

Prejudice

I am prejudiced. No doubt about that. My level of prejudice, of course, varies according to the criteria. I am prejudiced in general against all loud-mouthed aggressive human beings. But that is very different to my prejudice against anyone expresses anti-Jewish sentiments. I am prejudiced against people of any color or faith who do not obey the law of the land. I am prejudiced against fanatics and anyone who wants to impose his religion or views on others. To repeat a cliché I am intolerant of intolerance.

Even so, I try very hard to overcome such prejudices when I meet someone, regardless of appearance or loyalty, because I know that one should not judge a book by its cover, a man by his dress (though Shakespeare's Polonius thinks I should) or a woman by her plastic surgeon. Above all I do not believe in being rude or unkind, and certainly not offensive or aggressive towards people I disagree with and may be prejudiced against. Despite my recognizing certain prejudices, I work hard to ensure they do not affect the way I interact with others until more information either confirms or removes the preconceived mindset. If my prejudice turns out to be valid, then I just walk away.

Prejudice usually means something more than just feeling one wants to avoid certain people. Prejudice has come to involve not just hate-crimes and abuse, but preventing people getting jobs, renting homes, or even entering certain places. In free western countries the law bans such prejudicial actions and behavior. In some countries the law reinforces them. Laws of course cannot control people's thoughts or choices of company or where they choose to buy a house. Equally so, prejudice does not depend on where we live. Some of the most tolerant human beings I have met live in closed societies and some of the most intolerant live in open ones.

We can think nasty thoughts about others, but in general the law of the land forbids translating such thoughts into actions. Sadly enforcement is weak, almost everywhere. One should not be able to intimidate those one disagrees with though in practice this happens all the time in the so called free Western World and even in Universities supposedly paragons of open intellectual debate.

The current crisis in Ferguson, Missouri where an unarmed black man (regardless of whether he was a saint or a sinner) was shot dead by white police, illustrates the overlap between prejudice with cause and prejudice without (though I might add that I believe just as much a problem is a society where guns are so tolerated and encouraged). Prejudice against blacks simply because of skin pigmentation is as ridiculous as prejudice against someone because he is ugly or her hair is red. On the other hand, prejudice against people who seem threatening or dangerous is just a protective mechanism. It might just be self-defense.

One of our biggest problems now is a tendency to feel that most if not all Muslims are ill-disposed towards Jews. Even if in the past many Jews had good

experiences with their Muslim neighbors. But look at how much hatred and murder there is between Sunni and Shia! Singling out Israel say the apologists is just because of Israel's actions. But if the issue were just the dead, one would expect equal anger at Muslims killing Muslims. Is it because Israel is seen as a competing culture in the culture wars? Perhaps it is linked to the fact that until relatively recently Muslims were one of the most powerful groups, and they lived almost exclusively under Muslim rulers. Now they see the Imperial West as humiliating them, and Israel is identified with the imperialists (regardless of the fact that most Israelis originated in Muslim lands and identify with Arab culture).

If Muslim anti-Semitism is the major single cause of anti-Semitism around the world, fascism is not dead either. The Jobbik party in Hungary is violently anti-Semitic. So are skinheads in Germany. As is the left—how strange that it identifies with a fundamentalist, anti-humanist, anti-feminist, and anti-egalitarian brand of religion. But then it was a principle in Marxism that you could ally yourself with anyone if it helped your cause.

I grew up in a Britain, where anti-Semitism was common. It was lurking beneath the surface, but it was never as overt, as public or as threatening as it is now. But now even in New York we have seen thugs carrying Palestinian flags attacking Jews. So when I see a skinhead, or when I see a Muslim, should I not now assume the worst until I know differently? Should I not run for cover or cross over to the other side of the street? Or should I rather give humans the benefit of the doubt? And is that really prejudice?

Some of my Muslim correspondents can no longer speak to me civilly. But others still do rationally. Some have confessed that other Muslims, such as ISIS or Assad, are a far bigger danger than Israel, but they are reluctant to stand up against overwhelming public opinion. I know Muslims who do not hate me. But I am really worried that I am being dragged down into a cesspit of prejudice.

The Jewish answer is that although I must defend myself, I should try to judge each individual on his or her own merit. After all, on Rosh Hashanah we quote the Mishna that says that the Almighty evaluates every human being. Not all are found guilty! The Torah tells us to treat the stranger as one of us, even though the environment in which this was said was one of pagan hostility and a clash of cultures. But it is true this only applied where the stranger was willing to accept us and our moral code, not when he wanted to kill us or impose his laws instead.

A similar ambiguity occurs within the Jewish world. We have our full range of those for Judaism and Jews and those against or disaffected. Large numbers of young Jews with no firsthand experience of intolerance, expulsion, or insecurity, or of religious commitment, no longer see the need for a Jewish state or its right to defend itself. And I am very worried by the increasing prejudice I hear and see manifest in our own ranks against Muslims and Christians. "The goyim all hate us." Any Jew who expresses reservations about Israel is "self-hating".

Prejudice towards "the other" seems almost to be an evolutionary natural

state. The whole point of religious morality is to combat "naturalism", the animal aspect of our nature, and to try one's best to elevate the better. If others cannot, we must still try. We are all prejudiced in different ways. We must not let it dictate to us.

There are good people everywhere, and there are thinking, considerate humans even amongst those who we assume are our enemies. We must seek them out and try to make common cause with them, however few, frightened, or battered they may be.