

Abraham Joshua Heschel, "Religion and Race" (1963)

At the first conference on religion and race, the main participants were Pharaoh and Moses. Moses' words were: "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, let My people go that they may celebrate a feast to Me." While Pharaoh retorted: "Who is the Lord, that I should heed this voice and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and moreover I will not let Israel go". The outcome of that summit meeting has not come to an end. Pharaoh is not ready to capitulate. The exodus began, but is far from having been completed. In fact, it was easier for the children of Israel to cross the Red Sea than for a Negro [African American] to cross certain university campuses...

Religion and race. How can the two be uttered together? To act in the spirit of religion is to unite what lies apart, to remember that humanity as a whole is God's beloved child. To act in the spirit of race is to sunder, to slash, to dismember the flesh of living humanity. Is this the way to honor a father: to torture his child? How can we hear the word race and feel no self-reproach?

Race as a normative legal or political concept is capable of expanding to formidable dimensions. A mere thought, it extends to become a way of thinking, a highway of insolence, as well as a standard of values, overriding truth, justice, beauty. As a standard of values and behavior, race operates as a comprehensive doctrine, as racism. And racism is worse than idolatry. Racism is Satanism, unmitigated evil.

Few of us seem to realize how insidious, how radical, how universal an evil racism is. Few of us realize that racism is man's gravest threat to man, the maximum of hatred for a minimum of reason, the maximum of cruelty for a minimum of thinking.

Perhaps this Conference should have been called Religion or Race. You cannot worship God and at the same time look at man as if he were a horse... The aim of this conference is first of all to state clearly the stark alternative. I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have set before you religion and race, life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life...

What is an idol? Any god who is mine but not yours, any god concerned with me but not with you, is an idol. Faith in God is not simply an afterlife-insurance policy. Racial or religious bigotry must be recognized for what it is: blasphemy.

In several ways man is set apart from all beings created in six days. The Bible does not say, God created the plant or the animal; it says, God created different kinds of plants, different kinds of animals (Genesis 1: 11-12, 21-25). In striking contrast, it does not say, God created different kinds of man, men of different colors and races; it proclaims, God created one single man. From one single man all men are descended. To think of man in terms of white, black or yellow is more than an error. It is an eye disease, a cancer of the soul... How many disasters do we have to go through in order to realize that all of humanity has a stake in the liberty of one person; whenever one person is offended, we are all hurt. What begins as inequality of some inevitably ends as inequality of all...

That equality is a good thing, a fine goal, may be generally accepted. What is lacking is a sense of the monstrosity of inequality. Seen from the perspective of prophetic faith, the predicament of justice is the predicament of God... It is not humanity that endows the sky with inalienable stars. It is not society that bestows upon every man his inalienable rights. Equality of all men is not due to man's innocence or virtue. Equality of man is due to God's love and commitment to all men.

The ultimate worth of man is due neither to his virtue nor to his faith. It is due to God's virtue, to God's faith. Wherever you see a trace of man, there is the presence of God. From the perspective of eternity our recognition of equality of all men seems as generous an act as the acknowledgment that stars and planets have a right to be.

How can I withhold from others what does not belong to me? Equality as a religious commandment goes beyond the principle of equality before the law. Equality as a religious commandment means personal involvement, fellowship, mutual reverence and concern. It means my being hurt when a Negro [African American] is offended. It means that I am bereaved whenever a Negro [African American] is disfranchised...

There is no insight more disclosing: God is One, and humanity is one. There is no possibility more frightening: God's name may be desecrated. God is every man's pedigree. He is either the Father of all men or of no man. The image of God is either in every man or in no man...

There is a form of oppression which is more painful and more scathing than physical injury or economic privation. It is public humiliation. What afflicts my conscience is that my face, whose skin happens not to be dark, instead of radiating the likeness of God, has come to be taken as an image of haughty assumption and overbearance. Whether justified or not, I, the white man, have become in the eyes of others a symbol of arrogance and pretension, giving offense to other human beings, hurting their pride, even without intending it. My very presence inflicting insult!...

The crime of murder is tangible and punishable by law. The sin of insult is imponderable, invisible. When blood is shed, human eyes see red; when a heart is crushed, it is only God who shares the pain. In the Hebrew language one word denotes both crimes. Bloodshed is the word that denotes both murder and humiliation. The law demands: one should rather be killed than commit murder. Piety demands: one should rather commit suicide than offend a person publicly. It is better, the Talmud insists, to throw oneself alive into a burning furnace than to humiliate a human being publicly.

He who commits a major sin may repent and be forgiven. But he who offends a person publicly will have no share in the life to come. It is not within the power of God to forgive the sins committed toward men. We must first ask for forgiveness of those whom our society has wronged before asking for the forgiveness of God.

Daily we patronize institutions which are visible manifestations of arrogance toward those whose skin differs from mine. Daily we cooperate with people who are guilty of active discrimination. How long will I continue to be tolerant of, even participant in, acts of embarrassing and humiliating human beings, in restaurants, hotels, buses, or parks, employment agencies, public schools and universities? One ought rather be shamed than put others to shame...

The prophets' great contribution to humanity was the discovery of the evil of indifference. One may be decent and sinister, pious and sinful. The prophet is a person who suffers the harms done to others. Wherever a crime is committed, it is as if the prophet were the victim and the prey. The prophet's angry words cry. The wrath of God is a lamentation. All prophecy is one great exclamation; God is not indifferent to evil! He is always concerned, He is personally affected by what man does to man. He is a God of pathos...

What is the essence of being a prophet? A prophet is a person 'who holds God and men in one thought at one time, at all times. Our tragedy begins with the segregation of God, with the bifurcation of the secular and sacred. We worry more about the purity of dogma than about the integrity of love. We think of God in the past tense and refuse to realize that God is always present and never, never past; that God may be more intimately present in slums than in mansions, with those who are smarting under the abuse of the callous...

An honest estimation of the moral state of our society will disclose: Some are guilty, but all are responsible. If we admit that the individual is in some measure conditioned or affected by the public climate of opinion, an individual's crime discloses society's corruption. In a community not indifferent to suffering, uncompromisingly impatient with cruelty and falsehood, racial discrimination would be infrequent rather than common.