

Racism

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Tradition is the magazine of the Rabbinical Council of America. Its summer edition opens with a letter from a member of an Orthodox synagogue who says that in his opinion converts are “not Jews like us. . .they may be fine wonderful people but they are simply not like us.” He asks if that makes him a racist.

To dig himself even further into his dirty pit he also says, “Do I want my children to marry a person with such a different background? . . .I would have the same objection to my children marrying Sefardim.”

It took me several readings before I could actually believe my eyes. And then it took me several weeks before I could reconcile myself to the idea that a respected Orthodox journal could actually print such offensive opinions. Even as I write this, weeks later, I am boiling with indignation, frustration, and despair that I could be tarred with the brush of belonging to the same religion as this correspondent and the suspicion that he is certainly not a lone voice.

Who, I wonder, is “us”? Not someone who believes in Torah and the idea that one’s behavior is what differentiates a good person from a bad one, rather than an accident of birth. The writer is certainly is not a Jew like me!!! I wouldn’t want my children to marry anyone like him who would not want a child of his to marry into King David’s family or great rabbis like Shemaya and Avtalyon. He would avoid Rambam, Maimonides, because he is Sefardi. Never mind that he is regarded as the greatest post Talmudic Jewish minds and a spiritual giant. The mere fact that he was born in Cordova instead of Worms makes him a less desirable match? He is not “like us”?

What kind of morality is that? There are Ashkenazim like him who are “different”. Someone brought up in Frankfurt am Main will have very different attitudes, customs, and habits than someone brought up in the Carpathian backwoods. Or what about an Ashkenazi with absolutely no secular education as opposed to one with an Ivy League degree? Clearly his reason for not wanting to marry a Sefardi or a convert cannot be differences of attitude and custom. Of course it’s racist.

Racism is judging a person not by his actions but purely by physical characteristics. An ugly man cannot be a good man. A black man must automatically be inferior to a white man, a Sefardi to an Ashkenazi. That is racism at its most barbarous, intellectually degenerate, and morally corrupt. It is Naziism, “Jews are not like us.”

If I say I want someone who is moral for my son-in-law, or someone who lives a religious life for a daughter-in-law, that is not racist. I am judging people for how they are rather than where they came from, by the depth of their souls rather than the surface of their skins. I would by far prefer my

children to marry converts who care about Torah and live ethical lives, than members of the longest genealogical line of Ashkenazim who could not care less about either.

If the man had said, "You know, I would not want my daughter to marry a crook who might have all the outward characteristics of an Orthodox Jew (of any denomination or social group) because I object to corrupt behavior," then I would of course sympathize. Even so, I would allow for a person to change and repent. But this fine fellow has no room for repentance, for spiritual growth, for religious improvement. If he had said I object to hypocrites, whoever they might be, or wife beaters, I would agree too, so long as he also understood that this has nothing to do with where you were born but how you were brought up.

But to smear a whole group without specifically naming one characteristic, to generalize about them and to pretend that his group is automatically different and superior is precisely what defines a racist.

It is not just amongst the Ashkenazim we have this disease. I am offended that the Syrian community in New York refuses to give honors to converts and children of converts because it believes this is the way to prevent intermarriage. It is like thinking censorship works better than education, that punishment is preferable to rehabilitation. And, frankly, given what they have had to put up with from Ashkenazim, I am secretly glad they retaliate by refusing to accept Ashkenazi sons- or daughters-in-law! How's that for inconsistency? But still it is all the same problem.

The editor of Tradition, Shalom Carmy, has a reputation as a scholarly, intelligent, and moral man. In replying, he bends over backwards to be understanding and to avoid wiping the floor with such a crude, non-Jewish correspondent (and I mean non-Jewish in the sense of betraying Jewish values). He sees no evidence in the letter of racism, just of a failure in personal spirituality.

Even if we concede, as I would, that over the years many have abused the conversion system, or that occasional rabbinic voices have been raised that question some converts' motives, or that Sefardim have been more influenced by Islam and Ashkenazim by Christianity, this still does not justify his crass generalizations. A failure in personal development is not the same as tarring whole groups.

This has been the very plague that has dogged us externally and internally throughout our history. It starts with this sort of xenophobia and then goes on to characterize and demonize whole peoples, whole nations and religions without realizing that with them, as with us, there are good ones and bad ones. The one thing we must be intolerant of is intolerance. Shalom Carmy's public "tolerance" of an intellectually and morally challenged Jew has done Orthodoxy a great disservice.