“Anti-Idolatry”:

Talmudic Wisdom on Fighting Racism

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Martin Luther King Jr. Day, 2023

As a white Jewish child raised in Atlanta, Georgia, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King’s legacy loomed large in my life. My Jewish day school went on field trips to visit Ebenezer Baptist Church and the MLK Center. We were taught to be proud that R. Abraham Joshua Heschel marched with King. I was raised to know that racism in America is real, and was urged to fight against it. But I was never really taught how. What does it look like to resist something as pervasive as racism in the United States? How can I live a life that is actively anti-racist? In which situations was I meant to call on this value?

One model can be found in the Talmud, in the tractate called Avodah Zarah (literally “strange worship”). The entire book is a guide to living as a Jew in a world surrounded by idolatry. The rabbis understood that living in a society permeated by a toxic ideology requires us to actively and frequently negate the culture. Living as a committed Jew is not enough—we have to be “anti-idol.”

Anyone living in America today will eventually encounter racism they cannot easily fix or change, just as our ancestors could not entirely avoid or correct idolatry. What do we do when that happens? How can we reject ideas as pervasive and corrosive as racism? The Talmud’s

reflections on the struggle against idolatry raise similar questions and offer instructions on how to actively demonstrate objection through our behavior so that we do not unintentionally uphold the status quo. The anti-idol mandate can teach us a lot about how to live in a culture we see as fundamentally evil, even when we do not have the power to change it.[1] Transferring idolatry to racism, the entire tractate can be read as an attempt to think through how to live an anti-racist life.

This directive is much more complex than it might seem. Idolatry is one of the few sins we should die rather than transgress.[2] Fighting idolatry is non-negotiable—and yet the rabbis fill an entire tractate of Talmud literally negotiating what this mandate actually demands of us. Our rabbis grapple with the reality that no series of choices will allow them complete protection from idolatry. There is no simple, easy way out of an idol-filled culture. The same is true of racism in America today: we cannot opt out. The Talmud's approach to idolatry is complex enough to offer us real wisdom for understanding and addressing racism today. Here are three examples of how Massekhet Avodah Zarah might give us language and perspective about racism.

In the Mishnah (Avodah Zarah 3:4, found in the Talmud on page 44b), a non-Jew named Proclus ben Philosophos[3] challenges Rabban Gamliel about his use of a bathhouse with a statue of the Greek god Aphrodite. The conversation takes place in the bathhouse itself, in the presence of the idolatrous statue:

[1] These sages did not live in a democratic society. Jews living in the Roman empire had very limited political agency and therefore found different ways of showing their opposition to the status quo. The United States today offers us many additional ways to make change that were not available to our ancestors fighting idolatry, and we must use them to our best ability.
[2] See Talmud Bavli Sanhedrin 74a.
[3] Either "son of a philosopher" or philosopher's disciple" (see e.g. Amos 7:14 for this use of "*ben*"). Other versions of this *mishnah* have "son of Ploslos," perhaps meaning, "son of a bean farmer."

שאל פרוקלוס בן פלוספוס את ר"ג בעכו שהיה רוחץ במרחץ של אפרודיטי אמר ליה כתוב בתורתכם (דברים יג, יח) לא ידבק בידך מאומה מן החרם מפני מה אתה רוחץ במרחץ של אפרודיטי.

Proclus ben Philosophos asked of Rabban Gamliel in Akko when he was bathing in the bathhouse of Aphrodite. He said to him: It is written in your Torah: "nothing of the forbidden items shall cleave to your hand" (Deuteronomy 13:18). For what reason do you bathe in the bathhouse of Aphrodite?!

Rabban Gamliel is challenged about what seems like his direct interaction with an idol. How could a primary religious role-model like Rabban Gamliel be so cavalier about something as important as idolatry? His answer, and the rest of the *sugya* (on 44b), help us think through considerations about what behavior is or is not okay when toxic images permeate public spaces. Rabban Gamliel does not take it as a given that he can use the bathhouse, but he also doesn't assume a blanket ban. Instead, he raises questions about the role of the idol to help him better understand the implications of the specific situation. Is the idol an adornment of the bathhouse, or was the building built to valorize the idol? Is using this bathroom really showing respect to this idol, or maybe the mode of use in this case is actually denigrating the sacred status of the idol? He then observes:

זו עומדת על פי הביב וכל העם משתינין לפניה.

This statue stands upon the sewage pipe and all the people urinate before it.

The voices of the Gemara don't let Rabban Gamliel off the hook so easily. They push back on this excuse, noting that worship can take different forms and cautioning us not to take for granted that a little urine is enough to negate the profound danger of engaging with an idol. Proclus ben Philosophos' question is complex—and so is the answer.

Studying this centuries-old struggle to decide when and how to use a bathhouse may help us ask—and begin to answer—modern questions about avoiding racism in public spaces. Should I enter a building that has been named after a slave owner? What if that building is the library and I need a book for my school or work? What if that building is my local public school or post office? Like Rabban Gamliel, I might ask when and how the building was built. How prominent is the problematic name or statue? What is the status of the ideology it represents, and how do people generally show their respect for it? Perhaps ideally we could simply refuse to enter such a building. We don't always have that luxury. The talmudic discussion of this *mishnah* can help guide us in how to enter intentionally and thoughtfully, how to move in ways that are anti-racist.

A second discussion (41a) poses questions about the wide gap between destroying an idol and actually rooting out idolatry. Our rabbis contemplate what is gained when a particular idol is smashed. They ask questions to better understand the implications of breaking the statue: does the physical destruction show the idol has no power? Or does the idol retain its dangerous toxicity until the idol-worshiper actively nullifies it?

