

The Academy for Judaic, Christian, and Islamic Studies

ב'ה

IN THE IMAGE OF GOD
A JEWISH PERSPECTIVE ON ANTI-RACISM

Yael Aranoff

2020

One of the most foundational verses found in the Torah, The Five Books of Moses, that speaks to the essential question of what it means to be a human being, is found in the very first chapter of the very first book of the Torah. In Genesis chapter 1, verses 26 and 27, we learn that God made the first human in the image of God: *betzelem Elohim*. If we are to understand that we are all descendants of the first human, then it follows that all people are created in the image of God. And if we all have a divine spark within us, then it follows too that every single human being is worthy of love: throughout the Torah we are often reminded of the loving relationship between people and God, and it therefore follows that people should interact with one another from a place of love.

If the notion that human beings are to treat each other with love and not with hatred was not clear enough from our creation, in Leviticus chapter 19, verse 18, there is the following commandment: “Love your fellow as yourself.” Rabbi Akiva, a leading Jewish scholar and sage from the first and second century, famously claimed that this is a fundamental principle of the Torah. So, who is your fellow? My understanding, which I believe to be a common Jewish understanding, is that your fellow means your fellow human being.

So how can we place these two Jewish concepts in the context of the fight against racism? Racism, the marginalization and oppression of people based on a socially constructed racial hierarchy, operates best when there is a social agreement that some human beings are superior to others and that the “superior” human beings have every right to hatefully oppress the “inferior” human beings. This immediately breaks down when we

look at these two Jewish values. If we are all created in the image of God, and if we are to love all human beings as we love ourselves, then there is no room for racism in Judaism as I understand it.

As fundamental as love is to what it means to be a human being, unfortunately, the world has seen so much hatred amongst human beings for about as long as human beings have existed, and one of the most dangerous manifestations of that hatred is racism. Racism exists in many forms. There is, and there has been, institutionalized and systemic racism, there are violent acts of racism, there are racist comments, slurs, and speech, and therefore, we need just as many tools to combat racism as there are forms of racism.

I would like to explore what tools can be found in another Jewish source. The following words are found in Psalm 34: “Keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking lies.

Shun evil and do good, seek peace and pursue it.” In the machzor, the prayer-book used for the Jewish High Holidays, that was put out by The Rabbinical Assembly in 2010, the following explanation is given for the phrase “keep your tongue from evil”: “The first requirement for being God-fearing is being careful in one’s speech. Note the importance of speech in biblical thinking: God spoke and the world came into being.” As we humans are made in the image of God, then at the very least metaphorically speaking, we can create and destroy worlds with our words. Racist speech is evil speech that can destroy worlds, and sadly, has destroyed worlds time and time again. Psalm 34 reminds us that such speech is unacceptable.

In this prayer-book, there is also an explanation for the words “seek peace and pursue it”: “This theme is reflected in Hillel’s saying: ‘Be of the disciples of Aaron: loving peace and

pursuing peace, loving humanity and bringing them close to the Torah' (Avot 1:12). The Bible asks us to 'pursue' only two things: peace and justice (see Deuteronomy 16:20)." Therefore, we can learn that we are not only to refrain from racist speech, we must also actively fight against racism in all forms. My understanding is that Judaism charges us to be actively anti-racist.

We are reminded throughout our liturgy and our sacred texts of our responsibility to stand up and speak out against hateful behavior, racism being at the forefront of such conduct. In Pirkei Avot, the Ethics of the Fathers, in chapter 2, verse 5, we are instructed with the following words: "In a place where there are no human beings, strive to be a human being." This is commonly understood to mean that when we find ourselves in a situation where people have forgotten their humanity, we must do the work to remember our own humanity. If we can remind others of their humanity as well, then we are doing our job of pursuing peace and justice.

Rabbi Yom-Tov Lipmann Heller, a rabbi and scholar from 16th and 17th century Europe, comments on what it means to "strive to be a human being", explaining that the word "strive" is: "...a matter of training and thought about the thing." When we are experiencing or witnessing hateful acts of racism in the moment, it can feel overwhelming and scary, and those feelings, while valid, can overpower our willingness to do the right thing. That is why training and forethought is crucial, as Rabbi Yom-Tov Lipmann Heller expresses in his commentary. We must be prepared: we must listen to the stories of those who have experienced racism— especially if we have not experienced it ourselves, we must educate ourselves on how we can be the best allies and advocates we can possibly be, and

we must be ready to take action so that when—not if—but when we find ourselves in a situation where we are called upon to remember our humanity, to remind others of their humanity, to love our fellow as ourselves, to refrain from evil speech, to shun evil and do good, and to pursue peace and justice, we will be ready. All of these values make clear our responsibility to be actively anti-racist. This is an obligation for Jews, and it is an obligation for all people, as all people are created in the image of God.