

A Universal Faith

Mark 12:28-34

Last Tuesday evening, we hosted the Tree of Life program here in our sanctuary. Those of you who were present will likely attest to how valuable it was for us to listen to Gideon Levy, in particular, speak as an Israeli Jew advocating for the rights and welfare of Palestinians, be they Christian, Muslim, Arab, Druze, Bedouin, et. al.

The news from the Middle East, of course, has not been good for some time. More recently, Israeli citizens have been attacked by knife-wielding youth from East Jerusalem, much like the cloak-and-dagger Sicarii of Jesus' day. Israeli police have gunned down assailants, while IDF soldiers and militant Jewish settlers have mercilessly fired upon Palestinian landowners and rock-throwing protesters, while also killing innocent people in the streets in numbers far exceeding the death toll inside Israel. Since the international press corps typically operates out of Tel Aviv or Jerusalem, instead of Ramallah or Gaza City, what Americans hear about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is explicitly one-sided and slanted.

I will admit, I have spent most of my life influenced and befriended by the Jewish community, certainly moreso than by Palestinians and Arabs. From my childhood to the present, some of my closest friends have been Jewish, with or without direct ties to Israel. I have heard and studied the stories of the Holocaust far more than the Nakba—the Arabic term for the disaster that came upon a whole generation of Palestinians who became refugees when they were forced out of their homes and villages at the end of the British

mandate and the State of Israel was established nearly seventy years ago.

Along with this, I've studied Hebrew, not Arabic. My religious sensibilities and sympathies have been largely shaped by the story of Israel—biblical, mythical, and modern day. I have had an inherent interest in and empathy for Judaism, as the mother culture of my own faith and tradition as a Christian. So it's hard for me to escape the preference I would naturally have for Israel, especially given their often vulnerable place in history and in the Middle East.

However, Israel's policies and conduct toward the Palestinians brings out a deeper, more visceral, response from within me. The fundamental mistreatment and dehumanization of an entire people violates not only international law, but the basic tenets of Judaism. I cannot reconcile the systematic oppression where Palestinians are treated as if a lower race of people, with haunting reminders of Jim Crow laws in the U.S. and apartheid in South Africa repeated daily throughout the West Bank and Gaza. As Gideon Levy pointed out, within the country the culture of fear has made it nearly impossible to change the minds of the majority of Israelis, who find few parallels between what they do to Palestinians and how Jews were treated by the Third Reich. In fact, critics are commonly attacked for being anti-Semitic or, if they're Jewish, as being "self-hating Jews," when most have no greater motivation than to stop this terrible injustice and save Israel from losing more support around the world, including from many within the United States.

The harsh and wholesale suppression of Palestinians, with the economic sanctions against Gaza, the military occupation and

security wall cutting through the West Bank, the stolen land and illegal Jewish settlements, and the fundamental inequities under Israeli law that have been occurring for three generations—all of this is what's fostering the unrest and resistance resulting in bloodshed. In my view, Israel cannot blame the Palestinians for rising up anymore than Jews can be blamed for cursing the Holocaust. Those who are oppressed have a right to life, liberty, and justice. Ironically and tragically, these are core Jewish values that most Israelis revere.

This is often forgotten by those who don't appreciate the positive impact of the Jewish people on human civilization. On a larger scale, Jewish moral values rooted in the Torah have largely civilized much of the world down through the centuries—if not directly, then indirectly, through Christian and Muslim traditions and cultures. Jewish law, ethics, and culture have promoted human dignity, kindness, mercy, charity, and conscientious support for those who have been marginalized or made victims of another's dominant power. According to historian, Paul Johnson, in his book, *A History of the Jews* (1988):

Certainly, the world without the Jews would have been a radically different place. ...All the great conceptual discoveries of the human intellect seem obvious and inescapable once they had been revealed, but it requires a special genius to formulate them for the first time. The Jews had this gift. To them we owe the idea of equality before the law, both divine and human; of the sanctity of life and the dignity of human person; of the individual conscience and so a personal redemption; of collective conscience and so of social responsibility; of peace as an abstract ideal and love as the foundation of justice, and many other items which constitute the basic moral furniture of the human mind. Without Jews it might have been a much emptier place.

