

Universal values find place in Judaism that challenges Kahanism.

THE RABBI'S TURN RABBI ARTHUR GREEN

All of us in the Jewish community are disturbed and outraged by the killing of Meir Kahane. Senseless violence, as we so often said to the Kahanists, solves nothing and leads only to more violence.

Those of us who have always been firmly opposed to all that Kahane teaches are doubly concerned. We are disturbed about the murder itself, and we are worried that the figure of Kahane not provide a martyr and rally point for what we still consider the forces of darkness within the soul of the Jewish people.

Just a few weeks before Kahane died, I received a telephone call from his local supporters asking if I would debate their leader. I do not know whether I, in particular, was chosen for this questionable honor, or whether every rabbi in town received such a call. I did not return the message and would not have participated in such a debate.

I had heard Kahane, and I knew he was a skilled and ruthless debater, a twister of words and one who enjoyed scoring points against an opponent. I am none of these and, therefore, knew it would make no sense to become embroiled.

But that which Kahane stood for has not died with him. Let it be said that Kahane in his early days did some good in calling attention to poor Jews in changing neighborhoods. But it was his attitude toward the others — mostly blacks — among whom they lived that created the dark vision associated with his name.

There are many Jews, understandably driven by the close memory of the Holocaust and the real viciousness of Israel's enemies, who have become cold-hearted and vengeance-seeking, Jews for whom "Never again!" applies only to Jew as victim, and not to Jew as the one who might victimize others. It is because of this not insignificant force in the Jewish community that I feel the need to speak out.

Kahane's vision was a perversion of Judaism. True, he was an observant Jew and one knowledgeable about Jewish sources. I have great respect for both of those facts. But he was one who chose to read specifics, while forgetting the most general rules.

His selection from the tradition was one that emphasized the uniqueness and special place of the Jewish people in history, while ignoring the clear message we are given about the meaning of that role and its ultimate purpose. He was one who saw only darkness and hatred in the non-Jewish world, and only goodness and light among Jews. In doing this, he was insufficiently aware of his own power to ignite and to extinguish that light.

There are two issues on which I base my opposition to Kahanism: One is the very foundation point of our religion

and the other is the historical experience of the Jewish people. On both of these grounds, I find his vision sorely lacking and misguided.

An early debate among our sages: Rabbi Akiba and his friend Ben Azai are discussing *klal gadol*, the most basic rule of Torah. What is the single *klal*, the single general principle, on which our entire Torah stands?

Akiba declares it to be "Love your neighbor as yourself," while Ben Azai insists that he has found an even more basic principle than that: "This is the book of the generations of Adam; in the day that God created Adam, in the divine image did God create him, male and female God created them and blessed them."

Akiba wants love to be the basis of Torah, the most basic rule in human life. If we could all begin with loving one another, we would know how to read the divine commandments and how to act on them. Everything

would follow from this.

I know there are some who read "Love your neighbor" to apply only to Jews. But this is surely not what Akiba is saying. Here he is following Hillel the Elder, who told the convert that the most basic rule of Judaism is, "That which is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor."

Surely that was said as a universal, not only an intra-Jewish, way of acting.

Ben Azai, who realizes that Akiba's dream is too idealistic to be achieved, rather sees faith in universal humanity as the basis of Judaism. Here there is no question at all about the universal character. We may not be able to love everyone, he is saying, but we still must recognize that even those we do not love are created in God's image. That is the basis for all the rest.

I take seriously the rabbis' insistence that one of these principles or the other is *klal gadol*, the most basic rule. They would follow Hillel in saying that "the rest is commentary." Any Judaism that strays too far from these principles risks becoming one that is no longer worthy of the rabbis. In this sense, Kahane's reading of the tradition was a deeply distorted one.

His frequently heard cry was that all the liberal values of his opponents were "not Jewish," meaning that they were derived from the Western tradition and not out of Jewish sources. He claimed democracy to be

an un-Jewish idea and felt it had no place in the theocratic state he wanted Israel to become.

Here is the core of our disagreement. Because I believe with Ben Azai that every person's creation in God's image is the very center of our faith, I look upon any development which enhances and protects that image as belonging to our world of Jewish values.

The abolition of slavery enhances the image of God, both for those who have suffered at its hands and for those who, in perpetrating it, have had their own humanity diminished. Democracy allows for an increase in human dignity and self-respect, which permits more human beings to see themselves in God's image. Honest work and fair wages enhance the divine image. Equal treatment and full respect for women in our society enhance the image of God in both women and men.

These values enter into our Judaism and are thus not "alien" to us. They are the application of this *klal gadol* in our age.

The Kahanist view of Jews and gentiles is based on a jaundiced and incomplete reading of the record of Jewish history. This has been most fully brought home to me in recent years by my participation in the Foundation to Sustain Righteous Christians. This group seeks to tell the tale of the thousands of European Christians who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust.

Many of them are now old, destitute and abandoned, and the Foundation to Sustain Righteous Christians gives them moral as well as personal support. Reading the testimonies of these people has been an eye-opening experience. Confronting them forces us to come face to face with human goodness in its most unblemished form. And we meet this goodness in gentiles, mostly Christians, not Jews.

Of course, these were a minority, and they were effective only on a small scale. But we cannot help asking how many of us would have been out there risking our lives had the tables been turned. Would there be thousands of "righteous Jews" if there had, God forbid, turned out to be pogroms and mass slaughter against blacks in South Africa? Or against gays in America?

These righteous gentiles force us to realize that good is not all on our side, and that we are not life's only undeserving victims. The Kahanist vision of all black and all white simply cannot explain the existence of such people, nor would it make for Jews who would imitate them. That is enough to render it unfit.

May the good he did — in defending poor and elderly Jews against attack, in rousing the Jewish conscience to see our own Jewish poor — be what remains with us as the legacy of Meir Kahane. ■

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