

A Jewish view on the multiculturalism debate

Political leaders and commentators are openly asking what are the proper limits for expression of different faiths in our society. There is a questioning whether certain religions and cultures ought not be permitted to flourish in Australia because it seems that they promote behaviours that harm or even undermine the fabric of our society.

There is a Jewish perspective on this important issue. It comes from the story of Moses. Moses became the leader of the Jewish people not because he had a passion for Jewish survival. He had that in spades. Moses became the leader of the Jewish people because he was committed to justice and dignity for every human being.

Through Moses, Jews believe that God gives the Jewish people laws by which they are to conduct just and ethical lives. One of those laws (which was read in Jewish synagogues everywhere this weekend) is in fact repeated 36 times in the Torah. It is the promise not to wrong or oppress the stranger. Jews make that promise because we were once strangers in the land of Egypt.

Having been welcomed into Egypt in Joseph's time, the Jews were cruelly abused in later years and enslaved. No one stood up for them, and their disadvantages multiplied. Egypt became a sick society, and as we all know, eventually God redeemed the Jews from Egypt. In doing so God teaches the Jews not only to stand up for themselves, but, and importantly, to stand up for the stranger, and to oppose wrongful discrimination and vilification.

Standing up for the stranger is not easy, nor is it an automatic human response. One who has been abused must draw upon significant inner strength to stand up and be counted for the aid of another. Active choice is needed. So it is for a collective identity, a people. Every people has a right of self-determination, and that right must be exercised peacefully and respectfully.

However, when the strangers collectively become powerful and act to undermine the society that welcomes them, the welcome may justly end, and the strangers may be counselled in the first instance and if that does not correct the wrong behaviour, the strangers may be cast out. But such an extreme remedy must not be used just because the stranger is different or follows a different faith or reflects a different culture. It must only be used, and sparingly, where the very fabric of society is under attack.

It is essential not to confuse dignified, respectful differences of belief as challenging the fabric of our society. Those migrants, strangers, who peacefully espouse a different faith or culture must be made welcome.

And according to Rabbinic sources harsh or derogatory speech touches on self-image and self-respect in a way that other wrongs do not. A stranger, in particular, is sensitive to his or her status within society. He or she is an outsider. Strangers do not share with the native born the same common memory, past, or sense of belonging. They are conscious of their vulnerability. Therefore we must be especially careful not to wound them by reminding them that they are not "one of us." From a Jewish perspective there is no such thing as freedom of hate speech.

In societies that have rejected the proposition that every human being is entitled to dignity and respect, the Jew has also been rejected. The ghettos of Europe are a case in point. They were not created by Jews seeking to sever themselves from society. They were created for Jews whose dignity had been rejected by the society to which they endeavoured to contribute. In Nazi Germany and in the Gulags of the Soviet Union and in the ghetto of Damascus and the desert villages of Gondar, Ethiopia, rejection of dignity led to ghettoisation of the Jew, in each case accompanied by social decay.

In May 2001 Chief Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks: "... too much of human history has been written in the blood of human victims who – because they were not like 'them', who didn't live like 'them', they didn't share 'their' faith – who were regarded by 'them' as the infidels. They were regarded as the unredeemed, the sub-human. That is why the single most important statement in the rabbinic tradition is that famous mishnaic teaching that when a human being makes coins in the mould they all come out the same. God makes every human being his image and they all come out different. That is why each life, each culture, is a universe."

Rabbi Sacks argues that we will only preserve a natural environment if you respect biodiversity and we will only respect our human environment if we respect religious and cultural diversity. All of us must commit to the dignity of difference.

A foundation of Australian society is an acceptance of multiculturalism and a limitation upon exclusivism. In a truly fair society we treasure the dignity of every human being who lives among us. We treasure also their right to be different. It is in this environment of enlightenment that Jews, Christians, Muslims and people of all other faiths and cultures can thrive and benefit each other.

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