

Fallen Monuments and Modern Hubris

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During the recent protests society has begun to face important dilemmas regarding monuments which commemorate national heroes whose lifestyles were discrepant with current norms of racial equality. Some monuments celebrate people or organizations directly involved in discriminatory policies- such as the monuments which celebrate Civil War participants; there is strong consensus that these monuments should be reimagined or removed. Other statues commemorate heroic and even morally sound people who lived within the social norms and conventions of their era. As their overall life's accomplishments had little to do with their racially discriminatory behavior, perhaps their monuments should be retained. Is society meant to disqualify any role model because they lived within the moral institutions of their historical period?

These 'statue wars' provide an opportunity to ponder two questions: What type of monuments do Jews erect? Secondly how do we judge the moral fitness of past generations?

Statues or Ideas?

Judaism prohibits the crafting of three-dimensional human sculptures; halacha even proscribes against two-dimensional renditions such as paintings. The primary legal issue surrounds the danger that human forms will be worshipped as a form of idolatry- as was common in ancient pagan cultures. Some modern religions still maintain physical human images of G-d. The cornerstone of our true monotheistic religion is that G-d is unknowable and can't be rendered through any visual medium. Human images are prohibited because they will serve as gateways to the world of idolatry.

In addition to the concern of idolatry, human monuments and sculptures glorify and aggrandize their subjects, presenting "larger than life" figures and creating

unhealthy reverence about human beings. All human beings – even Moshe our greatest leader - are limited and flawed and we mustn't inflate them beyond natural proportion. The avoidance of "hero worship" is partially responsible for the concealment of Moshe's gravesite; can you imagine the hype and hysteria during mass pilgrimages to his grave! We direct our reverence to G-d above whereas monuments create gods out of men.

Finally, Judaism avoids human monuments because we commemorate ideas and lifestyles rather than images and appearances. Identifying with appearances can distract our attention from the Torah, wisdom or good deeds or past role models. The greatest influencers of my life are people I have never met nor can imagine their physical appearance. The deep pool of ideas which they delivered supersedes their physical forms. Bonding with an individual through their values, ideas and behavior is more formative than bonding through their "likeness". A human sculpture presets stereotypes and pre-shapes the manner in which we judge or assess them. The absence of controlling physical imagery liberates us to engage them more genuinely. Meeting them without sculptures is a more nuanced and a more formative rendezvous.

Judging Past Generations

The statue wars raise additional questions about the manner in which we view our own generation in relation to previous ones. It is completely legitimate and morally balanced to discuss the removal of a statue of George Washington because he was a slave owner. On the one hand, the overall values he represented are admirable and should be enshrined. Alternatively, and despite his impressive life, some contend that his monument is too painful to victims of injustice- given his association with slavery. This is a legitimate debate and one which is obviously context specific. Tragically, and for a range of reasons slavery was broadly accepted 250 years ago and individuals who lived morally upstanding and even heroic lives participated in this institution. Some were able to see beyond the moral limits of their society but most could not.

However, there is an important distinction between the removal of a statue – because of the pain it elicits- and the branding of people from previous eras as immoral. The modern world is often guilty of "generationism"- the false belief

that modern Man is superior to his primitive and ancient ancestors. As we have been empowered through technology, political freedom and many other forms of progress, we sometimes view previous generations with disdain and condescension. We may have advanced in certain sectors but we have definitely receded in others – both societal and, of course, religious. Even if we concede that certain "social institutions" of previous generations were backward, their individual moral codes and personal demeanor was often far more refined than our current manner and discourse. Broadly dismissing previous generations due to their social context, disqualifies them as moral examples for future generations and produces the morally aimless world we inhabit. Our modern world is fervently committed to social equality and justice but is sometimes disinterested in personal moral behavior, social etiquette and interpersonal kindness. Generationism eviscerates previous generations from their moral authority and ultimately bankrupts us from moral guidance.

Which brings us back to Judaism and the manner in which we view our masorah or tradition. Our religion is predicated upon the truth that earlier generations- closer to the seminal moment of Sinai- possessed a firmer command of Torah and more direct access to supernatural truths- which have withered in our rational/empirical world. Ultimately, the source both of personal morality and social ethics is the Divine will distilled within Torah; previous generations enjoyed more direct and more authentic access to Torah and to that will. Based upon this built-in hierarchy with our past, we, broadly speaking, submit to their legacy and submit to their authority. The overconfidence of modernity and the uniformed judgementalism toward the past can potentially erode the authority of those generations and of our masorah. How can I submit my will to a generation which participated in morally inferior institutions? Just because certain institutions have evolved doesn't mean that overall spirituality and religiosity have also advanced. Indeed, earlier generations may have operated within limiting or even morally restrictive institutions but that certainly doesn't frame their overall moral behavior let alone their spiritual inner world. In the 12th century women were entirely uneducated and therefore the Rambam offers women a religious approach suitable for ignorant people. To claim that women's education has evolved into a superior state isn't blasphemy. To wonder how the Rambam would

respond to the reality of educated women is completely legitimate. However, even if we admit that the socio-educational setting of his generation was inferior, their moral condition wasn't. Wholesale condemnation of previous generations due to their "less evolved" social institutions is historically myopic and, worse, it is religiously destabilizing.