



They Should Have Learned

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In *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. addresses his critics and writes, “Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will.” To be a real ally and advocate for change requires more than just good intentions and lukewarm support; it demands deep understanding and personal accountability. I worry that I might be just the kind of person with shallow understanding and good will about which Dr. King wrote.

The Rabbis of the Talmud also have something to say about ignorance and the obligation to educate oneself. When Avimelekh sets his sights on Sarah and brings her into his house, he thinks he does so with Avraham’s blessing. After all, he asks, “Is this your wife?” and Avraham claims that she is his sister. When God appears to Avimelekh in a dream and says, “You shall die for the woman you took, as she is a man’s wife” (Genesis 20:3), Avimelekh is stunned. He protests to God that he’s innocent, saying, “My heart is blameless and my hands are clean.” (Genesis 20:5). God even agrees with him. God says, “I knew you did this with a pure heart,” but even so, if you don’t return Sarah, “you shall die, you and all that are yours” (Genesis 20:7). It seems that, to the extent that Avimelekh did wrong by taking Sarah, he did it unknowingly. Why then should God threaten to kill him?



In the Talmud (Makkot 9b), our Rabbis use this story of Avimelekh to debate the status of someone who is “*omer mutar*,” that is, who mistakenly says or thinks that something forbidden is permissible. Is this person guilty and responsible for acting on that misimpression, or exempt from punishment? Rabbah argues that someone who sins unwittingly is still guilty and should be punished. Rav Hisda argues that, because one who is *omer mutar* was unaware of what they were doing or that they were doing something wrong, they shouldn’t be held accountable. In response, Rabbah brings the story of Avimelekh to prove that, in fact, one who is *omer mutar* is liable for their sin! Avimelekh claimed he was innocent—God even confirmed his innocence—and yet he’s still liable to the death penalty if he doesn’t hand Sarah over. Avimelekh’s ignorance doesn’t get him off the hook.

The Talmud concludes this back and forth about Avimelekh’s guilt with a profound teaching about ignorance and responsibility: “שְׁהָיָה לוֹ לְלָמוּד וְלֹא לָמַד - he should have learned and he didn’t learn.” Avimelekh can’t evade responsibility by claiming that he didn’t know better, as he relied upon Avraham’s word that Sarah was his sister. Avimelekh had an obligation to educate himself, to seek out correct knowledge, and to take responsibility for his ignorance. His sin is not Avraham’s fault—it’s his own fault, and he should’ve known better.

For me, I hear the echo of this short one-liner, “he should have learned and he didn’t learn,” when I think about my own relationship to racial awareness and racial justice work. I am certainly not deliberately bigoted, and I want to see myself as not racist at all. Yet I live in a country whose history is steeped in racism and whose systems continue to perpetuate racism today, and I am part of its culture. I know enough to know that I don’t know enough. Am I the well-intentioned person with the superficial understanding about whom Dr. King wrote? I hear this line from the Talmud as a call out: “you should have learned and you didn’t learn.”



Ben O’Keefe, former senior aide to Sen. Elizabeth Warren, has written about the obligation of white people to educate themselves:

Listen more than you speak. Do your research. Ignorance by very definition is a lack of knowledge, so the only way to break down ignorance and your ignorance and the ignorance of others is through education. It’s really important to learn the history of the struggle you’re putting yourself into, to learn about the systems of oppression that exist and how you’re complicit in them, and then, again, remember that it’s not our job to educate you. It’s not hard to educate yourself.¹

The Talmud teaches me that I cannot claim ignorance and absolve myself. I have an obligation to educate myself about the history of racism in this country, to understand the systems that are still at play, and to take responsibility for my role in them. The history is long and complex; I am at the beginning of my understanding but a shallow understanding is not enough. I should have learned and I will learn.

¹ In Emily Stewart, “How To Be A Good White Ally, According To Activists,” published June 2nd, 2020, available here: <https://www.vox.com/2020/6/2/21278123/being-an-ally-racism-george-floyd-protests-white-people>.

