

EDITOR'S NOTE

“FEAR OF FLESH AND BLOOD”

In 1988, the Yeshiva College *Commentator's* Purim issue allowed itself a couple of satirical shots at the Reverend Jesse Jackson, then mounting the first serious campaign by an Afro-American for the presidency of the United States. Two older colleagues at Yeshiva were outraged. Don't they know that “the birds in the sky will carry the word”? A paper—even a college paper—may be retrieved from the subway trash bin, where anyone can read it. How dare we offend the supporters of powerful and popular political figures?

If you asked me, the jokes were unexceptionably mild. My colleagues' fears were misplaced. Yet they spoke from experience. One had reached North America after World War II began. The other had spent part of his childhood in a Displaced Persons Camp after the war. They may have misjudged democratic culture. They did not misjudge anti-Semitism and its potential consequences.

Recently, Orthodox Jews have been held up to mass execration for acts far more heinous than poking fun at politicians. Let us not rehash the long and varied calendar of crimes and offenses. Pick up a newspaper or listen to the radio and you will have been inundated with a plethora of information about rabbis and laymen who have fouled their nest. Some weeks are worse than others and these have been increasing in frequency and severity. I am happy to leave the full reportage to others, especially as one hopes that between my writing and your reading some of the allegations will have been disproved or at least proved exaggerated. That, all extenuation aside, profound moral corruption has been brought to light and that considerable harm has been done to the cause of Judaism and to the reputation of Orthodox Jews is undeniable.

Declarations and attempts at analysis have been called forth at every new revelation of scandal. Diagnostic essays proliferate, some of which also serve the purpose of excuse and mitigation. Yes, we know that charitable institutions vital to our communities cost a great deal of money. We know that *yeshivot* especially need funding. We know that many modern Orthodox Jews are so attached to material comforts that these have

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become, for them, absolute necessities, and that those willing to do with less of them fear the scorn of those who are not.

We also know what the Talmud teaches that one who fails to teach his son an honest trade, it is as if he had trained him in robbery, so that those dismissive of such preparation, especially in a community where lower economic standards are socially unacceptable, are liable for the inevitable results. We have also heard a lot about the general “disconnect” in applying the laws we study in the Bet Midrash to everyday life. One Orthodox organization has declared the need for an enhanced study of the halakha obligating Jews to conform to civil law (*dina d'malkhuta dina*) in the expectation that detailed familiarity would breed respect and compliance among the faithful.

These insights and proposals all have their place. In our hearts, however, we all know that there is more to the accumulation of disgraceful episodes than the desperation of the needy and improvident for money or specific lacunae in halakhic knowledge about our obligations to the government. Underlying the series of offenses is an attitude of dismissal and disdain for others, Gentiles or Jews who are not part of one's in-group. This is evident from the casually contemptuous and unguarded epithets and sneers to which we have become so inured that they are no longer even noticed or hushed. Like the four-letter words that punctuate the dialect of certain subcultures, they have become part of the atmosphere. It is not simply contempt for the government or the tax system or any other American institution. It is contempt for human beings and gleeful pride at the opportunity to take advantage of them.

It may seem strange that individuals whom God has uniquely summoned to His service and glory, who are privileged to study His word and obey the commandments with which He has surrounded us, and who are able, in this country, to pursue unimpeded prosperity and the practice of their religious obligations and cultural interests, should be preoccupied to trumpet obsessively their putative superiority to their fellow citizens through verbal contempt and fraudulent activities. No doubt there are social and historical explanations and excuses and mitigations for this behavior. The confused, dangerous hash of secularist nationalism and ill-digested mysticism that passes for Jewish ideology in many circles has foreclosed more wholesome modes of thinking about the mystery of Jewish uniqueness. Here we must recognize how deeply seated these tendencies are among some individuals, how difficult it is for them to imagine alternative attitudes, and how inclined many of us are to tolerate their routine expression.

Let us not imagine that fine rabbinical eloquence and heartfelt pleading and noble religious sentiments will carry weight with people who do not much respect us or care for our message. The habit of contempt, honed on non-Jews, is easily deployed to resist words of Torah uncongenial to their hearers. We can quote R. Kook's dictum that it is a danger signal when any supposedly Torah morality diverges regularly from "natural morality," but these are tough customers who know not R. Kook, nor care about the intricacy of his ideas. We can cite any number of other sources, and they will be dismissed, belittled, shouted down, or the subject will be changed. There are explanations for this barrier. For now, again, it suffices that these are the facts, and that we are foolish to pretend otherwise.

We can write articles, shake our heads, organize symposia, and even schedule popular or abstruse *shiurim* on the relevant *halakhot*. The realities on the ground will not change until we neutralize the attitude of contempt and amorality.

