Affirming the Image of God

29.11.2012

Recent weeks and months have brought to public attention the issue of Jewish attitudes to non-Jews, as these are found in some traditional sources and halakhah (Jewish religious law), particularly with reference to Rabbi Yitzchak Shapira's book Torat Hamelekh. The great liberty with which the author dispenses with the life of non-Jews under various circumstances has become a scandal in the media, a subject for police investigation for incitement, a discussion item on antisemitic websites, and the subject of an appeal to the Supreme Court of Israel. It has engendered heated discussion, most of which has focused on the right to teach Torah and to engage in discussion of halakhah, especially of a theoretical nature, unencumbered by external considerations and factors, such as police and state control. While these issues may be legitimate subjects for discussion, they conceal the main concerns raised by these teachings and their public reception. Many Rabbinical authorities have subsequently failed to condemn these teachings in theoretical and practical terms, leaving the impression that these are indeed appropriate contemporary Jewish attitudes to non-Jews.

For this reason, we, rabbis, teachers and scholars of Jewish studies of various disciplines, religious denominations and political perspectives, from different countries worldwide, have come together to express with a united voice our deep disdain for these extremist teachings, which are opposed to fundamental Jewish conceptions of the unity of humanity which all Jews affirm at this time of year on the High Holidays. We assert that the core issue they raise must be given priority in Jewish education and thought. Our view is that Jewish teaching involves more than merely citing texts, whether in or out of context. Teaching and the art of halakhic ruling always reflect a broader religious worldview, guided by core values. In our understanding, the creation of humanity in God’s image is the great principle, as our sages recognized.[1] We believe this mandates full respect for the infinite value, equality and uniqueness of every human life, for it is created in the image of God. Our Torah’s ways are ways of pleasantness and all her paths are peace.[2] These and other great principles are the guidelines through which we interpret and teach our tradition.[3]

We are working together under the aegis of the Elijah Interfaith Institute, to bring to light teachings of Judaism that cohere to this worldview. Love of one's own group should not be equated with the hatred of others. Israel's calling is harmonious with the wellbeing of all humanity. We recognize that there are voices in our tradition that have lost sight of these great principles, because of the unspeakable suffering that our people have undergone throughout history. It is, therefore, a contemporary educational and halakhic challenge to confront these extremist teachings, to contain them, and to dissent from them publicly, applying the methods of halakhah, classical interpretation and historical study.

We have been collaborating on a project of developing a contemporary Jewish approach to other religions, that would make our students and communities aware of the dangers inherent in such extremist views in our tradition, and that would inspire a broader view of Judaism, its ethical task and its vision for humanity.

Accordingly, we call upon rabbis and educators to take a clear stand against narrow views Jewish particularity, in favor of a broader vision of Judaism's relations to the other. Our scholars stand

ready to debate the views under discussion. Our own critique of Torat Hamelekh will shortly be published on this website. We will also be publishing educational resources that provide an alternative view of the non-Jew in Judaism, that remind us that "The Lord is good to all, and His compassion extends to all His creatures."[4]

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