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# FAITH, CONFLICT AND SOCIETY

## A JEWISH PERSPECTIVE

ALL FAITHS have their fundamentalists; people who decline to engage inclusively with modernity. And faiths, more than cultures, have the capacity to be insular.

In assessing any faith or culture as contributing to conflict in our society, or indeed as Rabbi David Rosen said recently, as contributing to the solution to conflict in our society, we need to distinguish between people of faith and fundamentalists. People of faith are prepared to live with ambiguity and uncertainty, and therefore are willing to respect human difference while being strengthened in their particular faith. By contrast, fundamentalists admit of no uncertainty or ambiguity. For them their religion provides absolute answers and removes uncertainties, and disconnects troubling questions from their lives. For a fundamentalist there is no room for any "other" answer for life's most difficult questions.

If faith is a tool for managing ambiguity and uncertainty, then fundamentalists are not necessarily people of faith. Fundamentalism and the refusal to engage with modernity are challenges which must be taken up by all faith communities.

And the more perplexing we are, the more it is essential that we encourage people of faith to engage with us. The people we can and need to engage with are those—of various faiths and cultures—who are comfortable with ambiguity and uncertainty and therefore respectful of pluralism and modernity. But there is no engagement to be had with fundamentalists, because their approach to religion and problem-solving admits only of absolutes.

My thesis, an essentially Jewish one, is that if we can each articulate our faith-based commitment to our very human dignity, we can take that dignity and extend it to others who are of a different faith or culture. None of that requires any compromise of our essential articles of faith. We can be people of faith and yet not fundamentalists.

As I see it we all face an important choice. It is a choice we face in how we conduct ourselves and it is a choice we face in how we teach our children to conduct themselves. How we tell our story and express our religion and our culture—for in my view, the two are inextricably interwoven—can either strengthen Australia as a welcoming, cohesive, liberal, multicultural society, or weaken the fabric of our society if we promulgate views that fail to respect the goodness of those of a different faith.

### RELIGION

WHAT IS IT that the Jewish community brings to the multi-faith conversation? At the core of the Jewish faith is the idea of covenant. The covenant between the Jewish people and God is contractual. Far too often in Western parlance there is reference to the Jews as the "chosen people". This, according to Rabbis both reform and orthodox, is in fact a mistranslation. We were in fact the "choosing people". We entered voluntarily into a covenant with God to continue the act of creation; to make this world every day a better place.

It was of course Moses who was the messenger of the covenant. God communicated his will through Moses because Moses had demonstrated a passion for human justice in three essential ways. Before Moses met God at the burning bush there were three important episodes. The first was when he saw an Egyptian hitting a Jewish slave. Moses intervened. He did not stand aside or stay silent when the strong abused the weak. He stood up for a beaten Jew despite the advantage he could have continued to enjoy by hiding his Jewish identity as he had done until that incident occurred. The very next day he saw two Jews fighting and separated them and persuaded them to continue in peace. Not long after that he saw Jethro's daughters being bullied by some shepherd and prevented from obtaining water for their flock from a well. Moses drove the bullies away so that the daughters of Jethro could take water from the well.

These three incidents demonstrated to God that

Moses was committed to justice between Jew and non-Jew, between Jew and Jew, and between non-Jew and non-Jew. He acted rightly regardless of who benefited, and he acted as a Jew, when hiding his Jewish identity could have brought him advantage.

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 understood that the Jew must be committed to justice and dignity for every human being.

Indeed, the very name of Moses reflects Jewish respect for the non-Jewish world. God changed the name of the first patriarch Avram to Abraham to distinguish him by reason of his acceptance of monotheism. God changed the name of Jacob to Israel to recognise that Jacob had struggled with the angels and felt strengthened, not weakened, in his commitment to God. Thus Jacob became the father of the Jewish people. Yet Moses was given his name by the daughter of Pharaoh, who committed a critical act of civil disobedience—an act of choice—in saving the life of a baby Jewish boy when by her father's decree all such boys should have been drowned. She took a step towards humanity and away from depravity. She gave Moses his name, and the Jewish people were led by a man with an Egyptian name.

We, as Jews, are commanded to keep choosing, between what we do and what we do not do, what we eat or do not eat, how we pray or indeed sometimes do not pray. Each act must be an active choice, targeted to making this world, the world of here and now, a better place for all of us. To abstain from active choice is to abstain from the act of creation. In our schools every child learns how to make choices that contribute positively to the continuing act of creation started by God and continued by humankind.

Making choices is an act of freedom, something the Jewish people prize most highly. But with freedom comes responsibility. And responsibility is both individual and collective; necessarily based on responsibilities covenanted with God.

The Jewish God is not however an exclusive God. The covenant between the Jewish people and God is not designed as the only path to salvation or indeed the only path to acts of goodness. As a choosing people we invite others to make good choices too.

