

On the Subversion of Yeshiva Values

Shalom Carmy

Ed's Note: *The following is in response to Rabbi Alfred Cohen's reply in the Responsive Readers column, Ten Da'at, Spring 1991.*

Consider the following anecdote. High school students visit Eastern Europe to study the Holocaust. Upon their return, an English assignment awaits them: *How would you compare the suffering which you saw in the concentration camps with the suffering of African Americans?* An outraged yeshiva educator refers to this assignment as an "example of the unwitting subversion of yeshiva values by secular faculty." This casual remark is made in support of an argument against hiring teachers who are not Orthodox Jews. That such unqualified repugnance can be expressed in passing attests to its wide acceptance within the observant community—which is why the reasoning behind the accusation of subversion deserves citation in full:

To try and draw a parallel between the murder of six million persons and the enslavement of others is to make 'an obscene comparison.' Are these the values which the yeshiva wished to instill in excusing the students from two weeks of school? Is the suffering of our people to be

come just another trite example of 'man's inhumanity to man?'

My feeling is that this reaction reflects an attitude wide-spread in contemporary yeshivot. I too am unhappy with the assignment, but perplexed by the objection. By exposing what I found unsatisfactory in the objection, I hope to clarify what I see as the problem with the assignment.

I

Let us examine the objection. Straightaway, I am put off by the social science term "yeshiva values." Why must an objection lean heavily, and consistently, upon a characteristically "secular humanist" vocabulary? Such terminology carries with it the implication that what is wrong with the assignment is its failure to conform to the mores of a specific group, not because it offends Divine imperatives or moral judgments. Whatever happened to the robust language of law, doctrine, good, and duty, common to the Western moral tradition extending from Aristotle to Kant, so much better suited to articulate the normative force of Torah teachings? Is this another example of the unwitting subversion of a healthy theological orientation through the uncritical adoption of trendy relativistic jargon, with its saccharine aftertaste of subjectivity and sentimentalism?

The protest questions the purpose of skipping two weeks of formal education if, instead of learning what the school wants them to learn from their pilgrimage to Eastern Europe, they learn something

objectionable and "obscene." What should they be learning that would justify the curtailment of regularly scheduled Torah studies and other classes? If the idea is to learn more, and learn vividly, about the Holocaust or about the Jewish "world we have lost" in Eastern Europe, can this not be done effectively by listening to the accounts of survivors, in person or on videotape? In fact, I was puzzled by the strange reference, in the assignment, to "the suffering which you saw in the concentration camps." Be that as it may—and surely many readers are eminently able to discuss the benefits of conducting the trip during the school year—one of the peculiarities of the assignment is that it appears blithely oblivious to the enormous difference between witnessing horror and seeing the place where horrors once occurred.

Now to my major bewilderment: Why is it wrong, nay obscene, to regard enslavement as an evil comparable to murder? None of the obvious explanations seem satisfactory.

Is it that murder is so much worse than enslavement, so that even suggesting something in common renders mass murder "just another trite example of 'man's inhumanity to man?'" Imagine a group of students who had visited an oncology ward and were then assigned a comparison between the suffering of advanced bowel cancer and the suffering of heartburn.

If this is the objection then the offending assignment should not be called an

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"unwitting subversion of yeshiva values." It would be better, and more simply, described as the half-witted subversion of common sense. Far from justifying the exclusion of non-observant faculty from the high school, hatred of stupidity would help define the common ground shared by yeshiva educators and secular faculty.

But is the enslavement of black people merely "another trite example of man's inhumanity to man?" Trite? According to conservative estimates, 1.2-2.6 million human beings (from a total "cargo" of 15 million) died in transit, during what historians call the "Middle Passage."¹ As to the survivors, and ignoring the unintended consequences of accidental mistreatment and the misfortunes effected by sadistic owners: we are speaking of the violent removal of large numbers of human beings to a faraway land to be bought and sold like any other commodity, their family ties readily dissolved, subject to the fluctuations of the market in human bodies, their privacy furthermore unprotected from the sexual proclivities of the owners. Under slavery they are often forbidden to read and write; after Emancipation, for the better part of a century, prevented from voting, using the public toilet facilities provided for whites who need them, and engaging in a wide variety of occupations. Generation after generation it was brought home to them, with the conviction of inevitability, that neither they nor their kind would ever know anything different this side of the grave...

Trite?

