

# CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP

Center for Modern Torah Leadership



חרות ואחריות

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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

## HOW AND WHY WE MUST TEACH OUR CHILDREN WELL

Rabbi Aryeh Klapper, Dean

I put off watching *Hotel Rwanda* for a long time. This past Tenth of Tevet, in the afternoon, I finally steeled myself and watched it. Not all at once – I needed breaks, and so the movie wasn't quite done when it was time for *minchab*. But I couldn't bear to eat before finishing, so my fast lasted about twenty minutes longer than everyone else's.

The leitmotif of the film is a radio station playing in the background which constantly refers to Tutsi people as "cockroaches" and encourages Hutu people to commit genocide against them, with devastating success. My mind went constantly to *Parashat Shemot*, in which the Jews "multiply and swarm", like insects. (Or locusts – the eighth plague may be a poetically just response to the *Mitzriyim*'s image of the Jews.)

Now I know full well that there is an attempt to commit genocide against the Jews in (just about) every generation. I also know that it is not only the Jews. Several years ago Gann Academy held an extraordinary assembly in which a Bosnian survivor told stories of longtime friends and childhood playmates turning into genocidal murderers; I hold no brief for Holocaust uniqueness. But the word cockroaches got to me viscerally. What kind of people can be persuaded to regard other human beings as cockroaches?

Here's the educational problem. The simplest answer is that people who hold such opinions become, or always were, as worthless as cockroaches. How can we appreciate the enormity of their evil without repeating it?

It will not work to say that we despise the sinners, but not their genes. Cockroaches do not spawn chihuahuas, and nothing depresses a Manhattanite more than seeing a baby

roach – you know there are thousands more where that one came from.

How do we teach the Book of Exodus so that our children and students really feel grateful for G-d's rescue, and still have them understand deep in their souls why G-d stopped the angels from singing while the *Mitzriyim* drowned? How do we allow ourselves to know that Palestinian public culture unambivalently celebrates the murderers of our friends and neighbors and children, and yet not have our children grow up to murder their babies, and then celebrate those murders?

No, it is not good enough if only a few of our children grow up that way, no matter how spectacularly the rest turn out.

Yes, we are responsible for the way all our children grow up. Even those who rebel against us are shaped by our community.

It is absurd to claim that all the good in our community is internally generated, and all the evil the result of malicious external influences. But even if that were plausible, we would still be responsible to develop a pedagogy that would enable our children to resist those influences.

One instinctive response to desecrations of Hashem's Name such as the "wedding of hate" video is to deny that intellectually reasonable people could read Jewish tradition as endorsing such behavior. The *prima facie* problem, of course, is that some elements of the tradition seem to very much endorse such behavior.

In response, educators talk about the need for a more comprehensive perspective, so that isolated passages that

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raise moral challenges do not become philosophic centerpieces. This is very true. But children will never know enough (and most adults do not know enough) to have that kind of perspective, and we cannot easily segregate the tradition into G, PG, and R rated components. For that matter, many teachers, especially teachers of young children, do not have great breadth of knowledge.

In a sense, we are dealing here with the core problem of all philosophy: How do we establish our basic assumptions? We need to acknowledge that such assumptions cannot be proven; they can only be instilled.

The core assumptions of a society are instilled not by the rote repetition of propositional statements but rather by the transparent demonstration of values in action. For this purpose, Talmud Torah is an action, perhaps the quintessential action. We need not just to teach our values, but to teach our texts in a manner that demonstrates our values.

Here is an example. When the “Shimshon” song is sung, (as we must acknowledge it is at Dati Leumi events, including Bnei Akiva gatherings, albeit generally without waving weapons), there is a tendency to replace the “*Plishtim*” of the verse with “*Palestinim*.”

Now many commentators have correctly noted that this is halakhically illegitimate – the Talmud (*Berakhot* 28a) rules that “Sanheriv already came and mixed up all the nations,” so that we now accept male converts from the land of Ammon, even though the Torah explicitly states that an Ammonite male may not enter the Congregation of Hashem. And it is true that discrimination against Ammonites is not currently a problem in Orthodoxy.

My question is, however, whether we learn and teach as if this *halakhab* is true. For example, we translate “*Mitzryim*” as Egyptians, even though neither the Torah’s restriction of *Mitzri* conversion nor its prohibition against ‘abominating’ them applies halakhically to contemporary Egyptians. Now I have not heard of anyone making invidious comments about

Egyptians on the basis of identifying them with the Biblical *Mitzryim*. But when we translate *Mitzrayim* as Egypt, without using the occasion to explicitly make the caveat that Egyptians are not halakhically *Mitzryim*, we undermine our efforts to separate *Plishtim* from *Palestinim*.

This is not exclusively an Israeli problem. For example, there is a children’s song in America that translated Amalek as Germans and Ishmaelites as Arabs, and before my wife and I protested, it was taught to our children in both a Chabad and a Modern Orthodox day school.

The impulse behind these identifications is obvious; they create apparent relevance. And we cannot deny that similar identifications are present throughout the Tradition. Perhaps the most common and powerful example is the identification of Christianity with Esav. Contemporary warnings against faith in interfaith cooperation are often accompanied by the citation “It is *halakhab* that Esav hates Yaakov.”

Historians point out that Esav was identified with the Roman Empire before the conversion of Constantine, so that the identification with Christianity is an accidental outcome (and one which has never really acknowledged the Reformation). Similarly, those who seek to apply Biblical description of Yishmael to contemporary people can never keep straight whether they are talking about Arabs (including Christian Arabs) or rather Muslims (including Indonesians etc.).

What these changes suggest is that – as Chazal said – there is no genetic connection between Biblical and contemporary categories. Instead, there is an ongoing effort to use Biblical categories to interpret lived experience. As with every act of interpretation, this makes human beings responsible for the implications of Torah in this world. In a world where Jews have genuine, although secular power over others, we cannot afford the indulgence of immediate but misleading relevance. *Shabbat Shalom!*

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