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Speaking out against wrongs is right

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I believe I need to go back where I came from. After all, I see so much that is wrong with the United States today that I feel obligated to speak out. For example, I find it unconscionable that in the supposedly richest country in the world, more than 12 million children live in what the U.S. Department of Agriculture euphemistically calls “food insecure” homes. They may have some food to eat, but they do not have enough food, and they have little or no food of significant nutritional value.

Then there is our education system. There is no level playing field when it comes to education in this country. According to one study, college graduation rates for white students are 24 percent higher than for black students and 17 percent higher than for Hispanic ones. Another study showed that students from very affluent homes are far more likely to graduate college than those who come from poorer ones.

Income inequality is a big factor in educational inequality. According to a report by the Economic Policy Institute, it is “one of today’s most pressing economic issues,” and is at a “worrisome level.” The report adds, however: “Rising inequality might not be such a major concern if our education, economic, and social protection systems acted as compensatory mechanisms, helping individuals, and especially children, rise above their birth circumstances and improve their mobility. But that is hardly the case.”

Then there is the number of gun deaths in this country. Between January 1 and March 7, more people died by guns in the United States than died on the beaches of Normandy on D-Day 75 years ago. We have far exceeded that statistic from March 8 on. In the first six months of 2019, 7,121 people died by the gun. There have been 202 “mass shootings” (meaning at least four people were shot at one time); 317 children aged 11 and under were shot; and nearly 1,400 teenagers 12 to 17 were shot. Such statistics do not support America being about “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

I could go on with my complaints, but these should be enough to drive me back where I came from, if I am to base myself on the words of the current occupant of the Oval Office. “If you’re not happy in the U.S.,” he said (among worse things), “if you’re complaining all the time, very simply, you can leave. You can leave right now.”

So I should leave, but so should the person who painted this picture of American “carnage”: “Mothers and children trapped in poverty in our inner cities; rusted-out factories scattered like tombstones across the landscape of our nation; an education system flush with cash but which leaves our young and beautiful students deprived of knowledge; and the crime and gangs and drugs that have stolen too many lives and robbed our country of so much unrealized potential.”

The person who described America thus takes exception to America seeing itself as exceptional because of “all the mistakes we’ve made over the years.”

The problem with America, this person said, is that we “have people that [sic] are morally corrupt. We have people that [sic] are selling this country down the drain.”

The person who said these things was Donald J. Trump. By his own words, it would seem to be time for him to leave, too.

On the other hand, what he does not seem to understand is that criticizing America is an American right, enshrined in the First Amendment of which he makes much use. Our Founding Fathers said as much, over and again. “Our First Amendment freedoms,” James Madison said, “give us the right to think what we like and say what we please. And if we the people are to govern ourselves, we must have these rights, even if they are misused by a minority.”

Speaking up against what one sees as wrong is right, according to Thomas Jefferson, for “as long as we may think as we will, and speak as we think, the condition of man will proceed in improvement.”

On the other hand, when free speech is challenged, danger lurks. “[I]f men are to be precluded from offering their sentiments on a matter which may involve the most serious and alarming consequences that can invite the consideration of mankind, reason is of no use to us,” said George Washington; “the freedom of speech may be taken away, and, dumb and silent we may be led, like sheep, to the slaughter.”

So that we should not be sheep led to slaughter, the First Amendment guarantees free speech, even hateful speech, although the Supreme Court in 1969 correctly ruled that it does not include speech that advocates “imminent lawless action.” Disagreeing with government policies is not the same thing as advocating “imminent lawless action.” Encouraging hateful chants from thousands of people in a crowded North Carolina coliseum, on the other hand, may rise to that standard if violence follows.

Should I go back where I came from? The First Amendment also guarantees freedom of religion, and my/our religion requires me/us to speak out when I/we see wrongs being done.

Leviticus 19 is the Torah’s short-form guide on how to achieve holiness. The laws that follow come from that chapter.

First up comes, “You shall revere every man his mother, and his father....” Later on, the chapter tells us, “You shall rise up before the hoary head, and honor the face of the old man....” We must respect our parents and we must respect the elderly. So we must speak out against proposed legislation that we perceive will harm the elderly.

“And when you reap the harvest of your land,” the chapter commands, “you shall not reap to the very corners of your field, nor shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest. And you shall not glean your vineyard, nor shall you gather every grape of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and stranger....”

Later on, we are told, “The wages of he who is hired shall not remain with you all night until the morning.” So we must speak out to protect the poor and the laborer.

To continue: “You shall not steal, nor deal falsely, nor lie one to another....You shall not defraud your neighbor, nor rob him....You shall do no unrighteousness in judgment, in measures of length, of weight, or quantity. Just balances, just weights…shall you have….You shall not render an unfair decision; you shall not respect the person of the poor, nor honor the person of the mighty; but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor....You shall not stand idly by your neighbor’s blood.”

So we must speak out against laws that are unfair, that give preferential treatment to one group or another. We must speak out when we see private interests being put ahead of the public good, or when we see laws proposed or enacted that erode a defendant’s civil rights.

“You shall not curse the deaf, nor put a stumbling block before the blind....You shall not go up and down as a slanderer among your people....”

So we must speak out against unfair campaign practices, mud-slinging and gross distortions.

To continue: “You shall not hate your brother in your heart...; you shall love your neighbor as yourself....”

So we must speak out when we see the whittling away of laws designed to protect minorities and women, and on behalf of laws that seek to level the playing field, especially in the education of children of any race or socioeconomic status, and gender equality in the workplace, so that all people can get a fair and equal shot at the good life.

To continue one more time: “And if a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. But the stranger who dwells with you shall be to you as one born among you, and you shall love him as yourself....”

So we must speak out when we see the kinds of conditions migrants are being subjected to in federal custody.

Leviticus 19 says this, as well: “Reprove your kinsman, but incur no guilt because of him.” In other words, if we see someone saying or doing evil things, we must speak out, because not to do so makes us just as guilty.

If we must speak out because our Constitution guarantees us that right, and because it also guarantees us the right to follow the Torah’s precepts, I guess I do not have to go back to the Lower East Side after all.

And, on Nov. 3, 2020, I will also have the right to say to the current occupant of the Oval Office, “You can leave right now.”