Lehrhaus Over Shabbos

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Table of Contents

Articles

Racism and Religious Particularism: A Corrective Antidote

Chaim Trachtman

Introduction

Despite enormous progress over the last fifty years, racism continues to be a leading item in the news. Reactions to the massive forced migration into Europe triggered by civil war in the Middle East confirm that this is not just an American problem. Religious beliefs have often been implicated in racist systems. Judaism is also characterized by particularist ideas that can foster prejudicial notions and xenophobia. In this essay, I aim to examine particularism in Jewish thought and offer a proposal to limit its racist tendencies.

Origins of Racism

No one knows when racism first entered mankind's story. However, it is not a modern phenomenon. In his search for the origins of Inquisition culture, the historian Benzion Netanyahu claimed that antisemitism was already an established worldview of the pharaohs of Egypt. The Spanish persecuted the Marranos who converted to Christianity for racial considerations (purity of blood) rather than religious reasons. For Netanyahu, the bloodline-based bigotry served as a model for later racial theories, particularly for the Nazis.

Where, though, did racism start? Most likely, racism emerged as soon as one group of humans confronted another group and saw difference rather than similarity. Instead of viewing this observation as a welcome fact of biological diversity, each group concluded that their members were better than those in the other group. Modern genetics has documented that intra-group genetic diversity far exceeds inter-group differences. But the "other" is not encountered as a four-legged molecule of DNA with complete gene sequencing. The difference is at eye level. We immediately perceive the physical features that define humans—height and weight, complexion, hair color and texture, eye shape, the sound of their voice, and gait—all of which point towards difference rather than similarity.

The particularity of people fosters placement of individuals along a spectrum for each characteristic. This leads to grade systems for physical features on a scale from good to bad, prejudging those deemed bad, taking steps to limit their influence, and finally adopting full-fledged racist notions towards them.

There is another dimension along which people are categorized: by what they think and the social practices they adopt. This is how religion enters into the picture. Unfortunately, religion has been a major contributor to conceptions of mankind that have led to the ethnocentric and racist ideas. This demonization of the other has often provided cover for persecution and extermination.

Racism in Jewish Thought

Jewish tradition grapples with this, as well. The Torah offers and the Midrash (*Tanhuma*15; *Genesis Rabbah* 36:6) elucidates the well-known Curse of Ham, the progenitor of the dark-skinned people who migrated southward to Africa. After the flood when Noah begins to repopulate the world again, he discovers what happens when grapes are processed into wine. His sons discover him in a drunken stupor. They act to protect his dignity but, for reasons that are mysterious in the text, when he recovers, Noah curses Ham.

This would remain an obscure episode were it not for the subsequent Midrashic identification of Ham with African nations. This curse has provided religious sanction for the persecution of blacks in the Western world including the American pre-Civil War South. Jews are not immune to this belief. In a series of letters (*Iggerot Hara'yah* nos. 89-91) that Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak HaKohen Kook wrote in 1904, he replied to a question from Rabbi Moshe Seidel about his views on the institution of slavery and the place of black people in the contemporary world. Rav Kook wrote that slavery is a natural phenomenon. In the descendants of Cana'an and the children of Ham, "baser qualities grew great while spiritual qualities dwindled." They would never achieve stability as an independent people. Therefore, servitude might be the best fate for these nations because it fits with their divinely preordained status as cursed inferior groups.

It's not just Ham. The Torah singles out Amalek as a people who should be utterly destroyed—man, woman, and child. The Torah portrays the seven nations who occupied Cana'an prior to the conquest of the land by Joshua as incorrigible idolaters who must be completely eradicated to prevent their pagan ideas from contaminating the minds of the Jewish people and defiling the land of Israel.

