

Parashat Yitro

As you may have noticed in my weekly email, I received on my desk the full page advert by “Independent Jewish Voices” in the Times, with signatories from various areas of the Jewish community, though predominantly progressive (with a small p) academics or contributors to popular culture. They were united around five principles, primarily invoking a desire to apply universalistic values to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict - with none of the particularism that naturally follows from a people’s desire for self-determination. These principles had many admirable aspects and some aspects which I would argue are distinctly problematic, at least in the unwritten assumptions from which they have been developed.

I have to say, I sometimes wish I could be an onlooker because the polemic and counter polemic which takes place is a fascinating spectacle to watch. But you can’t be a spectator as a Jew, when it is your co-religionists who are slugging it out in a battle of words and adverts. The irony, of which I am aware, is that I am obviously contributing my part to the ongoing debate which I decry.

My friend Alex Stein, with whom I studied and who now lives in Israel, makes a fairly measured critique of the statement, at least as a nominally left of centre voice. Melanie Phillips weighs in on her own website with a vitriolic attack that made me want to cower in the corner. Then there are those who support what has been

written, you can look at all the comments on the Guardian's 'Comment is Free' website if you want to find out more. Finally, the JC has devoted a great deal of column inches to the debate, with everyone and anyone seeming to make a contribution.

At risk of subjecting myself to too much criticism I want to present an idea, which I think will explain why I tend to avoid signing petitions or statements - especially when they are either unoriginal or seem to make no great contribution to a cause, save raising the profile of a particular group or organisation.

I suppose my starting point is a letter by Paul Usiskin and Aaron Kliner, who are the co-chairs of British Friends of Peace Now. I do not know Aaron Kliner, but I respect much of what Paul Usiskin has to say - he has acted as an Israeli army spokesperson in the settlements and brings a great deal of knowledge and understanding to the debate. They write in a letter to the JC:

"As Zionists, we criticise the governments of Israel for the wrongs they commit against the Palestinians. We believe that Jewish human rights should know no boundaries. We believe in a two-state solution to resolve the Israel-Palestine conflict and that can only be achieved through negotiation. We do not believe in Israel right or wrong, and if the government of Israel commits a crime, it should be punished for it. But we do not believe that Israel is solely to blame for conflict with the Palestinians and we do not believe that

Israel should be penalised by disappearing in a one-state solution. We are not convinced that supporters of the IJV believe in a two-state solution or Israel's continued existence as a Jewish state, or that Israel and Palestinians share in the responsibility for what has befallen the Palestinians.”

It is their final sentences which most interests me. It is as if, in the signing of the IJV statement, a sort of strange alliance has formed between people of a variety of opinions about Israel - from those who wish to see a two state solution, to those who would like to see its dissolution. And that is always the problem when a call to unite under a general banner is proclaimed.

The Ten Commandments, or Aseret Hadibrot, can perhaps give us a glimpse of this process in action. How many times have you heard someone say or talk about the Judeo-Christian tradition or contribution to the Western world. The Ten Commandments are the embodiment of civil society, if you can deal with a concept of a deity that is. Otherwise you'll probably be settling for numbers 5-10 only. The Ten Commandments are the Judeo-Christian tradition's lasting contribution to our basic understanding of what is right and wrong. But, I am intensely annoyed when anyone talks about the Judeo-Christian heritage.

First of all, there's an early piece of history that it singularly fails to acknowledge. That of the development of Christianity and Judaism

as two sister religions, but who ultimately differ on some quite fundamental ideas. The New Testament, or Christian Bible, is not part of our textual tradition, albeit there are overlaps in ideas. For the Christian faith the rabbinic literature has no real parallel. And of course, Judaism before Rabbinic Judaism only resembled in part what we have today and the sectarianism of the turn of the common era saw a great variety of Judaisms. So at a very simple level to talk of a Judeo-Christian heritage is to conflate two very different religions into one rather bland universal faith.

Then there is an even more crucial problem with discussing the Judeo-Christian contribution to our world. It was not always fun to be a Jew in Christian Europe. Yes, there was a great deal of cultural creativity and probably cultural exchange, but being expelled from a country hardly places you in a position to really feel that you have made an equal and valid contribution to the society's norms. Indeed, you may argue that the Ten Commandments contain some basic and essential ideas for any civil society, but to describe that as some kind of Judeo-Christian influence is inaccurate - just because we share the book does not mean we can be meshed together artificially.

A practical example of this occurs in interfaith dialogue. What very quickly happens, when there are Muslims, Christians and Jews, is that the different representatives of each faith start to see commonalities very quickly. At once it might be the Jews and the

Christians seeing themselves as different from the Muslims, then it might be the Jews and the Muslims who feel like they have something in common. But true dialogue is when you get past the “Us too” part of the conversation and get to the heart of your own faith and how it is a unique expression of God’s presence in the world. I may share ideas with you and with you but we are not the same. Liberal Judaism confidently expresses the contribution of other faiths as insights into truth, without detracting from the Jewish insights.

The problem is if you don’t get beyond the commonalities the danger is that you’ll forget there are some differences which are part of the construction of self. Indeed, the term Judeo-Christian has apparently seen a resurgence in American life because it constructs an identity of two monotheistic traditions in opposition to Islam - as if Islam has made no valuable contribution to our world (I challenge you to reread your history books if you think this).

The Ten Commandments are a perfect example of the rallying round to a common statement of purpose which forces the differences to be subjugated beneath an unhealthy desire for universal acceptance. Actually, it is, I believe, coercive. Under the banner of a common and highly esteemed text we are all made to feel the need to profess some kind of identical identity. It is because of that reason the Jewish community was as active as the atheists in campaigning to have the Ten Commandments removed

from the USA court houses. On paper, we should be supporting the desire to have the central revelatory text in all Court Houses. In reality, that is just a coercive strategy intended to garner support to recombine Church and State.

Before anyone gets the wrong idea, the contributions that faiths can make to the world, in working together, is not detracted by this. It just means that I don't want to lose my particular identity in the process.

That is the problem with very broad universal ideas which it is sometimes hard to disagree with. One's difference can be subjugated beneath the apparent commonalities. And that is why I do not sign public declarations or petitions. When principles are put forward which cannot be disagreed with, except with almost Talmudic reasoning on each point, it is most likely a coercive strategy that forces me into being painted with the same brush as someone who I might disagree with on a very fundamental level.

Politicians do this all the time. "We want quality education for all" - they might say. Who can disagree. I want quality education. You want quality education. Well I'll just have to become one of you, or sign up/vote for you.

Douglas Rushkoff in his book, "Coercion" writes:

“That’s the whole point of good propaganda. You want to create a slogan that nobody’s going to be against, and everybody’s going to be for. Nobody knows what it means because it doesn’t mean anything.”

Does that make me part of the establishment, or an independent Jewish voice (with lower case letters). I leave it to you to decide.