

## ***Feeling Their Pain***

One has to be reluctant to base an understanding of current events on the experience of a few people. However, when those people are in a position to validate preexisting fears and anxieties, it becomes necessary to pay attention.

Within the recent past I had a conversation with a Rabbi at a fine university in a rural area. It used to be called a “white shoe” campus, but today it is part of the great amalgam providing a liberal arts education.

The Rabbi told me, in a manner that clearly showed him to be distressed, that he is now dealing with the kids and grandkids of Jews who went to Synagogue once or perhaps twice a year on the High Holy Days. These kids, even he was surprised to find, literally know nothing about Judaism. One individual that he met with in his work said that he used to think Judaism was a “political movement.” At first it sounds a little crazy, but it is not shocking if one considers that the religion of many Jews is not about the Shema Yisroel, but is based upon Tikkun Olam. The basic fabric of Judaism has been replaced with a neo-political construct. Tikkun Olam is obsessed with the impossible task of improving others. Shema Yisrael is about a personal healing by virtue of “oneness” with G-d.

The Rabbi went on to say that for the Jews that he deals with every day, a Jewish holiday consists of a “brisket dinner.” The Jewish holidays, for those who even know what they are or when they are, is “Thanksgiving” with chicken soup. Most people know a lot more about Thanksgiving, the Rabbi opined, or at least have learned to hate Thanksgiving because of the treatment suffered by Native Americans at the hands of the first settlers to North America.

After a long conversation, the Rabbi used a shocking term in describing his feelings: We are suffering and have suffered a Holocaust. One million Jews have already been lost and we are very rapidly losing the second million. The future of Judaism in America is grim.

I asked him about the work of Chabad, which certainly seems to have replaced conventional Judaism in many venues. He said that the Lubavitchers have done a fantastic job and in many places; “they are the only game in town.” However, he sorrowfully noted that the number of Jews they are keeping within any semblance of religious observance is low.

I thought about the Rabbi’s words all week and wondered whether it is really that bad. A week later I found myself at a Chabad at another college, this one in a suburban area. After services, I got to talking to a very nice gentleman who said that he had been teaching at a college for 36 years and that it was his first job out of graduate school. He teaches in a department which is about as non-political as you can get. He proceeded to tell me a story of campus disruption which occurred due to the killing of a Black man in a nearby city. What followed, he observed, was a total shock to him. It resembled the resistance that he remembers to the Vietnam War, but with much more personal abuse of students who did not want to skip classes or who did not buy into the “all White people are bad” scenario. He described what occurred on campus as being like Chairman Mao’s

Red Brigades back in the day. Students were shamed on social media; it was demanded that they sign letters and petitions submitted by the protestors. Given the laid-back nature of the campus, the professor was shocked. He received a letter that his department was racist, even though he personally was involved in trying to recruit a professor to his department who would be a “minority” candidate. After the hullabaloo that occurred on campus, the professor had an opportunity to talk to some of the students. He said that some of them simply burst out crying, others said they were forced to participate in the disruption and attack on innocent professors and still others simply shrugged their shoulders and said they did not know what else to do.

What disturbed the Professor the most, was the force exerted against students whose opinions may not have been in sync with the self-appointed authorities who were in charge of the student protest. He said to me: “This is supposed to be liberal arts, a liberal campus, where different views are discussed and respected.” What bothered the longtime professor the most was the “illiberality” of the campus environment and the emotional force which shuts down conversation, dissention and even nuanced differences in outlook. The Professor shook his head and said maybe the pendulum will swing the other way, but when it does, will other minority views become intolerable?

In other words, have we established a template where anyone outside the pale of settlement, cannot be tolerated? The Jews in Soviet Russia, at one time, and in many countries in the world, were forced to live in ghettos. The Jew outside the ghetto was barely permitted to interact with Christian or Islam society and culture. We have now ghettoized views deemed unpopular and not in keeping with the *lingua franca* of the campus.

It is difficult for students, who are only on the campus for four years, to oppose an extremely forceful constituency of fellow students and teachers who demand fidelity to Chairman Mao’s little red book. To stand up for a different view, idea or principle suggests a lack of adherence to majority rule.

I have run into the same issue myself. In the current environment, many legal organizations are embracing views that are currently in vogue. If one voices skepticism or even wants to look at deeper at other compelling viewpoints, they are immediately labeled as “troublemakers” or, worse yet, “bigots.” This lack of tolerance for different opinions or even facts is infectious and is ultimately destructive.

We can only hope that America will at some point resume a more balanced approach to different optics. Even though he was an ugly, disgusting anti-Semite, Voltaire was correct when he said that he may disagree with somebody’s views, but he would defend to the death their right to have those views and express them. Perhaps we can have a restoration and respect for differences, without the repulsive opinions held by Voltaire.

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