Some might find this degree of moral influence hard to fathom, given their minority status, not to mention the many violent and painful stories within Hebrew scripture. But as Rabbi Ken Spiro puts it:

The Torah...was like no holy book of any people before or since... It made the Jews look bad. In it, they are shown as shirkers and complainers, often sinning against their own God and His law. And yet they insisted that they needed to carry around with them the history of their failures as well as their successes in order never to lose sight of their mission to elevate humanity.

(Ken Spiro, *World Perfect—The Jewish Impact on Civilization*, Simcha, 2002)

This is a fascinating insight—that part of the great moral legacy of Judaism has been not to hide, but rather maintain a permanent record of their moral failures as a religious and ethical culture. In that way, they and the world would continually learn wisdom from their history with lessons that would help guide them toward a better future. With its direct religious influence upon Christianity and Islam, Judaism provides a universal faith and moral base for much of the world's population.

So it's fair to ask, why haven't these lessons come into play in the present context in Israel and Palestine? Why does it appear as if this great moral legacy is being undermined by the resentment and fear of being a victim? I realize the Holocaust is not my story, nor do I fully grasp the depth of understanding or pain that this terrible trauma continues to inflict upon the collective memory of Jews. But Jews were not the only victims in the Holocaust, nor in World War II. The world criticizes the xenophobic policies and militarism of Russia all the time without discounting the 20 million people who died at the hands of Hitler and Stalin. No one should forget or gloss over the terrible tragedies of that time, but neither should anyone excuse injustices in the present because of the injustices of the past. Is it

possible for Israel to “elevate humanity,” as Rabbi Spiro has noted, by addressing their conflict with Palestinians in a just and merciful way?

I certainly hope so, as do many others, including some within the global Jewish community and within Israel itself. In many respects, Jews have faced this question many times before. Jesus himself often faced the same dilemmas, though they were politically reversed, as Jews lived under Roman occupation in the same region of Palestine. The story we have today as our lectionary text indirectly reflects this through Jesus’ prophetic reminder of the religious and ethical importance for Jews to love their neighbor. This is one of many examples of where Jesus provided a moral and ethical challenge out of the Torah that had implications far beyond the interpersonal concerns of individual lives by addressing the injustice in social relations between those in Judean society, as well as with non-Jews in the wider world. What lesson might be found there relevant to today?

The story as we have it from Mark tells of an episode when Jesus was being challenged by a scribe to reveal what he considered to be the most important obligation in Judaism. In short, it was an orthodoxy test, much like a religious catechism: the scribe represents scriptural and moral authority and Jesus, the novice. Jesus responded in orthodox fashion. The most important commandment, or *mitzvah*, was the Shema from Deuteronomy 6:4 (still recited to this day at every Jewish service): “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” Familiar words. This is the basic confession of Judaism in

their monotheistic identity. There was no dispute over that. Jesus responded as a faithful Jew.

However, what Jesus added to the Shema was the otherwise unrelated clause from Leviticus 19:18: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” This wasn’t customarily recited with the Shema, nor were they commonly associated, even though both were from the Torah. So what we have here is the core of Jesus’ proclamation as a Jew, which was to say: as important as it is to express one’s devotion to God, it is equally important to treat one’s neighbor in like kind to how people naturally watch out for their own self-interests. It was an *ethic of reciprocity* (“I’ll treat my neighbor in the way I want to be treated”).

Religious Judaism was founded not only on their monotheism, but equally so on their commitment to social justice. Throughout his teachings and ministry, Jesus emphasized this point to say in effect that a faithful Jew’s love of God is best expressed *through* one’s love of neighbor. These two commandments were not only morally interrelated, they were spiritually co-dependent. They could not have one without the other.

Interestingly, the scribe did not take issue with Jesus’ answer. Nor should he have, since this association had been made before within Judaism. Jesus’ social morality was based on the tradition within Judaism that had been articulated through the prophets, through the great Talmudic scholar, Rabbi Akiba (who Jesus virtually quotes in this passage), and through Rabbi Hillel, a near contemporary to Jesus, who lived the generation prior to Jesus in Jerusalem.

