ARE JEWS A RACE?
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz
Temple Sholom – Vancouver BC Canada
February 4, 2022

I have a sticker on my laptop – largely so that I have street cred in coffee shops when I go there to write, which I haven't done in 2 years but that's another sermon.

The sticker says, "Careful or you'll end up in my sermon" – this is one of those sermons.

Last shabbat I mentioned at some point in the service that my two boys are students at King David High School and when I drive them to school most mornings they will often pummel me with questions either about something they heard in one of their Jewish Studies classes or in an attempt to get from me a question that can stump my friend Rabbi Berger in his weekly, "Ask the Rabbi" sessions.

It's about 8am when they begin this interrogation, I am awake just enough to operate a motor vehicle, not nearly enough to debate the finer points of halachah; and I have *rachmanus* for Rabbi Berger, though there are times I have perhaps planted a zinger to two with my kids, generally I just want the good rabbi to have an easy go, at least from my sons.

Over the three years we have had kids at KDHS more than a few times the question has come up in that 20-minute car ride, "Dad are the Jewish people a race?". The same question of course that is at the heart of the recent *kurfluffle* concerning Whoopi Goldberg's statement on The View, which she has apologized for and retracted that the "Holocaust was not about race".

I will share with you that even fully awake it's hard to answer that question in a 20-minute conversation, and obviously it's even harder to do so on live TV, for an entertaining soundbite. So, I want to begin with, like I have for Rabbi Berger, I have *rachmanus* for Whoopi Goldberg; she was wrong, naïve and what she said was deeply hurtful to the Jewish community. It was an afront to all of the victims of the holocaust, not only the 6 million who were murdered by the Nazis in their tyrannical attempt to create a master race by purifying it of Jewish blood and the blood of others they found abhorrent. But I don't think it was malicious, I think it was simply wrong.

At the core of what it means to be called a rabbi, it means to be a teacher so I'd like to try to make something positive out of this painful situation that comes amidst seemingly endless and baseless comparisons made to the Holocaust by politicians, pundits, anti-vaxers and celebrities.

Whoopi's answer has given us an opportunity to have a conversation about an issue that goes to the core of how Jew Hatred is perceived and experienced in society today.

Fully awake, not driving my car through the streets of Vancouver, lets unpack this question for a moment.

Are the Jewish people a race? And a second question why does it matter?

The Atlantic's Yair Rosenberg explained it well, I wish he had been in the car with me. He wrote that "family" is a more accurate way than "race" to encapsulate the Jewish community.

I used the same terminology with my boys while driving in the car, but what do we mean when we say the Jewish people are "a family" not a race?

Rosenberg explained it this way, he wrote:

"In my experience, mistakes like [Goldberg's] often happen because well-meaning people have trouble fitting Jews into their usual boxes. They don't know how to define Jews, and so they resort to their own frames of reference, like "race" or "religion," and project them onto the Jewish experience. But Jewish identity doesn't conform to Western categories, despite centuries of attempts by society to shoehorn it in."

"This makes sense, because Judaism predates Western categories. It's not quite a religion, because one can be Jewish regardless of observance or specific belief. (Einstein, for example, was proudly Jewish but not religiously observant.) But it's also not quite a race, because people can convert in! It's not merely a culture or an ethnicity, because that leaves out all the religious components. And it's not simply a nationality, because although Jews do have a homeland and many identify as part of a nation, others do not."

"Instead, Judaism is an amalgam of all these things—more like a family (into which one can be adopted) than a sectarian Western faith tradition—and so there's no great way to classify it in English."

Why is this important?

Because race is the harbinger of marginalization in society today, and being a marginalized group, be it of colour, gender or sexual orientation is a key, if not the key component to identifiable persecution. It follows that being obviously and frequently targeted is the foundation of grievance; which allows the aggrieved to claim the mantel of injustice and persecution; which in turn draws people of good will to come to your aid and defense and in a free society that's when laws and attitudes begin to change.

Put more simply – as it's a 20-minute car ride and I am competing with iPhones for my kids' attention. If people see that you are treated unfairly, they will often rally to your defence and work to right the injustice you experience. The key to being seen as being treated unfairly is to actually be seen and easily identified as a marginalized group.

Jews don't often fit this model anymore, though they did in 1930s Europe. Not that it mattered to the Germans who saw us as a subhuman race. The Nazis didn't care if you wore a kippah or

kept kosher – if you met their meticulous calculations of having 1/8 Jewish blood (ancestry) that's was good enough, or subhuman enough for the gas chambers.

