

Betrayal

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The culture wars are raging around us. Anything or one who is unacceptable to the Culture Police is to be banned, silenced, and censored. Any writer or artist from the past who lived in a different era, with its different norms, must now be removed from politically correct syllabuses. Even as radical a thinker as Steven Pinker, best-selling Harvard professor whom I admire despite disagreeing with him totally on many issues, has been attacked by hundreds of “woke” (brain dead) academics who object to some of the things he has said in the past. There is no room for debate.

This culture war is pitching two world views against each other and we will all have to choose where we stand and hold our ground. We now have what we might call the “Betrayal of the Clercs.” The French essayist Julien Benda published, in 1927, an attack on the intellectual corruption of the age, *La Trahison des Clercs*. He used the word “clerc” to mean “scribe,” someone we would now call a member of the intelligentsia. Academics and journalists, pundits, moralists, and pontificators of all varieties are in this sense are clerics. The “treason” in question is the betrayal of their vocation as intellectuals and seekers after truth, by allowing only one correct opinion to become an absolute and above challenge.

Sadly politics has now invaded and distorted intellectual life. There was a time, many years ago, before the Second World War, when the world was divided between the Fascists and the Communists. Leading thinkers at the time lined up on both sides. Heidegger, the German philosopher was a Nazi and supporter of Hitler. Jean-Paul Sartre of France was a Marxist and admirer of Stalin. Thank goodness both were discredited.

The Cold War then pitched America, as the symbol of capitalism and freedom, against the Soviet Union, the champion of Marxism and dogma. Marxist societies were dominated by rigid ideologues and totalitarian dictators. The Welfare States of Europe were in the middle, trying to hold the balance. When Russia collapsed we all thought that capitalism had won and proved itself a better model. But then China rose and showed that a totalitarian Pseudo-Marxist power could succeed in raising the living standards of millions of poor as never before. And the extremes of capitalism were shown to be immoral and divisive. Even so, most people I know would rather live in a capitalist society, with all its faults, than a totalitarian one.

America, as the most powerful nation, came to be envied and resented. If it was the leader of the free world, most of the world only cared for its largess. Certainly not its moral authority. And anyone associated with her, like Israel, was tarred with the same brush. The remnant of the old Marxist Left was caught in the middle. They hated capitalism and they did not approve of Maoism. So they came up with new 'isms to hate, for hatred it is that drives many causes. Racism, orientalism, colonialism, and capitalism are now the deadly sins. Extremes are simplistic and more passionate. But as the Midrash says, "Hatred unbalances the mind," as on the other hand does love.

The alternative to Marxism is often said to be liberalism. But that term now has many different flavors. So let me abandon generalizations and talk of issues. The traditional Jewish assertion is that all human beings are created in the image of God and are therefore of equal moral worth (unless of course their actions declare otherwise). From this stems the idea of obligations to other human beings (rather than the later notion of rights). That we should not rely only on the State to solve our problems, but that we should take responsibility for our own actions, for better and for worse.

The Torah, for all its laws of human conduct, wisely does not advocate any one political system. Instead it hints at various options and variables. Yet we know that what Maimonides called "The oppression of States," *Shibud Malchiyot*, is the cause of injustice as much as personal greed and egoism. So that where a system, any system is discredited it must be changed or modified. But how?

The great innovation of Greece was not so much democracy (for what was democratic for them is not democratic for us), it was the Socratic method; discussion, debate and open-mindedness to other points of view. And it this that is at stake here and now.

Just because all dogmas have failed to some degree, either economically or socially, that does not mean that they are all as good or as bad as each other. Refusing to hear another point of view, is what Alan Bloom called "Closing of the American Mind." But it has become the piety of University Campuses. And Bloom, from being regarded as an intellectual and cultural giant, is dismissed and rejected. Now, only kosher articles are allowed, only kosher lecturers and kosher books.

And this leads me to our own Culture Wars that have been brewing and growing these past fifty years. The blogosphere is full of abusive, aggressive, so called Orthodox rabbis pushing their own agendas by rubbishing and demeaning anyone who disagrees with them. I will not sully myself by mentioning their

names. But if you are interested you might look up Rabbi Nathan Slifkin's blog Rational Judaism.

These religious heresy hunters who give Judaism a bad name, have only been able to flourish because of the prevailing mood in Orthodoxy, which is a growing witch hunt against anyone who disagrees. Only my Orthodoxy counts. Only my halachic opinions are acceptable. Only my ideas of what is right or kosher can prevail Everyone else is simply wrong.

As the old saying goes " What the non-Jews do, so the Jews follow" and sadly that is what is happening today culturally and religiously. We must not be afraid of expressing our own ideas and values. So long as we do so with respect, toleration, and a willingness to hear another point of view.