

Jews And Slavery

When slavery was legal in America, there were no uniform condemnations of that slavery by the organized Jewish community, or by social action committees of American congregations. As a matter of fact, there were no social action committees.

Anyone surprised by these facts may be suffering from a severe case of "Presentism." That is the awkward word historians use to describe the imposition of current moods or understandings on some past period. The idea that the Jewish community was always disposed to, or organized for, liberal social action is a Presentist fallacy.

Slavery is an example. Neither the Board of Delegates of the American Israelites nor the Independent Order of B'nai Brith, the two major organizations of the time, expressed a vigorous Jewish view on the subject. There were Rabbis, like David Einhorn of Baltimore, who spoke eloquently for the abolition of slavery; there were other Rabbis, like Morris J. Raphall of New York, who tried to justify slavery.

It was not uncommon for Jews to own slaves. In the 1820 census, over three quarters of the Jews in Richmond, Charleston and Savannah owned slaves. It is a matter of record that Sherith Israel in New York City once hired two slaves from their owner. There were even Jews in the slave trade. Aaron Lopez of Newport, one of the leading colonial Jews had at least one slave ship on the seas each year for 10 years. B. Mordecai of Charleston purchased \$12,000 worth of slaves in a single sale in 1859.



Raab

Some Jews, like Moses Judah of New York and Rebecca Hart of Philadelphia were very active in opposing slavery and supporting abolition. But such activity was not a prevalent concern of the Jewish community. How can that be? Were Jewish religious precepts not the same then as now? And is not liberal social action central to those precepts?

The eminent American Jewish historian, Bertram Korn, points out that "Jewish liberalism was detached from Jewish teaching until the late 1880's." The concept of Jewish social action, as we know it, has not suffused all of Jewish history — or even most of it. The biblical religious insights of the Jews were instrumental in creating the social morality which spells out one human being's obligations to all other human beings. But throughout history, few Jewish communities have given as broad and universal an interpretation to those obligations as has the modern American Jewish community.

There are a number of possible explanations and implications. For one thing, it suggests that social action is not the chief ingredient of Jewish life. Jewish life has survived for longer periods without that major emphasis than with it. Perhaps it reminds one that the primary direct obligation of the Jew is to God, not to other people, Jewish or non-Jewish. The obligation to other people derives from that primary obligation — which does not make it unimportant, but provides a somewhat different perspective. To start with the primary obligation directly to other people, may represent a subtle shift from Judaism to something else.

Then, of course, there is the suggestion that Jews are, after all, not saints but human beings. They struggle with their obligations. They tend to be overcome by their surrounding culture, like everyone else. It is just that, as members of an historical and religious body, they are tugged in a particular direction. Their primary obligation tugs them, as a body, in a certain direction, as does their history. The lessons of modern Jewish history and the needs of the Jewish people have apparently served to tug the American Jewish community a good distance since the early 19th century.

Earl Raab
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