My colleague, R. Aviva Richman, addressed these questions in a blog post from August 2017 to consider the need to remove confederate statues in the southeast:

> Seeing the conflict that arose over removal of confederate statues in Charlottesville and the ensuing aftermath, what is perhaps most striking to me after studying the laws of idol smashing this summer is that those monuments I grew up with are not in fact nullified; there are still people who consider what these statues represent to be a sacred part of their identity and inheritance.[4]

[4] Available here: https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/smashing-idols-changing-minds/.

R. Richman watched as her hometown began to remove statues she had grown up visiting in local parks. The discussion in the Talmud about breaking idols helped her understand that the removal of the statues may be both necessary and insufficient to uproot the racism in whose name they were erected.

The continuation of the talmudic discussion may help us consider how to preserve southern plantations and other landmarks that bear witness to the racist history of our country. We learn that Jews cannot be the ones to nullify an idol "lest [a Jew] lift it up and then revoke it" (41a). The text warns that lifting the idol for even a moment is forbidden. The danger that we might accidentally acquire the idol—and therefore be implicated in idolatry—is too great to risk.

Modern experts ask similar questions about racism. How do we build museums about slavery without valorizing any part of the oppression? Which pages should we cut out of our books, and which should we laminate? How do we lift up the artifacts of this painful history and publicly proclaim they are wrong?[5]

The Mishnah (3:6) offers a third image that is perhaps the most provocative and most useful. In this case, a Jew's home is built directly next to a house of idol worship and the two buildings share a physical dividing wall:

מי שהיה ביתו סמוך לעבודת כוכבים ונפל אסור לבנותו כיצד יעשה כונס בתוך שלו ארבע אמות ובונה.

> One whose house was adjacent to [a house of] idol worship and [the dividing wall] fell, it is prohibited to rebuild it. What should they do? Withdraw into their own property four cubits and build there.

[5] For examples of extremely thoughtful museums, see: https://museumandmemorial.eji.org/ and https://nmaahc.si.edu/.

The Gemara (on 47a) tells us that, when the shared dividing wall falls, the homeowner is forbidden to build it back up as it was before. The only way to rebuild your own home and still avoid rebuilding—literally propping up—a house of idolatry is to make your own home a little smaller. Here the requirement to avoid idolatry is not an abstract restriction on belief and prayer but a concrete mandate about how to construct the walls of your very home.

To read this as a text about anti-racism forces us to confront multiple difficult truths. First, racism likely lives in the house directly next door—we may indeed share a wall. Second, tearing down a house of racism may sometimes mean losing a wall of my own home. Finally, refusing to rebuild that wall, refusing to recreate a problematic racist system, might sometimes include further losses. When we take seriously the mandate not to uphold racism, our own homes may end up smaller. That may be what is required of us.

But how do we even know if the house next door is a "house of idolatry"? In today's world, it isn't always clear what constitutes a racist structure. The Mishnah (3:7) continues by telling us not all houses are equally tainted:

> שלשה בתים הן בית שבנאו מתחלה לעבודת כוכבים הרי זה אסור סיידו וכיידו לעבודת כוכבים וחידש נוטל מה שחידש הכניס לתוכה עבודת כוכבים והוציאה הרי זה מותר:

> There are three types of houses. (1) A house that one built initially for idol worship is forbidden. (2) If one plastered or cemented it for idol worship, and they added [a layer to the walls of the house], one removes that which they added [and the rest of the house is permitted]. (3) If one brought an idol into it and [then] removed it, [the house] is then permitted.

Not all houses of idolatry are the same, and not all American institutions are permeated by racism in the same ways. How I approach a given institution may depend on which kind of

"house" I believe it to be. This frame might help us consider a variety of modern institutions. One high profile example from recent years is US policing. The Mishnah's framework offers me multiple ways to understand the problem, which might lead me to different responses. For example: I might believe that the police force has some elements of racism that need to be removed, some "bad apples." Maybe, as in the final example brought by the *mishnah*, removing the isolated problematic racist actors would be enough. Or I may see the police more like the middle category, believing there is an entire layer of racism built into the current system that needs to be painstakingly scraped away, perhaps through training and investing heavily in anti-racist initiatives. Finally, I might understand the police as a house built initially for racism. I could see an institution that was originally founded to return escaped black slaves to their southern masters and therefore believe it is permeated by racism and thus forbidden to interact with. Taking the time to unpack these different perspectives may help us better understand why we hold our different ideas about how to address the issue.

The same discussions may be had about all American institutions—public schools, banking systems, the military, and others. Each question could have a slightly different answer, leading me to make different choices. Understanding the right way forward requires a great deal of attention and nuance.

The question of "How do we live an anti-racist life?" is complex and multifaceted. As Jews, when a question or problem is too big to understand, we look to the Talmud. Our ancestors' quest to build a life that is not only pro-God, but anti-idol, offers us a guide. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, invited us to show up to the fight for black liberation as religious people. If we think there is only one possible way to do this, we are likely refusing to see all aspects of the problem. At the same time, if we allow this complexity to overwhelm us, we risk inaction and

exhaustion. In the words of King, we must not remain "more cautious than courageous" or we will once again fail "to understand the freedom movement."[6]

The Rabbis of the Mishnah were living on the precipice of a major change in history. Monotheism was spreading across the Roman Empire in the form of Christianity. They did not know it but soon idolatry would no longer be a primary daily concern. Change is possible, even on a grand scale. I pray that we are also on the precipice of major change. I pray that our children will inhabit a world that can say the same about racism. We are not there yet.

[6] Quotes from "Letter from Birmingham Jail" (August 1963).