The 614th Commandment: The Moral Imperative for Political Action

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Growing up in a deeply Orthodox home in the immediate shadow on the Holocaust, and being named for my aunt who perished in the gas chambers of Auschwitz, were probably the two determining factors that led me to lead a life of political activism and to establish my unabashedly pro-Israel and pro-American think tank and policy shop in our nation's capital entitled EMET, The Endowment for Middle East Truth.

There is absolutely no question that a strong commitment to a Jewish lifestyle is a necessary precondition for the sense of Jewish identity, Jewish history, and Jewish consciousness that would lead one to take this path. The problem with the emancipation we, as Jews, enjoy to such a great extent in the United States, is that those very freedoms make it so easy for us to blend in, to assimilate , to intermarry, and to forget the struggles of our people to survive. The outside world is not constantly reminding us of our "otherness." Therefore so many Jews in the United States have take the convenient route and simply opted out.

My parents could not afford to send me to a yeshiva or a day school, so I was educated through the public school system. This could have easily had backfired on me. The fact that I had to go to so many birthday parties and not eat the cake, the fact that I was the only child in my grade not allowed to participate in the seductively beautiful Christmas pageants in my elementary school, and that I stayed home from all the Friday night dances in junior high school and high school made me feel distinct and different.

It also made me into somewhat of a fighter.

I was forced not to take my Judaism for granted. But then again, I came perilously close at one point to doing so.

This is not at all a prescription on how to raise one's children, and I took the opposite approach with my own children and raised them with strong Jewish educations.

As an adolescent growing up in the late 1960s and early 1970s, I briefly found myself riding the tidal wave of universalism. I remember distinctly telling a high school friend of mine, with all the arrogance of youth: "All religions create a superficial and arbitrary distinctions between people." I briefly dated a non-Jewish boy.

To be completely honest, it was a good, strong dosage of unadulterated Jewish guilt that kept me on the straight and narrow path. Looking back, from this juncture in my life, I am completely grateful that it did, although, I must say, I wasn't at all at the time.

My parents were very fine people, whom I loved and respected. The thought of ever hurting them was profoundly painful to me.

At the age of eighteen, still being somewhat of a secret, left-wing universalist, I travelled to Israel to study at Hebrew University. The first Friday night there, I walked to the *Kotel.* In the early 1970s, it wasn't as safe there as it is now; many perilous things happened to us during that same evening, including some Arabs trying to run us over with a truck, and to force us off a cliff. I still wanted to cling to my universalist tendencies, however, and I remember giving up my only winter coat to the Arab "*ozeret*" who cleaned our dorm rooms.

However, that year was pivotal to me. I began to realize that our arms weren't long enough to embrace the entire world, and that there was something extraordinarily special about our Jewish peoplehood.

Having had said this, the Orthodox emphasis on minutiae has been to me both excruciatingly difficult to accept, and has, at the same time, made me aware of how morality can be found in the smallest of acts. I still find myself recoiling over the misplacing of emphasis that some Jews seem to find in trivia and how for a few, this emphasis and the habituation of living a life mitzvoth seems to give them a sense of moral superiority and an exemption from basic acts of morality and civility, or from simple common sense acts of compassion and goodness. (We all know those few who give us all a bad name: those who are meticulous about eating their *keZayit* of matzah on Pessah, yet cheat on their income taxes.)

Yet that overall predisposition of an awareness of the fact that God and morality can be in the smallest of acts predisposes one towards a general care of one's words and actions, and led me to try to conduct all of my actions with the greatest of care.

I realized early on that blaming Judaism on people who lack the sense of spiritual, intellectual and moral understanding of the big picture would be tantamount to blaming a cognitively deficient person for his inability to grasp higher level, abstract concepts. It would be making what is known in philosophical terms, as a genetic fallacy.

And I also realized early on that to every level of intellectual abstraction, there is a corresponding level of spiritual and moral abstraction.

It is the thread of the collective narrative of our people that is read each week from the Torah that has woven us together as a people, that coupled together with the distinctness of our mitzvah lifestyle have given us an ability to survive and to carve out an ontological space for ourselves. These particular commandments, rituals and halakhic requirements have necessitated a sense of community. It is through this strong sense of community that our collective identity is forged as Jews, and consequently our identification with Jews throughout the world and a *particular* and overriding concern for the State of Israel.

There is no substitute to role modeling. Hardly a day goes by where I do not remember my deeply religious, deeply modest, brilliant father. His words and his actions were always measured. His life has been a yardstick that I have always used to measure mine up against, and I have come up incredibly short.

It is no accident that I named my think tank EMET while thinking of my father, because he was a living apotheosis of integrity and truthfulness. And the simple truth is what is needed so much now, in this age of moral relativism and political correctness.

Once I embraced our peoplehood and gave up on my adolescent naivety of becoming a universalist, and decided to cast my lot with the Jewish people and the Jewish nation, I saw that there is an egregious double standard with which the world judges our people and the nation of Israel, compared to the rest of the world.

Casting one's lot with the Jewish people has become increasingly difficult, when one straddles the line outside of the comfort zone of the Jewish community. There is a great deal of polite anti-Semitism outside the boundaries of our *eruvim* and it transcends all societal strata. I have witnessed a tremendous amount of irrational hatred directed against the state of Israel and the Jewish people. It is becoming all too fashionable once again. As the scholar Eliot Cohen says, "The Holocaust bought us 50 years without anti-Semitism, and it is now re-emerging in many forms."

In many ways, we had been living in the Golden Age of American Jewry, which, unfortunately, appears to be on the decline. I have always been deeply troubled by what American Jewry did not do for their brethren in Europe during the Holocaust.

I don't feel that it was a lack of empathy that American Jewry had been confronted with then, but a sense of helplessness and impotence. The majority of American Jews were still a bit "green." They were self-conscious of their accents, of their "otherness." They did not yet feel like they were true Americans. They felt like they were strangers living in someone else's house.

As opposed to those American Jews who were alive during the years leading up to the Holocaust, we not only have access to the corridors of power in this country, we occupy those corridors.

The fact that there was no one here to advocate for my aunt who was killed in the ovens of Auschwitz, together with her infant twin daughters, has left an indelible imprint in my psyche. It is very difficult not to draw the lesson of using everything in our power to advocate for those Jews who find themselves in more vulnerable places around the globe. I call this, borrowing from Emil Fackenheim, the 614th commandment, the moral imperative for political activism.

For many American Jews it is difficult to find the voice to advocate for our people. Many of them live a life of relative comfort here, yet they do not want to stand up for their fellow Jews, whether it means standing up for beleaguered Jews at home, where they are beginning to be confronted with more and more polite anti-Semitism, in places such as many of our nation's college campuses, or for our brothers and sisters in Israel, where they are facing very real, existential threats.

It is very possible that they might be living in an emancipated world, but many have brought with them the psych of the shivering *shtetl* Jew. That is why so many Jews would use the moral foundations of Judaism to throw themselves into greater causes of *Tikkun Olam* that many deem "politically correct," such as environmentalism or health care issues rather than advocate for the fate of our own people.

I do believe that the challenges facing our people are growing greater and greater with each passing day, and that it is through the sense of Jewish identity that is forged by an observant lifestyle, that one is more likely to feel that distinct sense of peoplehood and that unseverable bond to the destiny of the Jewish people and to the state of Israel. It is only then that one can find the courage to speak the words that must be spoken, the truth about our people's proud history and Israel's proud struggle to survive. Otherwise, it is much easier to simply blend in with the masses and remain mute.