Yehudah Ha-Levi considered Jews to be a singular nation, a special subset of humanity. They were separated and blessed by God who distinguished them from all other nations. His essentialist views conferred an intrinsic superiority on the Jewish people. They were the heart of humanity as opposed to the gentile body, an idea which translated into a willingness to mistreat all other nations and religious groups. For the Maharal of Prague, non-Jews have a diminished conception of God and are metaphysically inferior to Jews. Conversion to Judaism became an almost impossible proposition because it implied a change in species.

Potential Solutions to the Problem

Knowing the profound destruction unleashed by racism throughout history and in our day, how does one understand our religious tradition? This has been a source of consternation for Jewish thinkers from Sinai onward. A number of strategies have been offered to minimize the potential damage that these views can unleash. One can limit the essentialism to the group in the aggregate but see each member of the group as a divine entity worthy of respect and dignity. Alternatively, one can intellectualize the definitions of nationhood and assert that they do not refer to actual people but rather to ideas that represent a threat to human flourishing. Finally, we might assert that the conditions of the biblical text no longer apply or that the groups identified in the text no longer exist. Political upheavals, national migrations, and social change have blurred beyond recognition the boundaries between biblical peoples.

The Meiri follows this final approach when he characterizes Christians living in the Middle Ages as monotheists who no longer are liable for extermination as polytheistic idolaters The Rambam makes this type of claim when he writes that because of the Assyrian ethnic cleansing and assimilation of the Amalekites and the seven nations into

the global population, we can no longer identify these tribes with certainty. Therefore, the requirement to annihilate them is no longer feasible and applicable.

Still, none of these approaches represents a principled stand against racism nor do they take the full sting out of the extreme particularistic texts in the *Tanakh*. They only cordon off the damage and prevent the application to specific individuals and groups. Moreover, the racist ideas remain in the intellectual gene pool ready to be reactivated.

This has happened recently in Israel with the publication of the book, *Torat Ha-melekh*, written by Rabbis Yitzchak Shapira and Yosef Elitzur. This work is a halakhic attempt to link modern day Palestinians with the condemned groups described in the Tanach and to provide legal justification and sanction for preemptive killing of members of the "cursed" group.

Particularism Versus Universalism in Judaism

Stepping back, it is important to recognize that Judaism is a particularist religion. Chosenness is a key feature of the covenantal relationship between God and the Jewish people. As Michael Wyschogrod wrote, God loves the Jewish people. Abraham and his descendants had unique features that warranted divine selection.

The Jews are a nation that dwells alone. Our legal code and mores are designed to maintain social distinctness and prevent full integration into the surrounding society. This has enabled the Jewish people to survive and maintain their age-old connection to the Torah and the land of Israel. It is important to note that chosenness was not meant to indicate privilege but rather an obligation to promote an ethical life. Moreover, alongside these particularist ideas, Judaism has incorporated universalistic elements that act as a counterweight to the ethnocentric pull of particularism.

Malka Simkovich has demonstrated that these ideas date back to the *Tanakh* and rabbinic literature. Universalism as a theological concept articulates doctrines like the seven Noachide laws that are applicable to all people, regardless of race or ethnicity. It is a belief that there is substantive commonality among nations and shared features of humanity that would preclude exclusionary attitudes or discriminatory policies. Like the interpretive approaches outlined above to diminish the force of racist texts in the *Tanakh*, the

universalistic ideas in Judaism have not prevented outbreaks of extreme xenophobia among Jews.

One potential explanation is that experience in the exile has not been kind to proponents of universalism. Another, as pointed out by Menachem Kellner, is that universalism is not synonymous with pluralism where the latter indicates the recognition of multiple views and acceptance of multiple truths. Although Jews may acknowledge a commonality with fellow humans, according to the prophetic tradition, there is the expectation that at the end of the day non-Jews will accept the world and law of the one true God, the Jewish God.

It is unclear if this will occur by mass conversion or by virtue of individual intellectual enlightenment.

