

The Patience to Understand

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Rabbi Aaron Brusso

This summer a teacher of Jewish mysticism requested to meet with me. Among other things, he told me that the 13th century book, The Zohar had the ability to protect me if I simply glanced over its aramaic words and kept it in my possession. I had an opinion about the likelihood of that being true but I kept it to myself. He then told me that he had participated in burying these Zohar books up and down the California coast in order to protect the state from earthquakes. I didn't let on that except for punctuation my opinion hadn't changed. He then said that they had done the same thing around the coast of Florida and sitting in my office last month he looked at me and asked "you haven't scene hurricanes there recently have you?" I think it was just bad timing on his part. Did I mention he was a lovely guy?

I present you with this story of the teacher of Jewish mysticism not so that we can be amused by religious overreach but in order to say that he is less different than us than you might think. We are all at some time or another prone to magical thinking. We can't control a situation, we don't understand that person, we don't know why that happened and so we come up with a theory that gives us control, understanding and reasons. But the search for a theory of everything, a way to explain it all is not new to humanity. In fact according to the philosopher and author Isaiah Berlin, it was the magical thinking of grand theories that led to some of the most devastating moments of the 20th century.

Our desire for a better world can begin with good intentions, but we lose patience when things get complicated and passion overwhelms. Before we know it, the dream of equality leads to communism and the vision of liberty leads to fascism. In his essay "Message to the 21st Century" Berlin wrote that people like Vladimir Lenin believed there was a way to create a "just, peaceful, happy, free, virtuous society" and in order to get there the ends justified the means. Berlin asserted that leaders like Lenin believed there was "one true answer underlying the central questions of human life."

The idea that there is one true way of understanding and addressing life's problems is also known as messianism. Whether they be political or religious, ideas become messiahs saving us by explaining everything and providing one overarching solution.

We are much more prone to these panaceas than we think, you don't have to be a Lenin to be susceptible to the allure of an elegant solution. The shopping network has sold plenty of closet organizers and 8 minute abs equipment on the promise that this indeed is the product that will change your life

Messianism begins innocently enough, and because it is initiated with good intentions, you don't even notice when it goes off the rails.

I'll give you an example. This summer while studying at the Hartman Institute I had a conversation with a christian professor who teaches pastors in seminaries. He was participating in Hartman's Christian Leadership Initiative or CLI which brings pastors to Israel in order to better understand the country and its most pressing questions.

We were sitting at dinner getting to know each other. We talked about our experiences teaching and serving communities and then I asked him how the conversations had been going with the Hartman faculty. He said it was going well but that in talking about Israel they had left out a major topic that some of the members of CLI had to bring to their attention. "What's that?" I asked. "Well," he said, "the fact that zionism at its core is a white supremacist project." I almost choked on my hummus.

Before I tell you about the rest of our conversation I should back up and provide a glossary of terms. On college campuses there is a lot of talk about the theory of intersectionality, privilege and suffering. Intersectionality is a social theory from the 1980s which acknowledges the complexity of people's identities which are often combinations of privilege and suffering. Being black has a history of suffering while being a man represents a certain privilege. Being gay has been challenging while being white provides a certain kind of access. It's actually a very helpful framing for us to think about the ways we understand other people's struggles and the ways we have difficulty understanding them. So for those of us who are heterosexual we may not

realize how until very recently the privilege of our majority status has eased us into marriage and family life or how little those of us who are white think about the consequences of being pulled over by the police. And then there are intersections between sufferings where being black and being a woman can compound the obstacles a person has to overcome.

So where does being a Jew fit into this matrix of intersectionality? It's a good question without a simple answer. We have a history of being marginalized but being white allowed us to change our last names and pass starting in early 20th century America. We have experienced powerlessness but today have achieved success in America and undeniable power through self determination in Israel. Thinking about our position in the world is complicated.

As a way to think through our own and other people's experiences, intersectionality can be helpful. But recently we have seen this helpful lens weaponized in the arena of activism and deployed to oversimplify, declare alliances and persecute. The Black Lives Matter movement, which arose out of a legitimate concern for how blacks are treated by law enforcement, created a platform that included solidarity with Palestinians and assumed a critical posture towards Israel. There is a well meaning but ultimately oversimplified assumption here that all persecuted groups are suffering from the same power structure seeking to maintain its own privilege.

