

A Religious Response to Protests for Social Equality

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Over the past three months, the corona medical crisis has induced a worldwide upheaval. The social protests in the USA surrounding the death of George Floyd has launched a social upheaval, as we consider the importance of racial equality. The “basics” of our response have already been voiced and appear to enjoy universal consensus: The Jewish community, obviously, opposes discrimination of race, religion, or skin color and is horrified by the scenes of police brutality. Our unwavering support of racial equality doesn't lessen our desire for an efficient but humane police force capable of providing both security and respect of human life.

What are the religious values which should frame our response and our attitude? Here are a few points to consider...

1. Religious Motivation for Social Equality

Undeniably, racial equality is essential to a moral and properly functioning society. Our struggle with the corona virus has highlighted the vital importance of national and social unity. For a religious person however, racial equality is primarily based upon the belief that every human being is created in the Divine image and is deserving of our utmost respect and support. Man, possessing intelligence, consciousness, emotions and free will is the pinnacle of G-d's creation and our reverence for G-d must translate into respect for all His creations- and certainly for every Man. Recognizing this supreme value, Rebbi Akiva announced "Beloved is [all] Man" because he was created in the Divine image. If Man is beloved to G-d he must be beloved to us. Human suffering blemishes the Divine image and human suffering at the hand of a fellow human being is a Divine tragedy.

In addition to respecting the Divine image in man, Jews aspire to fashion a society based upon the just and moral image that we sense in G-d Himself. Injustice and suffering are discrepant with G-d's kindness and when they prevail our world veers further from G-d's intent.

2. Social Justice as “Part” of a Larger Religious Experience

Despite the importance of social justice, it cannot occupy a disproportionate “portion” of our overall religious experience and displace more essential religious values. Often, over the past two centuries, Jews who veered from classic halachik tradition, replaced halachik observance

with the crusade for social justice. We pursue social justice as “part” of an overall agenda to draw G-d into our world and reshape humanity in His image. Interest in social justice must be interwoven into overall religious experience.

Relatedly, despite our best efforts, our world will only attain comprehensive moral fitness through Divine redemption. Until that stage arrives, we should attempt to advance the world- as best we can- toward a greater state of morality and fairness. However, our interest in a moral world must bolster our interest in propelling this world toward a Messianic endpoint of absolute morality. Absent of this larger drive, our efforts at social reordering is limited, and to a degree also flawed.

3. The Moral Mandate of a Jew

As Jews who have suffered historical persecution, we possess a greater responsibility to rail against human suffering. The Torah commands us to embrace the convert as we were once strangers in Egypt. At the formative stages of our national identity we suffered discrimination and bondage, to sensitize us to human suffering. For centuries, Jews were socially and historically disempowered and could offer little actual assistance to victims of discrimination. In the modern era, however, having been socially enfranchised as active participants in society, our historical mandate demands reasonable efforts to insure the dignity and rights of every human being.

4. Trepidation of a “Uniform”

Police brutality is even more odious for a nation which, for centuries, lived in mortal fear of soldiers and police officers who would routinely abuse helpless and hapless Jews. Many Pesach Hagadot append a picture of a non-Jewish soldier alongside the mention of the “evil son” or rasha in the list of the four sons. Jews lived in terror of thugs who used their office to persecute them. Abuse meted out by unformed security personnel meant to protect us, should resonate with great terror for a Jew.

5. Three Cautions

As committed as we are to social reform, we must be cautious of three potential errors. Firstly, we shouldn’t conflate the narrative of racial inequality with that of anti-Semitism. Sadly, hatred of Jews stems from larger metaphysical forces and from our unique historical agenda of over 3500 years. Pursuing social equality in the modern era should not blur the

trans-historical nature of the Jewish mission and the consequence of anti-Semitism.

Secondly, we must participate in this process even though we may not enjoy reciprocity or even gratitude from other minority groups. Traditionally, Jews spearheaded social equality movements, incorrectly assuming that Jewish relations with other minority groups would prosper; sadly, this was rarely true. However, our motives are purely “lishmah” to relieve human suffering, whether or not this process gains support among other groups. Again, our motives are larger than mere contemporary social dynamics.

Finally, we must maintain moral clarity about our own struggle in Israel. A recent agenda-driven newspaper in Israel likened the Jewish State to the brutal police in Minnesota. In Israel, we face many moral challenges in defending ourselves against our violent enemies. We don't always get it completely “right”. However, our armed forces are amongst the most humane in the entire world, willing to absorb significant risks while attempting to save innocent lives while pursuing those who seek us harm. We are thousands of miles from Minnesota!

6. Distribution of Wealth

The recent protests are, in part, a response to forty-year period of phenomenal financial growth- which hasn't been equitably distributed. We live in a gilded age and, as was the case 120 years ago, disproportionate wealth is controlled by a small minority of the population. The Torah itself is concerned with this combustible situation; every 50 years, yovel resets the financial equation by redistributing wealth among the entire population. Ancient economies evolved more slowly and a reshuffling once every fifty years was sufficient. In the modern era we have developed economies capable of rapidly generating astounding wealth. Though the Torah generally supports Capitalism, it also favors an equitable distribution of wealth; modern man has yet to develop economic models capable of these dual goals.

7. Balancing Deterrence of Crime and Civil Liberties

This is, perhaps, the most delicate issue to balance. It is obvious that brutal police methods are horrifying to civil societies. It is equally obvious that effective police enforcement is absolutely necessary to protect all colors, races and religions from crime. Calibrating the two values is obviously tricky but Chazal already offered guidance: the preservation of human dignity justifies slight reduction of deterrence. We select the most humane form of capital punishment even though a more painful execution

would exert greater deterrence. Likewise, the prosecution protocol strongly favors the defendant; Beit Din will take extraordinary measures to protect a defendant- even though such liberal protocols will definitely diminish deterrence. Evidently, on a social level, the Torah favors human dignity over law enforcement. Though this issue is highly sensitive and extremely context-specific, Chazal's "prejudice" for human dignity serves as a rough guideline for balancing between these two important values.

Let us continue to improve our society just as we anticipate G-d's renovation of our world.