Kellner has pacified the Maimonidean push toward a singular approach to God by focusing on the Rambam's ultimate theological goal for humanity in this world, namely a state of political stability that will enable men and women to contemplate the divine presence in the world. Kellner argues that such a rational, peaceful end cannot by its very nature be achieved by violent means, which should serve as a protection against racist particularism. Moreover, people being who they are and the inherent sociability that promotes group identification, the Maimonidean view of universalism does not address the human inclination to rank everything and place one's own life and thought at the top of the list. And to take up arms against those who think and act differently.

Toward a Solution

An alternative approach to limiting the dangers of particularism and racism may emerge from the law of *hokhe'ah tokhi'ah,* rebuking your neighbor. This is the command to correct someone if they are doing the wrong thing. This is a socially difficult mitzvah to fulfill, placing psychological stress on both parties. The responsa literature is extensive about how and when this *mitzvah* applies.

There are opinions that the imperative only pertains to a person who will listen to the rebuke, who is aware that he/she is sinning and acknowledges that it is not the right thing to do, and who is violating a Torah law. The consensus is that the requirement to rebuke

is not applicable to one who does not accept the oral law and by implication the validity of *halakhah*.

There is one specific word in the text of this commandment, *li-amitekha*, that is germane to the issue of racism. Racism is rebuke and criticism of the other taken to its extreme. It represents overwhelming critique of the other to the point when they are no longer considered to have value as human beings. This rationalizes and sets the stage for physical and emotional degradation of others.

The law of *hokhe'ah tokhi'ah* only applies *li-amitekha*, to your kinsmen, fellow Jews. All other people are outside the sphere of your influence. Knowing that the parameters of rebuking are limited even among fellow Jews, prudence and good sense would indicate that greater restrictions and caution should apply to members of other religious faith groups and ethnicities. They are not legitimate objects of your worldview and have no obligation to abide by your standards of living and values.

There can be and there have been nasty internecine fights within the Jewish nation about identity, politics, and religious destiny. There have even been civil wars. But what emerges from this law of *hokhe'ah tokhi'ah* is an acceptance that all of the "others," all of the non-Jews, can live their lives as they choose provided they do not threaten the welfare of the Jewish people. This does not undermine the prophetic or Maimonidean hope that Torah theology and ethics will ultimately prevail and that there will be a universal embrace of the Jewish God. It does not even promote respect for the lives of others.

But it enables tolerance and peaceful coexistence to emerge. It seems like a weak reed to combat the forces of racism. But by delicately balancing the human need for justification of one's values against the danger of imposing them on others, this proposal may point the way to achieve lives filled with meaning and purpose, to avoid moral relativism, and to prevent the descent into racist barbarism.

The Baptized Jew Who Had a Lot to Teach Us about Orthodox Judaism

Daniel Korobkin

On June 27, 2017, Peter Berger passed away, and the world lost one of its greatest thinkers and writers on the sociology of religion in the modern world. Berger was born to a Jewish family in 1929 in Austria, and the family converted to Christianity in his childhood. After spending the war years in Palestine, Berger immigrated to the United States, where he had a long and illustrious career as an academic sociologist, writing on the social theories of knowledge and religion. In Jewish circles, he is perhaps most famous for his ideas about the nature of religion and religious belief under the conditions of modernity.

Fortunately, Alan Brill recently authored two impressive blog posts on Berger's writings and how they compare with and influence some of the modern sociological and philosophical Jewish writings. His writings explain (and often predict) several features of contemporary American Jewry, including: the decline of non-Orthodox movements; the fragmentation of Orthodoxy despite its successes; the failure of established institutional frameworks; and the importance of "doubt" for the adaptation and survival of contemporary religious groups.

Among Berger's myriad observations about contemporary religion in his voluminous writings (and bloggings), many of which have significant implications for Jewish communities, I would like to focus on two groundbreaking propositions that are particularly instructive for the Orthodox community, of which I am a part.