But today unless you are an identifiably religious Jew either in the way you dress or because you are praying in synagogue; of which there are far less in our assimilated open society than there was in Nazi Germany, you are not directly a target of antisemitism. In fact, you may never experience it.

Thus, many non-Jewish people, particularly those who suffer their own injustices don't see Jew Hatred as systemic or rampant; because the Nazi symbols, the torch lit chants of, "Jews will not replace us", the seemingly endless and baseless comparisons made to the Holocaust by politicians, pundits, anti-vaxers and celebrities. These are shouted into the air, but where are the Jews they target? We non-Jews don't see us, so where is the real danger of such hate and rage. Jews can just hide.

The Torah declares that the Jewish people are, "a people destined to live apart, not reckoned among the nations" (Numbers 23:9) – that biblical prophecy is abundantly true with regard to how our persecution is seen in the context of the suffering of other groups. We are so much the eternal other that even our persecution does not fit the working definition.

Goldberg ultimately tried to argue, that the holocaust was "not about race," she said; it was instead about "man's inhumanity to man."

As author of the important book, "Jews Don't Count" David Baddiel wrote, BTW he is speaking this Sunday at the Vancouver Jewish Book Festival along with Dara Horn who I referenced a few weeks ago; when again we were talking about antisemitism; Baddiel writes in, "The Evening Standard":

"Describing the Holocaust as "man's inhumanity to man" is similar to those who insist that Black Lives Matter must be broadened out to All Lives Matter: an idea that loses all the specifics of a particular racism into a universal platitude."

Goldberg's view that race is only a matter of the colour of your skin and that racism is therefore only in reference to the discrimination suffered by people of colour is in my experience nearly universally accepted amongst both left and right activists; and tremendously dangerous for Jews, as we have seen time and again.

This view, as Baddiel put it, "[betrays a] deeper resistance to the idea that Jews, with all their imagined power and privilege, can never truly be victims." Shylock's plea, "if you prick us do we not bleed,… If you poison us do we not die?" comes eerily to mind.

Now to be fair, that goes farther than Goldberg did, she was not denying Jewish victimhood; she was denying that we were being targeted in the holocaust because we were Jews. That's of course absurd – it was the only reason.

And this is the folly of Goldberg trying to fit Jews in to an identity box. It's a box that she sees through the lens of her own experience as a person of colour in a deeply racialized society. So, if we see it through her eyes, which is what Judaism and Hillel's Golden Rule of empathy requires of us, we can see how she sees it – race is about the color of your skin. That's her lived experience; and it has been a charge made by blacks against Jews throughout the civil rights movement.

As Goldberg put it when she went on "The Late Show with Stephen Colbert" on Monday and attempted to clarify the situation.

In her experience as a Black person, she said, race is something "I can see."

"If the [Ku Klux] Klan is coming down the street [and I'm] with a Jewish friend… I'm gonna run. But if my friend decides not to run, they'll get passed by most times, because you can't tell who's Jewish," she said. "It's not something that people say, 'Oh, that person is Jewish.'"

That may be true, but in combating Jew Hatred the requirement is not to see the experience of it through the eyes of a non-Jew who has never experienced this particular type of prejudice, even if like Goldberg she has experienced a great deal of prejudice in her life. The mitzvah of empathy requires her to see Jew Hatred, and in particular the Holocaust, through the eyes of those who experienced it, of Jews who were systematically murdered for being of an inferior race.

Goldberg was right to apologize and while I cannot speak for the victims of the shoah or their families, to the extent that I can speak on behalf of some small section of the Jewish people, I accept her apology.

She has been a frequent and consistent supporter of the Jewish people and Jewish causes for much of her public career. In fact, there is more than a bit of irony in that Goldberg, who was not born Jewish, later who adopted a Jewish stage name because of what she has described as her positive feelings toward Jews and Jewish culture, not for religious reasons.

I'm actually glad she said what she said because it raised this complex issue from the back seat of my car to the front pages of the news – which is right where it needs to be if we are going to have the kinds of conversations, we need to have to combat Jew Hatred in our society.

In the time it took us to work through all of that – we would have arrived at King David High School and off my children go for a day of learning.

When I pick them up, and tomorrow for all of you I will be exploring whether suspending Whoopi from The View, cancelling her for two weeks is the appropriate Jewish response? What does Judaism say about cancel culture? But for that you'll have to come back tomorrow, we

need another 20 minute car ride, but don’t worry you won’t really have to ride in my car on shabbes.