Another example of the approach being used with more heat than light was at a recent LGBT march in Chicago. Some LGBT Jews were carrying rainbow flags with a Jewish star. Others at the march claimed to have been triggered emotionally by what they said was a symbol of Palestinian oppression. The carriers of the Jewish star flags were told not to participate.

So, anyway I'm choking on my hummus but I manage to compose myself and ask "What do you mean Zionism is a white supremacist project?"

He explained that Zionism was an ideology conceived of by white European Jews who in ways similar to European empires used the concept of a nation state to colonize an indigenous people and impose a foreign culture upon the native inhabitants.

I'm telling you this conversation took some self control.

I said "well the relationship between Israel and the Jewish people goes much farther back than that and there was a Jewish presence in Israel before that but, you know, the conversation of white privilege is one that has gone on within Israel since the 1950s." I went on to explain how sephardic, dark skinned Israelis have for many years complained that the white ashkenazic power structure has not recognized or respected their culture and that recently sephardic culture has been on the rise and sephardim have become much more represented politically even taking over the leadership of the labor party. He was not convinced that that represented an enlightenment. "Once you assume a position of power you are raised in a culture of privilege," he said. He went on to explain to me why Barack Obama wasn't really black since he was raised in Hawaii and went to elite universities, places far from the actual experience of most black people. "People are products of their surrounding culture and easily become tools of oppression," he told me.

What this white seminary professor was saying was that we have to be aware of people's suffering and not let it determine their lives but once you have privilege it invariably determines your life.

I said "I have to tell you, as a pulpit rabbi I counsel people all the time and if there is one thing I have learned it's that just when I think I know what's coming through my door I am reminded that I have no idea. People are infinitely complex and varied. With all of your categories and labels how do you ever see any one person?"

He retreated a bit and acknowledged that it's important to see past categories if you really want to understand someone.

Then I said, "The other thing I have to say is that I spend a lot of time helping my community understand the problem of a Jewish culture of victimhood. That not everyone is against us and that we are not as powerless as we historically once were. I try to help them understand that with power comes responsibility and that Israel was not created just to give us a safe place to be, Israel is not perfect and we have to support Israel in becoming the best moral version of itself which was the original Zionist vision of Abraham. I work for an Israel born out of a Jewish vision for the world, not one born just out of oppression. But now you have me worried that the world's memory is short, that people don't take our history seriously and that the world prefers powerless Jews. Are you saying there should be no Israel?"

I wish you could have seen the look on his face. He was horrified that his defense of those he saw as victims could be seen as a form of persecution. He backtracked, apologized and said he of course thought Israel should exist and that Jews should be able to defend themselves in the world. He seemed genuinely concerned with the results of his theory meeting reality.

The next day I relayed the conversation to Donniel Hartman, the president of the Hartman Institute. Donniel said "When we first started the program with the Christians we got the people we wanted to talk to. We have done much better recruiting and now we have the people we need to talk to."

Messianic approaches to the world are tempting, especially ones that help us separate the good people from the bad people, the victims from the persecutors, threats from safety. Why think through every situation anew when you can link them all together and come up with a total solution?

In response I could have called him an anti-semite. But here's the thing, he wasn't. He was trying to understand a highly complex situation in a facile way. Labeling him an anti-semite would have been the same lazy shortcut to understanding as was his all encompassing theory of intersectionality.

Sometimes its just too complicated.

And sometimes its pretty simple.

This dinner conversation in Jerusalem took place a month before actual self defined white supremacists took to the streets of Charlottesville with Tiki torches shouting "Jews will not replace us." They joined together with members of the KKK and neo-nazis in support of a vision of America without people of color and without Jews.

That march was a reminder to the Christian professor I was talking to of what a project of white supremacy really looks like and it was a reminder to me of what anti-semitism really looks like.

Those who marched in Charlottesville deserve all the hate they generate in response to their provocative gathering and aside from the protection of law enforcement and equal treatment under the law, they deserve no sympathy. "Very fine people" do not find themselves among those groups. You are the company you keep.

Sometimes its more complex than we think, and sometimes its pretty simple. Sometimes situations are like high speed curveballs and sometimes its like T-Ball, you have to try really hard to miss.

But there were overreactions to Charlottesville that should concern us.

There were some who responded that those groups should never have been allowed to march in the first place and others who responded by toppling confederate statues or ordering their removal in the middle of the night.

