote religious teachings on the matter but, if we wish to embody the best of Abraham, or Jesus or Mohammad or Buddha, we must see, care for and value the stranger who is in pain as if their pain is ours.⁶

This summer, Julie and I spent a little time vacationing in Canada and were stunned to see how actively our neighbors to the north are looking directly at the role their ancestors played and the effect their colonialism had on the Native Americans, who they refer to as First Nations. Nationally, they are engaging in an Ashamnu – they refuse to pretend otherwise. The juxtaposition against our conversation in the States is difficult to miss. Here, for example, conservatives express exasperation about the new conversation that has emerged around the

⁵ Flood, Brian. Bill Maher compares woke liberals to KKK on Joe Rogan show: They see race 'first and foremost'. September 4, 2023. <https://www.foxnews.com/media/bill-maher-compares-woke-liberals-kkk-joe-rogan-show-see-race-first-foremost>

⁶ Islam: “None of you has faith until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself”. ([Sahih Al-Bukhari](#))

way we remember Honest Abe saying, “Abraham Lincoln is not good enough for them?!?”

As new historical information about Lincoln’s treatment of the Native Americans comes to public awareness, some have raised reasonable critique.⁷ There was a trial in which several hundred members of the Dakota Tribe were sentenced to death for an attack against white settlers without having provided them with the chance to defend themselves according to the due process of our courts of law. After personally looking over the evidence and in the midst of managing a Civil War, Lincoln found convincing the cases against 38 of the men and signed their death warrants. There were unarguably steps in the legal process that were missed, and so Lincoln personally engaged in the execution of Native American men whose lives, we know, have never been valued on par with white Americans. It is reasonable for us to say that one of our heroes of American history missed the mark in this case.

Do we not know to take this man like all others - piece by piece and admit that they are complicated, like you and like me? We struggle with this a great deal. We build up leaders and icons and we create symbolic exemplars of political or religious or comedic or sporting heroes and we expect them to be perfect. Then, when they turn out to be human – meaning flawed - we simply cancel them and look elsewhere for our next messianic hero.

⁷ Gerstman, Evan. [Abe Lincoln Is Next On The Cancel Culture Chopping Block](https://www.forbes.com/sites/evangerstmann/2020/10/14/abe-lincoln-is-next-on-the-cancel-culture-chopping-block/?sh=5a72a43e6224). Forbes.com, October 14, 2020. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/evangerstmann/2020/10/14/abe-lincoln-is-next-on-the-cancel-culture-chopping-block/?sh=5a72a43e6224>

Judaism handles its heroes quite differently. We hold no perfect models in our tradition – all of them were flawed. We laud Abraham’s leadership and criticize his parenting. We value Moses’ ethics and criticize his temper. We emphasize King David’s joy in serving God and criticize his insatiable lust. Perhaps this is why Judaism's second commandment is to make no graven images? And, the rabbis teach that this why we were prevented from knowing where, exactly, Moses was buried. We are discouraged from turning any man or woman into an idol, god or hero because none of us is perfect?

To suggest that Abraham Lincoln had his faults and missed his own mark is *not* to suggest that we cannot hold him up as a model for his most impactful and lasting legacies. If we are willing to remain awake, we can hold both as true at the same time. It is therefore fair to say that, at its essence, Judaism encourages the individual to stay Woke – that is, to open our eyes and see the world and its inhabitants for all the incredible blessing as well as the ways in which growth is overdue - in our attitudes and practices.

You sit in this room with me as a *Reform* Jewish community. We embrace that the stagnant and outdated needed to be updated. We have found the conservation of antiquated traditions and ways of teaching to be out of line with the world we live in. We were the first to embrace the equality of Women and the Queer community. We have advocated for the evolution of Jewish Law and have established the Religious Action Center in Washington to further the values of Torah on the secular stage as well. When we move forward on our journey toward someplace, we are making progress. – anything we label as “Progressive”

whether it is progressive Judaism or progressive values will continue to do just that - progress.

Bill Maher considers himself a “liberal”⁸ – he has “liberated” his mind from old ways of thinking. Maybe it was good parenting, the right teachers or his life experience, but he was taught to see the plight of the other. But now, he said that he’s *glad* he lost his woke fans because they have no sense of humor.⁹ He remembers when good liberal opinions were enough. He says liberal thinking has gone too far. Apparently, he is the one who gets to choose the very moment in the evolution of human values and to decide that his set of views (as they look right now) represent the perfect culmination of progress. Anything more conservative or more liberal than he is, should be seen as out of sync. He was happy when it looked like the way it did when *his empathy* woke him up to its truths.

I feel a lot of compassion for folks who feel like the world has gone too far in its sensitivity to others’ needs – I admit to sometimes feeling that myself. It can be hard to keep up with the expanded significance of chosen pronouns, gender affirming health care, the workplace that honors its employees by keeping matters of Diversity and Inclusion and Equity in focus not to mention changes to our education systems that are designed to address inequities in our community. My teacher, Rabbi Jonathan Slater writes: Much turmoil has taken hold of our

⁸ “Bill Maher explodes: “Liberalism and woke culture isn't the same thing. They're f***ing opposite of each other”. 12/30/2022. <https://www.marca.com/en/lifestyle/celebrities/2022/12/30/63af68db22601dfb108b45bd.html>

⁹ <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=tzwC-1000cw>
<https://www.foxnews.com/media/maher-happy-lose-woke-fans-no-sense-humor-dont-let-door-hit-you.amp>

country. Some of us have felt that our eyes have been pried open, while others hold fast to prior ways of seeing. The latter too is understandable.”¹⁰ Like an elder who feels technology has left them behind and throws up their hands and accepts that they’re going to henceforth be a curmudgeon who eschews all things digital, it is easy to push it all off. (Does anyone else here have grandparents who used racist language and would never be made to understand why it was a problem?) Jonathan Slater goes on: “How can we bear seeing [the familiar world] we love turn to ash before our very eyes? But not everyone has the choice of living with their eyes closed. Minorities who are discriminated against today do not. The Piesetzna Rabbi did not. The world he lived in was engulfed in flames from every direction, and increasingly, so is ours.”¹¹ We don’t have the right to bury our head in the sand and pretend the world is not on fire.

Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, also known by the place he lived, Piaseczno, Poland hence “the Piesetzna Rabbi” was well known for the lessons he taught while in the Nazi concentration camps. He tackled the complex questions of faith in the face of the mounting suffering of the Jews in the ghetto.¹² He offered us¹³ an explanation of the famous midrash of when the young Abraham of the Torah destroyed the idols of his father's shop: You see, Abraham lived in a historical moment of darkness in which nobody would name the truth about their

¹⁰ Sfat Emet, 1:58. From the Hassidic perspective, this world is viewed as a “corridor that leads into the great hall.”

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¹² Shapira, Kalonymos Kalman. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kalonymus_Kalman_Shapira

¹³ Derech MaHeleck, Lech L'cha.

blindness. He needed to smash that which symbolically allowed them to keep their heads in the sand. The Piesetzna compared it to a man looking at a burning palace and asking: “where could the owner be?” Then another man leans out the window of the palace and says, “I am the owner.” In the metaphor, the Palace is the world, the owner of the building is God and the rest of us, living in the rooms of the palace, act as though we are not concerned greatly enough about the fact that it is burning around us! The rabbi says: “We live amongst darkness and obstruction, theft, robbery, murder, lusts – each one repulsive in and of themselves. But to make matters worse, a person who is [spiritually] ill, does not feel that he or she is enclosed in a burning building.”

Abraham was alert to the fires burning around him and could not understand the lack of concern others felt. In other words, Abraham was woke when the others around him were not. I worry that this describes us today. We are long overdue for a national moment where in which we beat our chests as a nation of individuals and say, “Ashamnu” we have sinned against so many minorities. But now, we must refuse to close our eyes and insist upon staying woke. We should do this for them but we each need to do this just as urgently for our own soul.

A few years back, on what most call Columbus Day but others refer to as Indigenous People’s Day, protests in Portland OR transformed into riots. We witnessed expressions of collective rage over past injustices that are not being addressed. That day, one native American woman was heard chanting, “We want official acknowledgement that the boarding school system of the United States

was a terrible, terrible mistake with genocidal impact." What is she looking for? If we *were* to offer that acknowledgement would it change the past? Of course not...She wants to be witnessed as equally human. She wants her people's pain and suffering to be seen.

When we ignore the pain of a victim or tell them it isn't as bad as they say or that it is not worth addressing, we are telling them that we are unwilling to allow their experience of pain to challenge our sense of inner peace. When I close my eyes to that suffering, I am saying to them that they do not matter. This is an incredibly cruel thing. It is exactly what Holocaust Deniers do to us. These days when one person says, "Black Lives Matter," we too often hear someone else angrily retort, "Yeah, well Blue Lives Matter, too." Of course, the lives of our police force matter - nobody is arguing they do not. They have always mattered, that is why it is not as important to state it. Empathy and compassion are not in limited quantity – we have the ability to care for and about both sides of a conflict without sacrificing one or the other.

A short while ago, you joined me as we recited the Sh'ma stating God is "One." When we are taught that humans were made in God's image, it means *all of us* and it means that what you're seeing in the face opposite you is the image of God looking back. Therefore, if you are willing to show one group of humans more love and concern than others, you are denying that the Divine is at the center of being human. What is more, when you insist on closing your heart in this way to some, it causes an eclipse of the divinity that is a part of you. As Elie Wiesel wrote, "We must not see any person as an abstraction. Instead, we must

see in every person a universe with its own secrets, with its own treasures, with its own sources of anguish, and with some measure of triumph.”

Jonathan Sacks wrote, “Many people worry about their own stomachs and the state of other people’s souls. The real task is to do the opposite: to worry about other people’s stomachs and the state of your own soul.” Or as the founder of the Mussar Movement, Rabbi Israel Salanter used to say, “Someone else’s material needs are my spiritual responsibility.”¹⁴

If my comments this evening achieve one goal, it would be to have you consider the possibility that, like me, you may not even realize that you have your eyes tightly shut against seeing certain truths; That being woken up to the other’s humanity is part of sacred personal growth; that being called woke is not an insult – it should be a badge of honor; and that this year is not too late to give it a try.

Being woke is looking at the world through the Jewish lens of Torah. This year, experiment with taking a deep, calming breath and forcing your eyes open, just a bit, to look at what others are hoping you'll see. And may this be our most woke year yet. *Keyn Y’hi Ratzon* – Let this be God’s will,

Shabbat Shalom,

¹⁴ Sacks, Jonathan. Someone else’s material needs are my spiritual responsibility. January 26, 2013. <https://www.rabbisacks.org/archive/someone-elses-material-needs-are-my-spiritual-responsibility/>