Hillel was famous for coining in Judaism what we call the Golden Rule. When asked to summarize the Torah, Hillel didn't even mention the Shema. Instead, he replied: "What is hateful to yourself, do not do to your fellow man. That is the whole Torah; the rest is just commentary..." So when Jesus (Mt. 7:12; Lk. 6:31) and later the Apostle Paul (Rom. 13:8-10) referenced the Golden Rule, they were merely echoing a prominent school of moral and spiritual wisdom that already existed within Judaism.

What may be a surprise, though, is that a near identical social morality is found in every major religion, almost to the word. Variations on the Golden Rule are universally affirmed around the globe throughout human civilization, from the earliest times to the present. Virtually every major tradition cites a version of it at the heart of their spiritual teachings, some of which precede Judaism by thousands of years.

This ethic of reciprocity is found in ancient religions, such as Confucianism ("Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you"), Buddhism ("Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful"), as well as ancient Egyptian ("Do for one who may do for you, that you may cause him thus to do"), Hinduism ("This is the sum of duty: do not do to others what would cause pain if done to you") and Taoism ("To those who are good to me, I am good; to those who are not good to me, I am also good. Thus all get to be good."), as well as similar teachings in Islam, Zoroastrianism, and in the Baha'i faith.

In other words, the Golden Rule as a spiritual guide for social morality was never unique to Jesus, nor even Judaism; instead, it's

universal wisdom, accessible and applicable to all people everywhere. To love God (however the divine Presence might be named) and to love one's neighbor articulates the most profound example of a universal faith and morality that exists. These two great commandments have universal appeal and value that reaches across borders and boundaries, religions and cultures, in a way few other things can tie humankind together.

So what happens when the commandment to love one's neighbor, articulated through the Golden Rule, becomes the social ethic of human civilization? A pathway toward peace and mutual respect emerges and becomes evident. What would that look like in Israel and Palestine, or in Syria, or in Iraq today? Or how does it apply in the U.S. and Europe—especially when we're talking about hot topics, i.e., immigration, equal pay for women, or racial profiling?

Can we not appeal to the moral consciences of those who are inspired by faith to lift up this social ethic from their own traditions and texts into their settings by extending the notion of "neighbor" to those beyond their own culture or creed? Is it so impossible for people to find a way to set aside their histories and differences in order to relate on a common ethic to save life? Is this not the most important and relevant divinely inspired message for our time? Is it not a universal moral ethic in all faiths?

Loving one's neighbor, treating others as we would want to be treated ourselves, isn't ethereal, abstract, or impossible to achieve. It's a very doable thing. Judaism alone has 613 commandments providing specificity to how Jews are to be kind, compassionate, merciful, and just to each other as well as to non-Jews—moral

guidelines that are as central to their identity as a people as the Shema recited every day. Christianity and Islam have much the same, and we are matched by those in eastern traditions who draw guidance from their sacred texts calling for justice, love, and compassion to guide their consciences and conduct. These are elements of a universal faith that can quiet the violent provocations within people, if they are treated with respect, consideration, dignity, and justice!

For me, that is the essence of Jesus' gospel proclamation and the measure of meaningful hope. If the Law of Moses can be summarized in this way, if Jesus' teachings can be as well, if Muhammad proclaimed this as spiritual wisdom, as well as Buddha, Confucius, and others, why wouldn't it be deeply imbedded within us as human beings?

The late Joseph Campbell once remarked, "When we quit thinking primarily about ourselves and our own self-preservation, we undergo a truly heroic transformation of consciousness." That is what is needed; that is what will save the world; that is the pathway toward justice and peace in the Middle East.

Will we live to see that day? Why not? Why does it need to be a distant hope? Until it comes, though, our task is to proclaim its truth and live into it each day of our lives. For that is what it takes to resist injustice and violence and protect the dignity of all God's people. The Shema and the Golden Rule—the two great commandments and moral aspirations of life. May they bring about peace for Jerusalem and a hope for justice in Palestine.

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