The first rejected longstanding twentieth century sociological theories that religion was becoming less and less relevant to modern man. Earlier scholars argued that, in the past, religion gave meaning and purpose to everything, including illness, war, and natural catastrophe. But with the advent of modern technology and science, man no longer needed religion's classic function of providing order and structure to life's seeming chaos and arbitrariness. Man was evolving into a secular being who no longer needed a deity to

explain everything. Rather, science explained and governed the world, rendering religion redundant.

But this theory didn't match the facts on the ground. While certain parts of the world, like Western Europe, were indeed becoming more secularized, religion in other parts of the world and religious groups other than mainline Protestant Christianity—notably Mormonism, Islam, and Orthodox Judaism—were becoming much stronger.

Berger concluded that the weakening religious movements had traded in core religious tenets for modernist and universalist ideologies. His theory certainly helps explain the trend in North American Judaism, in which non-Orthodox denominations, which emphasize universalist notions like "*tikkun olam*" and social justice, have weakened, while Orthodoxy, with its emphasis on the particularism of halakhic observance, has grown stronger.

Berger also recognized the need to modify earlier theories in order to explain *why* certain religious configurations, such as Orthodox Judaism, were experiencing growth. Instead of modernization leading to secularization, he concluded, modernization leads to *pluralization.* That is, modern man's access to so many intersecting ideas and cultures does not lead him to reject religion, but rather allows him to choose the kind of religion he prefers.

Once, an institutional church community offered a person raised in it only one way of doing things. Today, everyone has exposure to a multitude of religious cultures and experiences and can freely choose how to express their personal religious sensibilities. So while mankind is not necessarily becoming less religious, religious expression and practice are becoming more pluralized.

This provides a rubric for understanding the growth of "indie *minyanim*," the "*shtiebelization*" of communities (primarily, but not only, within Orthodoxy), and the rejection of one's parents' Judaism in favor of neo-Hasidic *minyanim*, partnership *minyanim*, *beit midrash minyanim*, and a host of variations and combinations of these themes.

Pluralization isn't limited to religion. Society has also come to expect plurality in the way it consumes products. Today, every cup of coffee is custom-tailored for the individual. Prego, as Malcolm Gladwell recounted elegantly in a TedTalk, saw the modern consumer's desire for the perfect spaghetti sauce they could call their own, and revolutionized the industry. Instead of marketing just one sauce, they featured spicy, extra chunky, and other varieties far more compelling than "plain." Taken in this context, many Jews' desire to have *Yiddishkeit* done their way, including the "spicy" and "extra-chunky" varieties, is perfectly understandable.

Berger observed that the down-side of pluralization was that it leads to a weakening of our religious institutions, since as people splintered apart, the mainstream invariably weakens. We are witness to this weakening in many Jewish communities where the old-style institutions that haven't changed the way they do business, e.g., by maintaining only the cathedral-style service, are shrinking, while the avant-garde, experimental shuls and *shtieblekh* are gaining strength. The same may be stated about some of our Jewish day schools, yeshivot, and seminaries.

Berger's second proposition is a direct outgrowth of his first: religious institutions must adapt to the pluralizing forces of modern society. How is that done? Through "doubt."

In Praise of Doubt: How to Have Convictions Without Becoming a Fanatic (co-authored with philosopher Anton Zijderveld) posits that in every person's mind, there are two polar extremes: *fundamentalism* and *relativism*. Fundamentalism refers to those things that I maintain to be dogmatically reliable and true; they've always been this way and they always will be. Fundamental beliefs are in things like the sun rising in the east tomorrow morning or my parents always bailing me out of financial crisis.

With respect to religion, a fundamentalist maintains a long list of religiously-held dogmas. That list may include basic religious axioms, such as belief in God, belief in the divinity of the Torah, and belief in Divine Providence. But a fundamentalist's list might also include certainties that are not theologically dogmatic to Judaism, but which the person nonetheless believes to be absolutely true and necessary.

For example, many Orthodox Jews' religious Zionism demands that they align with a particular political ideology on Israel. For others, it's a given that when I look for a prospective mate, I will use the *shiddukh* system that is in vogue in my community. Because these are part of one's fundamentals, anyone who is politically different or who does not go through the *shiddukh* process is simply *wrong*.