To most of us it seems anything but trite. Mass murder and mass enslavement are both very great evils. To say this is not at all like comparing terminal cancer with indigestion. The alleged "obscenity" of the comparison, suggested by the assignment, is thus far from evident, nor does suggesting the comparison appear to contradict either halakha or the foundations of Torah belief.

In truth, I submit, the Torah takes the suffering of slavery no less seriously than does common-sense morality. Purim celebrates the failure of Haman's genocide; Pesah recalls our liberation from bondage. How often the Torah commands us to

remember, when we consider those less fortunate than ourselves, that we were slaves in Egypt, and were redeemed by God (*Dvarim* 15:15; 24:18,22). These texts are far from obscure, and testify to the centrality of slavery in *Klal Yisrael's* consciousness of human evil in history.

A less well known Biblical passage points yet more directly to the unique evil of slavery. The prophet Joel emphasizes the suffering caused by the slave trade. Exiles were disposed of like property:

*We are all too often forced
to assign formative
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crucial roles.*

"They have cast lots for my people; and gave the boy for a harlot; and sold the girl for wine and drank" (4:3). They were shipped off to places from which return is impossible: "You [Tyre and Sidon] sold the children of Judah and the children of Jerusalem to the Greeks, to remove them from their border" (4:6). It is impossible to read this Divine chastisement without recalling the fate of the African slaves involuntarily transplanted to alien shores. If an "ignorant" secular teacher, however unwittingly, induces students to think, perhaps for the first time, about these and similar passages, we would be foolish to condemn him or her for "subversion of yeshiva values."

How then might one deem the sufferings of mass slavery trite, and hence unworthy of being mentioned in the same breath as the sufferings of mass murder? Various possibilities come to mind. Perhaps the number: six million Jews pitted against an unspecified number of "others"

who were enslaved. But vagueness, ignorance, or indifference about the number of blacks who suffered grievously from slavery does not make that number small and negligible. And even if we entertain, for the sake of argument, the possibility that the number was small, should numbers affect the moral equation? Imagine that, in 1930, a group of high school students went to the Middle East to learn about the Turkish massacres of the Armenians. Upon their return an assignment is set:

How would you compare the suffering which you saw in Armenia with the suffering of the Jews in the Kishinev Pogrom? Whipping out our quantitative calculus, we would conclude that any comparison between mass murder in Armenia and the handful of deaths, rapes and assorted acts of pillage against the Jews is "obscene." Would such a comparison also constitute the "unwitting subversion of yeshiva values?"

Darker motives may contribute to the allegation of "obscenity" against the offending assignment. The victims of the Holocaust were Jews; the victims of slavery were not. Might this factor, and not the quantitative and qualitative nature of the suffering, explain the intensity of the objection? Perhaps Gentiles are so inferior to Jews that their suffering

doesn't count. To compare the two would then be as obscene as equating the pain of a human being with that of an insect. Or, one might think, chest expanding warily with pride, Jewish suffering belongs to us: it is obscene, and violates "yeshiva values," to pay attention to other people's suffering.

None of these formulations can stand the light of day. If expanding the range of human sympathy is the "unwitting subversion of yeshiva values," then we can use more of it. Most decent people would judge the "Jews are Special" formulations of the last paragraph, elevated to the authority of moral principle, far more obscene than the English assignment to which objection is so strenuously made. The unwitting implication, that such formulations and predilections are what the Torah teaches and requires, makes it increasingly difficult for many to recognize the crucial difference between *Atta behartanu* and unadorned racist resentment.

II

Thus the objection, in the name of “yeshiva values,” proves unacceptable. Yet my initial disapproval of the assignment remains in full force. The writer’s criticism fails because it doesn’t go far enough. He is unable or unwilling to challenge the assumptions of the secular educational establishment.

Let’s reexamine the assignment: *How would you compare the suffering which you saw in the concentration camps with the suffering of African Americans?* Cursory analysis uncovers several unhealthy presuppositions underlying the assignment:

1) Though the student is ostensibly free to reject the premise of the assignment, and to challenge the appropriateness of the proposed comparison, the question clearly leads the student towards the approved response, a *shallow egalitarianism* of suffering: Jews have suffered a lot, but so have African Americans. So have all ethnic groups (even the poor WASP’s); so, of course have women. The complaint is that the assignment reduces our Jewish suffering to “just another trite example of ‘man’s inhumanity to man.’” This is only half right. The assignment likewise reduces the suffering of African Americans to “just another trite example of ‘man’s inhumanity to man.’”