II

No doubt the most famous incident involving Reb Yaakov in Tzitevian—and one which he felt it a *mitzvah* to publicize—involved the local postmaster. Shortly after he assumed the position as *rav*, a Jew came to Reb Yaakov and told him that the postmaster has mistakenly given him change for a hundred-*lit* note instead of for the ten-*lit* note he had given him. Reb Yaakov advised the man to return the money. Several weeks later, Reb Yaakov was in the post office and this time the postmaster gave him more stamps than he had paid for. The smile of the postmaster's face as he handed Reb Yaakov his stamps alerted him that the postmaster was deliberately testing him to see whether the other Jew has been an honest fool or had been acting according to the dictates of the new *rav*. Reb Yaakov was delighted that he had been presented with such an opportunity for *Kiddush Hashem* (Sanctification of the Divine name) and instantly returned the extra stamps. Years later he learned from survivors that the postmaster had been one of the few locals who had been willing to hide Jews in his cellar, and he was convinced that such displays of honesty had been a major factor in that decision.

So we are told in the ArtScroll biography of R. Yaakov Kamenezky. That R. Yaakov may have delighted in the opportunity to return what didn't belong to him may hark back to the Yerushalmi's story about R. Shimon ben Shetah, who returned lost property to a Gentile, provoking the latter

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to bless the God of Shimon. Both R. Yaakov and R. Shimon knew very well that one could formulate a credible halakhic rationale to justify taking advantage of the non-Jew's bad luck: Finders are keepers—what rights have losers to demand that others make the effort to restore what they have lost? Nor is exploiting an error in calculation equivalent to theft. Many people, including many in our community, would instinctively adopt the postmaster's initial attitude and judge a person like R. Yaakov an honest fool. Some, like the postmaster, might be swayed by his example and come to see that, in the eyes of God, honest folly is the higher wisdom. A few might even be inspired to risk their lives, even more foolishly, it would appear, in time of terror in order to save the people of R. Yaakov and their own souls.

To those who do not delight in the opportunity for *Kiddush ha-Shem*, such anecdotes about *gedolim* and other exhortations seem quaint and unworldly. They cling to the lower wisdom of cleverness, craftiness, cynicism and contempt. It is their gloating at the opportunity to desecrate God's Name that is conserved on tape and gets the media attention. Perhaps the contemplation of Gentile wrath, the fear of flesh and blood, can accomplish what fear of God and the attractiveness of moral ideals cannot.

III

It may seem strange, even paradoxical, that individuals constant in their denigration of Gentiles, who find nothing worthy of emulating among them except for their vices, give no evidence that they take anti-Jewish hostility seriously, as a reality rather than as a rhetorical reflex. They indulge in the rhetoric of hostility and fantasies of persecution even while encased in the greater fantasy of invulnerability. It is as if our Jewish cleverness and their Gentile fecklessness give us a renewable license for bad behavior. My refugee colleagues, with whom our discussion opened, like most of us, had mixed feelings about non-Jews, their culture and our relations with them. They had no illusions about our condition as a nation apart, whose destiny and fate separates us from them and exposes us to hostility, persecution, sometimes exclusion and sometimes death. One may appreciate the benefits of America without taking them for granted. One need not delight in *Kiddush ha-Shem* to recognize how foolish and self-destructive it is to provoke hatred and resentment.

You may feel that expecting the threat of anti-Semitism to rectify the sickness of our community is taking the low road, a little like scaring a

drunkard with tales of the DT's or pictures of a diseased liver. We should respect other people, we should respect the law of the land, because it is right; we should delight in the opportunity for *Kiddush ha-Shem*. In truth, however, almost everyone who leads a decent life and a life of religious passion has been preserved from sin not by high ideals alone but also, on occasion, by reinforcement through fear of the consequences. In this vein, R. Yohanan ben Zakkai wished that the fear of God be as vivid to his students as the fear of flesh and blood. In appealing to those segments of the community impervious to ordinary moral considerations and cool to the personal example of those who live by them, we cannot afford to be overly nice in confronting the likely results of obnoxious, offensive and criminal conduct. If (God forbid) the *Ribbono shel Olam* wills an *idan rit'ha* – an hour of wrath that sweeps all before it, guilty and the innocent, participant and bystander – that all the wealth and institutions tainted by shady practices be sunk and that every insult and gesture of arrogance we have heedlessly, irresponsibly, and contemptuously inflicted upon our host society shall be paid by acts of insult, humiliation and persecution directed against us, we will have no choice but to confess with Daniel in penitence: “Yours God, is the righteousness and ours is the shame of face.”

As a child, I witnessed the then novel phenomenon of young people, raised in more or less assimilated surroundings, who turned to a life of religious observance. I saw many older people, more or less faithful to Judaism and to Jewish life, puzzled that anyone would willingly revert to the ways of their ancestors out of intellectual conviction or spiritual quest. When they discovered some incident of Gentile hostility in the *ba'al teshuva's* past, it made more sense to them. “Ah,” they sighed: “It takes an anti-Semite to remind them they are Jews.” It would be catastrophic but not unprecedented if it took anti-Semitism to remind authentic Jews that there is a God.