Judaism is unique among monotheisms because what we say is: "chassidi umot olam yaysh lahem chelek el'olam haba"—"you don't have to be Jewish to get to heaven". We strongly believe that God is bigger than any one religion. In pursuing this article of faith, we act in a manner that is consistent with liberal multicultural-

ism. A liberal multiculturalism is one in which each faith respects the other, and does not consider itself to have an exclusive path to goodness or salvation.

Exclusivism is an essentially illiberal concept. Exclusiveness is a claim that a particular faith or culture is the only path by which man can succeed before God. It incorporates a relative denial of the rightness or equivalent goodness of the other. Exclusivism stresses the *inequality* of man. A liberal multicultural society requires a belief in the *equality* of man.

**G**OD GIVES the Jewish people laws by which they are to conduct just and ethical lives. One of those laws is in fact repeated thirty-six times. This makes it the most frequently repeated mitzvah (commandment) in the biblical text. We not only covenant with God to deal justly among ourselves, faithful Jews are also commanded not to wrong or oppress the stranger, because we were once strangers in the land of Egypt (Exodus 22:20). And the commandment is repeated and explained at Exodus 23:9 as follows: "Do not oppress a stranger. You know the soul of the stranger for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." Our conduct and our spirituality must not be infected with oppression.

The Jews, having been welcomed into Egypt in Joseph's time, 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. God teaches the Jews not to stand up for themselves, but rather to stand up for the stranger, to oppose wrongful discrimination and vilification. It is not easy, nor is it an automatic human response. One who has been abused must draw upon 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. The Jewish people covenant with God to stand up and be counted not only for themselves, but for the strangers in their midst.

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 a memory, a past, a 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".

Commenting on this teaching, Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, in his treatise *Living in the Image of God*, teaches as follows:

*If faith is a tool for managing ambiguity and uncertainty, then fundamentalists are not necessarily people of faith.*

## FAITH, CONFLICT AND SOCIETY

Because humans are the image of God, they are endowed by their Creator with three intrinsic dignities: infinite value (the image created by God is priceless); equality (there can be no preferred image of God; that would constitute idolatry); and uniqueness (images created by humans from one mould resemble each other, but God creates God's images from one couple or mould, and each is distinct from every other).

Britain's Chief Rabbi, Sir Jonathan Sacks, adds:

"Why should you not hate the stranger?" asks the Torah. Because you once stood where he stands now. You know the heart of the stranger because you were once a stranger in the land of Egypt. If you are human, so is he. If he is less than human, so are you.

From a Jewish perspective there is no such thing as freedom of hate speech.

JUDAISM is not however one-sided or lily-livered. With the commandment not to oppress the stranger comes a right to require good conduct of that stranger. When strangers or newcomers to a society collectively become powerful and cause harm or seek to undermine the society that welcomes them, the welcome may justly end, and the strangers may be in the first instance counselled and if that does not correct the wrong behaviour, the strangers may be cast out.

Thus, we as Jewish community enter the current debate about the nature of our liberal multicultural society, and say that behaviours which work to undermine our social fabric may properly be counselled against and indeed stopped. Exclusivism should be discouraged. But we do not regard dignified, respectful differences of belief as a threat to the fabric of our society. Those migrants, strangers, who peacefully espouse a different faith we must make welcome. With modernity often comes a commitment to respectful pluralism, which allows no religion, culture or race mastery over any other.

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 by 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 separation and ghettoisation of the Jew.

A foundation of Australian society is an acceptance of multiculturalism and a limitation upon exclusivism.

In a liberal society we treasure the dignity of every human being who lives among us. It is in this environment of enlightenment that Jew, Christian and Muslim can all thrive and benefit each other.

Let me quote from a lecture given by Rabbi Sacks in May 2001:

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—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 in 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 we 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.

That dignity of difference is the foundation stone for the positive Jewish community contribution to Australian society. And of that society we ask for a limitation upon exclusivism and fundamentalism, which when exercised against Jews find expression in various forms of anti-Semitism. Our security and prosperity depend upon an environment of enlightenment in which Jews, Christians, Muslims and people of all other faiths and cultures can thrive and benefit each other. We all depend on the multiculturalism of peace and are harmed by the exclusivism that leads to hatred and war.

And each individual has an important contribution to make, as beautifully symbolised in the following apocryphal Jewish story.

A young sceptic, wishing to test the wisdom of a wise rabbi, held his closed fist before the venerated man.

"What have I in my hand?" the youth asked.

"A butterfly."

"Is it alive or dead?"

The old man knew that the youth was sporting with him. If he replied "Dead", the youth would open his hand and let the butterfly fly away. If he replied "Alive", the youth would close his fist and crush the creature.

The seer replied, "It is in your hands—whatever you wish to make of it."

*David D. Knoll, the President of the New South Wales Jewish Board of Deputies, presented this address at the Fifth Abrahamic Conference, held in Sydney in August.*