

THE INSPIRATION FOR HUMAN RIGHTS AND MORALITY

A commentary of *Parashat Toledot*
By Rabbi Ari Faust

Society today is guided by morals that protect the rights of the individual. What is the source of these values? Why are we motivated to shape a society that cares for the individual? What is our interest in treating others with dignity and respect?

Simply understood, we treat others the way we want to be treated ourselves. We respect others because we hope to be respected as well. There is nothing inherently altruistic about mankind, we are just egomaniacs trying to protect ourselves. Understood as such, society is a technical-functional establishment built to serve 'me'. It is a great insurance policy set-up in order to protect ourselves and ensure our own personal comfort. Thus, morality is merely the advent of men and women who seek to be treated morally themselves.

This Nietzscheistic approach is celebrated by Avimelech king of Pelishtim in *Parashat Toledot*. We read that Yitzchak and his wife Rivka rest in Gerar, in the Pelishti Kingdom, where they announce that Rivka is Yitzchak's sister (Bereishit 26:7). It is only after their stay in Gerar prolongs, Avimelech notices the couple behaving in intimate ways indicating they are more than just brother and sister (verse 8). The King chastises Yitzchak; but instead of claiming the moral upper-hand, the only nuance to his disapproval is that "one of the people might easily have laid with your wife, and you would have brought guiltiness upon us" (v. 10).

The question of wrong and right does not bother the Pelishti King. Avimelech is not concerned with the moral implication of sleeping with another man's wife, he is only concerned

about the potential consequences of this act.

This stance is consistent with the Pelishti King's worldview: several years earlier (*Bereishit* 20), Abraham reported to the Pelishti King that his wife, Sarah, was but his sister. After the truth was revealed, the King was duly upset at Abraham for his duplicity. Abraham's defence was simple and poignant, "Because I thought: Surely the awareness of G-d is not in this place" (v. 11).

In a place where morals are not absolute, they can be easily compromised and if morals are the advent of man, they can equally be overturned by man. Thus, in the twentieth century, Nazism was born out of the Pelishti-

Nietzscheistic 'weltanschauung'. In the absence of absolute values, the most hideous

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inhumanities can be justified through human logic because where the source of eternal values is killed, innocent people are also killed.

Judaism boasts a different view regarding the source of morals and human rights. The Torah is based on a principle that is as radical today as it was millennia ago: "In the image of G-d was [man] created" (*Bereishit* 1:27). Every single human being is essentially entitled to rights. By virtue of our very being – we are "in the image of G-d" – do we behave upright, and treat others as such. According to Judaism, we care for others, not because we want to be treated that way ourselves, but because they essentially deserve it. To behave immorally – to violate human rights or ethics – is inherently unbecoming of our most essential selves.

Western society has yet to fully appreciate the extent of the human dignity and personal rights espoused by the Torah. We yearn for the society that will celebrate the divine dignity of the individual, and that the moral rights boast the Godliness of mankind.