Clearly, excessive fundamentalism is unhealthy, because it leads to intolerance of others' practices and ideas. Furthermore, a person who is so certain that what he is doing is correct will not bother to scrutinize the details of his system to verify that there are no latent flaws. And when flaws are left unquestioned, they will never be rectified.

Relativism is the other end of that spectrum, where one may have an agnostic, *laissez-faire*attitude toward others' practices or beliefs; I'll do things my way, you do things your way. For example, one person may daven in a certain kind of minyan or shul, but doesn't begrudge another for choosing a different shul down the road. Other examples would include personal choices of observance such as mode of dress and hair covering for women, how often a man attends minyan, one's reliance on a particular rabbi, and so forth.

Berger asserted that either extreme is unhealthy for religion and unhealthy for the society wherein that religion resides. For example, if a child makes religious choices that do not conform to her parents' choices, the break between parents and child could be disastrous if the parents' fundamentalist reaction results in the child being completely ostracized by the family and community.

Yet religious relativism, just like its cousin, moral relativism, is equally disastrous. If there are no foundational principles, if everything goes, then religion is a sham. If we don't shun intermarriage and other banned relationships, if we don't declare certain kinds of Biblical Criticism to be beyond the pale, or if we condone serving non-kosher food at Jewish events, then in what sense is Orthodox Judaism orthodox?

This is where every person and community must find their golden mean between fundamentalism and relativism. This is what Berger meant when he praised doubt. Outside the dogmas of our faith, we benefit from questioning those things that have

always been formal institutions and structures of our religious communities but aren't integral to our faith. By introducing a modicum of relativism into our fundamentalist lifestyles, we might arrive at the realization that not everything we're doing is good. And that's how positive change comes about.

Furthermore, we must acknowledge that it's simply impossible for some of our old institutions to maintain the status quo. Facets of everyday life are constantly changing—materially, technologically, and culturally—and these changes give us no choice but to adapt to new realities on the ground.

To take just one example of many: The North American Jewish day school system is currently in a state of crisis because the cost of day school education has outpaced the earning power of most Orthodox Jews, who form the primary population base for these schools. Moreover, priorities have changed, and even with the Orthodox community's increased earning power, certain lifestyle features—vacations, summer camps, multiple cars, single-family homes in the suburbs—that were unthinkable a generation or two ago have become non-negotiable. Consequently, Orthodox families are beginning to question how these "necessities" can be reconciled with the necessity of a yeshiva education.

As a result, the institutional "fundamental" of private Jewish education is beginning to erode. Much has been written about this to date, but one thing is clear: if we don't do something, and do it fast, the crisis will snowball.

Orthodox communities should be taking Berger's "praise of doubt" seriously and start questioning its social structures. This is the only way it will be able to come up with viable responses to ever-changing societal mores. Let us carefully identify and protect our unalterable religious dogmas and practices while putting everything else on the table for scrupulous scrutiny.

Let us carefully examine those areas of institutional Orthodox life that are facing serious challenges. The economics of an Orthodox lifestyle clearly have to be reexamined, and we need to reassess what should and should not be essential to the Jewish home. Are those institutions that are deemed to be in crisis, such as the *shiddukh* and day school systems,

really in crisis? Is it possible that we've become too fundamentalist in our view of these relatively modern inventions that are in need of a serious overhaul?

In the past, Orthodox Jews were taught that they need to be allergic to any kind of doubt. The way we do things, we were told, is the way things have always been done and are an essential part of our Orthodoxy. Tamper with anything, and one risks unraveling the entire system that has kept our communities alive for thousands of years. When it comes to our dogmas and core religious practices, that's still largely true. But when it comes to our social structures, we'd do well to tip our hats to a wise apostate Jew, embrace doubt, and shatter the false gods we have created.