Our students—most students—become quite good at giving the teacher what he or she wants. And familiarity with the “politically correct” response breeds, not sensitivity, but contempt, as many uncritically liberal university teachers are learning to their consternation. Anyone familiar with the attitudes towards Gentiles in general, and Blacks in particular, within the Orthodox community, can hardly fear that increased insight into the terrible story of African slaves in this country will “unwittingly subvert yeshiva values” (whatever is meant by that theologically rudderless phrase). On the contrary, we have every reason to fear that well-meaning but formulaic attempts to manipulate students’ feelings and judgments will engender nothing but cynicism about an educational system that treats the great atrocities of the modern world as so many political investments, to be accumulated, nurtured and held for the dividend.

2) A frequent companion of shallow egalitarianism is *telescopic humanism*. By affecting to apportion our sympathies equally in all directions, thus systemati-

cally effacing the special claims of each, we do not enlarge our hearts, but rather dissipate our emotions. The so-called love of humanity that “heroically” blinds itself to the existence of one’s immediate neighbor, has become a byword of social thought. However, it is not so familiar that we need not acquaint our students with its moral and intellectual pitfalls. The distaste which many Jewish leftists continue to display towards any expression of feeling for their own people, even after the Holocaust, is a classic instance of moral bad faith. The critical evaluation of the assignment we are discussing offers an excellent opportunity to explore the history and psychology of this phenomenon.

3) Another presupposition of the exercise, no less disturbing, is the notion that, confronted by two extraordinary atrocities, the proper response is to set them up in *competition* with each other. We accustom ourselves to tolerate, with some ambivalence, children’s rivalry for grades. We also acknowledge situations in which it is desirable, for practical reasons, to determine, with respect to several candidates, the suffering of which is greater: e.g. allocation of resources at the site of a disaster. But there is something morally perverse, if not perverted, about the idea that comparing the suffering of the Holocaust with that of American slavery, helps us to understand those evils, to alleviate their consequences, or to prevent their recurrence. Why anyone would *want* to indulge in such comparisons in the first place, or contest avidly for a larger slice of the suffering pie, should be a worthwhile subject of reflection, and would teach all of us a great deal about what our culture has come to.

4) In the waning years of the twentieth century, as other sources of authority have lost their power, *victimhood* has come into its own. Members of groups with access to some significant grievance find it convenient to be judged not by the color of their skin, nor by the content of their character, but by the size of the chip on their shoulder. The cult of resentment, often abetted by leftist rhetoric, makes being a victim a status to be prized, and it is thus a source of self-esteem to insist that one’s ethnic group has suffered more than others. This attitude has blighted the spiritual horizon of too many elements in the Black community in America, and presents a temptation whose dangers to our own self-understanding ought not to be underestimated.”

III

As already noted, the objection under discussion is deployed in the service of a larger thesis: to deny the competence of “someone who is not committed to the Torah way of life” to teach our students. As a university teacher, I would not venture to decide the vexed question of “uncommitted faculty—*l’khat’hilla* or *b’diavad*,” as it affects younger students. Yet precisely because much of my intellectual life is spent on the front lines where Torah confronts both the heritage and the detritus of Western culture, I share the writer’s sadness and anxiety that we are all too often forced to assign formative educational responsibilities to individuals who are not, when all is said and done, well suited for their crucial roles. This state of affairs will improve only when more of our best students undertake the disciplined, critical study of the liberal arts, including philosophy, literature and history, as a valuable ancilla to their Torah learning—and then enter the field of Jewish education. It was not whimsy that led Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch to advocate that teachers of Torah at his high school, including himself, share in the responsibility for liberal arts instruction as well.

Thus I subscribe without reservation to the conclusion: “Today, more than ever, we need the secular studies faculty to share our positive values (*ouch!*), to help us raise a generation of young men and women who understand the Torah and how it applies to their own lives in the modern world. It would be unconscionable to accept anything less.”

At the same time, however, it would be equally unconscionable if we were to exempt ourselves, as individuals and as religious and intellectual role models, from the kind of critique we would generously apply to others. For, however we resolve the problem of hiring in the general studies departments, we cannot go wrong by making the Mishna’s definition of *hokhma* our own: “Who is wise? He who learns from every human being.”

FOOTNOTES

1. I obtained the numbers from Prof. Monty Penkower.

2. It is possible that the teacher who made the assignment alerted his/her students to these presuppositions. Our knowledge of the English class is, of course, limited to what the yeshiva educator tells us about it.

3. Black thinkers like Shelby Steele, Thomas Sowell, and Stephen Carter have diagnosed and battled against the cult of resentment.