

## ***Of Heroes and Unity***

Oh Lord, keep us from deifying the Texas Rabbi who helped to save himself and his congregants from terrorism and let us avoid meaningless hero worship.

The Rabbi at the congregation in suburban Dallas, Texas deserves accolades, praise and thanks, but he does not want to be called a “hero” and we do not want to engage in meaningless hero worship. Rather, this latest attack on the American Jewish community needs to be yet another clarion wakeup call; but will it be?

All denominations of Judaism have now been violently assaulted in America. Whether it is Chabad, modern Orthodox, Conservative or Reform, we cannot ostrich-like hide our head in the sand any longer. Jews and Judaism in general are under attack. It is remarkable that Jews comprise approximately 2 percent of the American population, yet well over 50 percent of violent attacks are against the Jewish people.

We can be thankful that American authorities, both Republican and Democrat, stand behind the Jewish people, and that law enforcement has done its job admirably. We have lived in nations before where the ruling authorities were in cahoots with the bad guys. Fortunately, that is rarely, if ever, the case in America. That is something to be thankful for.

Upon reflection, I cannot help but think about what warm relations I have had with disparate members of the Jewish community in my lifetime. I was best man at the wedding of a Reform Rabbi and his wife, who now are living happily in North Carolina. I attend Chabad Synagogues and relate best to that philosophy. I have seen, participated in and been a supporter of the Conservative movement. There are few Jewish denominations that I have not had some relationship with in the course of my career, and the experiences were mostly positive. I never found any problem saying, “This may not be for me, but I hope those that follow this path do it with sincerity and seriousness.” When I wrote the popular college pamphlet “A Jewish Dialogue”, the dialogue was with a Reform Rabbi.

While there are those who say, and argue convincingly, that Judaism has broken into a number of religions or sub-religions, given our canyon-like differences, I could not help but wonder if there are any precepts that we can all agree to? Here is my list, comprising, as is inevitable, a target for anyone to throw darts at:

1. Shema – G-d as a guiding principle of oneness and unity. All one has to do is read the first line of Shema Yisrael and ask whether we can all subscribe to that.
2. Torah as the guiding constitutional fiat. We do not all have to agree on what the Torah means in every instance, and whether every commentator is correct, since they disagree among themselves. Rather, the Torah represents who and what we are. It consists of words that are a sign upon our arm, what we do physically, and a sign as well upon our head, what we do with our brain.
3. The basic commitments that have always made Jews, Jews: circumcision of males, and a minimum respect for Shabbat and the Chag'im.

4. Love one's fellow as oneself. In many Siddurim, all prayers begin with this promise.
5. B'yetzer Tov V'mase'm Tov'im – good inclination and good deeds, as we pray for every morning.
6. Education, education and education. That has always demarcated us as a people, and the emphasis must now be on a solid grounding in Jewish education.
7. Klal Yisrael – Avodat Yisrael – support for one another and love for all of Israel, including the State of Israel.

All of these principles are subject to debate, discussion and denominational differences in understanding. There certainly are some groups or individuals who will reject some or all of these formulations. Others will say, “just read Shma Yisrael” or “read the Ten Commandments”. Jewish thinkers have, for millennia, been trying to come up with a formulistic understanding of what Judaism is and means. It appears in the Torah not only through the Ten Commandments, but of course in the Shema itself and throughout our holy works. The prophets have written all that is required “is to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with G-d.” The formulas are found throughout our compendium of writings both pre-Talmud, in the Talmud, and post-Talmud.

There is no shortage of sayings, reflections, and formulas that we, as Jews, should be able to agree with. As to those who have left the faith, no longer care about it, or have renounced the Jewish understanding of G-d as passe, they doubtless will look at the entirety of this list as something archaic, antique, and irrelevant. So be it. Sometimes, those who reject the faith and our principles come back as the strongest Baalei Teshuvah.

My thoughts and formulations are addressed to those who at least identify with some denomination of Judaism and call themselves Jews, not Jewish Christians or “JewBus” or any other combination of Judaism and some other faith, but those who still identify as Jews.

The near tragedy, and thankfully happy ending, in Texas is unlikely to change our overall American Jewish attitude towards G-d and our religion, but as with any other challenge, there is no harm in thinking out loud. Perhaps I and others can at least begin a discussion as to whether there is any overlap, any binding cord that is yet left within and among the American Jewish community.

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