Here I think we need to be careful not to respond to messianisms with messianism. The white supremacists and Neo-Nazis have a utopian vision where certain groups are put in their place. Responding with an equal and opposite reaction is to privilege the simplicity of their hatred. What makes our country great is that freedom of expression extends even to those people who hate that we are all free. And destroying confederate statues is a rash erasure of history. Instead of putting them in places of prominence like public parks which signals celebration, maybe we contextualize them in a museum or a

place with appropriate historical signage communicating that though we don't condone racism it is nonetheless our history.

You see life rarely presents us with moments in which there is an absolute right and an absolute wrong, except when it comes to self avowed white supremacists and anti-semites...as Rabbi Elazar taught "One who becomes compassionate to the cruel, will ultimately become cruel to the compassionate" or as Indiana Jones said "I hate those guys." They're just wrong, end of conversation.

But usually we don't get the emotional satisfaction of a total condemnation, we are often balancing competing goods in order to arrive at moral clarity. And moral clarity is not the same as moral simplicity.

Israel is constantly balancing safety and peace, the narratives of the majority and the narratives of the minority. America is constantly balancing rights and responsibilities, liberty and equality.

Rabbi Joshua Ben Korcha says in the Talmud that wherever there is true peace there is no justice and wherever there is true justice there is no peace.

Peace is a good thing, unless and until we say its the most important thing. A repressive society is peaceful but there is no justice.

Justice is a good thing, unless and until we say its the most important thing. Declaring winners and losers may be just but it does nothing to bring the parties back together in peaceful coexistence.

We know this in our personal lives too. Knowledge and happiness, two individual goods, don't necessarily go together. Knowing the truth about someone's health does not necessarily make us happier.

Total knowledge and total happiness, total peace and total justice are messianic ambitions. Balancing them is the everyday work of the real world. And its slow, careful, constant and consistent calibration.

Helping countries like Israel and the United States come to terms with their histories and its consequences and helping them build a self aware future that is good for all their inhabitants is not a simple thing, especially when we live in a time where patience is short and the demands for satisfaction are high.

How can we imagine a better tomorrow without needing to get there yesterday? How do we deal with complicated issues without impatiently tearing down statues and capriciously using terms like “white supremacy?”

The political theorist Michael Walzer thinks that the Torah tells us what we need to know in the book of Exodus. He writes:

first, (you need to know) that wherever you live, it is probably egypt; second, that there is a better place, a world more attractive, a promised land; and third, that “the way to the land is through the wilderness.” There is no way to get from here to there except by joining together and marching.

We get that we are in Egypt in many ways and that there is a better place. The part we don’t appreciate is that the way to the land is through the wilderness.

We think we will get there with an academic theory or taking away people’s rights or with an election.

But the strength of a country, or any system goes down to its smallest component parts. A relationship is strong when we are willing to have the hard conversations, the one’s that challenge our understanding and don’t have easy solutions...the hard ones.

The difference between moral clarity and moral simplicity is messianism. Its fair to try to understand our own marginalizations and our own privilege and that of other people, but its much trickier when we try to *tell* the rest of the world about theirs. The path from pointing out someone’s privilege to calling them a white supremacist is paved with many assumptions and oversimplifications. Unless, of course someone says

that they are a white supremacist then for all that is good and holy, hit the T-Ball my man!

You know, there was something the Christian seminary professor and the teacher of Jewish mysticism had in common- they were young. If I had to guess, a good 10-15 years younger than me. When we are young ideas are very attractive, that's why they call it youthful idealism. Listening to them made me feel old.

When I heard that a book could give you protection by holding it or scanning it, I thought about so many of you and all that you have gone through. I thought about conversations we had in my office, the hospital and your homes about illness, suffering, confusion, conflict, fragility, vulnerability and how you have bravely walked through things you never imagined you could, courageously confronting all the difficulties and the unknowns. I thought about you and said to this teacher of mysticism about his theology of omens and amulets "I could never say that to my people, I love them too much."

I think when we are young we try to come up with a way for everything to make sense, for things to be perfect. As we get older we learn enough to know the impossibility of knowing it all. Some call that cynicism, I call it experience. We all live in egypt and can get to a better place in our families, in our communities, in our societies, in the world, but we don't get there just by toppling a statue of pharaoh, we don't get there by a well thought out speech by moses, we don't get there with a text or a tweet, we get there by marching, arm in arm in the wilderness. Its only in the wilderness that we learn the patience which all true understanding requires.