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The sins of silence

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The Book of Leviticus, which we began reading during Shabbat services in mid-March, does not deal only in sacrifices. It deals with morality and ethics, as well. One area of its concern is the need to speak out when wrongs are committed, including those we ourselves commit.

Leviticus makes this point in a variety of ways. For example, Leviticus 5:1 has this to say: “If a person who sins because he [or she] has heard a public sacrilege, and he [or she] does not speak out, he [or she] must bear his [or her] guilt.”

Further on, Leviticus 19:17 states, “You shall reason with your fellow, and do not bear sin because of him.”

When someone knows of a wrong that has been committed, even one he or she himself has committed, and does not publicly speak up, that person is committing a grievous sin—against God, and against the interests of the people.

There are other laws in Leviticus 19 that go hand in hand with these, including: “Do not put a stumbling block before the blind” (verse 14) , and “Do not stand idly by the blood of your fellow” (verse 16). When a person deliberately misleads someone else, that is putting a stumbling block before the blind; the person who does so is committing a grievous sin—against God, and against the interests of the people. The same is true of the person who knows of a wrong being committed against another and does nothing about it.

When we see or hear of a wrong, or read false information, we must speak out. When we know of a wrong that is being or has been committed, we must speak out—and we must do so even if it goes against our own interests. It is not by sacrifices that we serve God, but only by doing what is right in God’s sight. Deuteronomy 6:18 states it plainly: “And you shall do what is right and good in the sight of the Lord.”

Our politicians today do not seem to understand that, the most recent example being New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo. Whether he is guilty of a crime is the various investigations now underway to determine—but he has done wrong, and he needs to publicly acknowledge those wrongs, not trivialize them as he has been doing.

Perhaps the greatest wrongs being done right now are being done by the former occupier of the Oval Office. Something he should say, but probably never will, is that he is sorry he ever used racist-tinged terms to refer to the Coronavirus. (I will not dignify those terms by citing them here.)

According to a peer-reviewed study published in mid-March in the American Journal of Public Health, his doing so in a March 16, 2020, tweet brought an avalanche of anti-Asian tweets in its wake. Tweets, however, were just the beginning of the consequences of what he did and continues to do, most recently at CPAC. Hate-fueled attacks on Asian Americans rose almost 150 percent in 2020 over 2019, according to California State University’s Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism.

According to a new ADL study, that 150 percent increase contributed to a dramatic rise in a whole variety of hateful messages in 2020—5,125 cases of anti-Semitic, anti-Muslim, anti-black, anti-Asian, anti-gay messages in 2020 compared to 2,724 cases in 2019.

So far this year, through February 28, there were over 500 anti-Asian incidents, over 11 percent of which were physical assaults. That figure jumped even higher following the shootings in Atlanta in mid-March.

The former president needs to speak out against such hate, if only to convince some of his supporters to back off from this hate, but there are no signs that he ever will.

Others have to speak out, as well, and by others I mean Republicans. Speaking out, however, does not seem to be something they are interested in doing (compare that to the chorus of prominent Democrats calling on Cuomo to resign). The GOP had several recent opportunities to do so, such as condemning the racist and anti-Semitic rhetoric and tweets of Georgia Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, or condemning Texas Rep. Chip Roy for the hateful things he said at a House committee meeting that was supposed to discuss the rise in anti-Asian violence. He railed against “the policing of rhetoric in a free society,” meaning all forms of hateful rhetoric, including anti-Jewish rhetoric, of which there is a great deal, especially among the Republican base. He even praised lynching as a way of “taking out bad guys.” His efforts to temper his remarks have been lame and even laughable.

The shootings two weeks ago in Atlanta and last week’s shootings in Boulder also demand speaking out—in this case, by us especially. Virtually no Republicans and too few Democrats show any desire to do anything positive to keep such tragedies from recurring.

We need to demand that the Senate take up—and pass—at least the three bills the House passed last month. Both the Bipartisan Background Checks Act and the Enhanced Background Checks Act of 2021 would expand background checks on people who want to either purchase or transfer firearms, among other things, including closing several background check loopholes in current law. Then there is the Violence Against Women Act, which includes a provision that would close the so-called “boyfriend loophole” that allows people who have been convicted of abusing their spouses or partners, or of stalking, to purchase firearms.

Here is another instance that demands our speaking out.

The Kingdom of Jordan received more than $1.5 billion in U.S. aid last year. In 1995, it signed a treaty that requires it to extradite accused criminals to the United States. President Clinton at the time called the treaty “an important step in combatting terrorism.”

Interpol, the inter-governmental police force, is funded in part by the United States, to the tune of around $19 million a year. In early March, it dropped an arrest warrant for a woman who is on the FBI’s most wanted terrorist list and for whom the Justice Department has offered a $5 million reward for her capture.

Her name is Ahlam Tamimi. She orchestrated the Sbarro Pizza Shop bombing in Jerusalem in 2001. Fifteen people were killed in that bombing, including seven children and a pregnant woman. When Tamimi learned about the number of casualties, she had a broad smile on her face—there are photographs of it—but she said she was not completely happy, “because I had hoped for a larger toll.” That was because she expected students from a nearby school to be in Sbarro when the bomb exploded. In other words, she had planned on killing many more children that day.

Two of the dead were American citizens. It was for their deaths that the United States charged her with “conspiring to use a weapon of mass destruction against U.S. nationals, outside the U.S., resulting in death.”

Tamimi not only lives in Jordan, she is a popular host on Jordanian television. (It should be noted, by the way, that she and her co-conspirators or their families have so far received nearly a million dollars in payment from the Palestinian Authority for that horrendous crime.)

The Further Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2020 gave the United States more economic tools with which to punish countries that refuse to extradite wanted criminals like Tamimi. So where is the outrage against Jordan and against Interpol in Congress? Where was the outrage in the Obama and Trump administrations? Where is the outrage in the Biden administration? Why are we still sending Jordan or Interpol any money?

We need to demand of our congressional representatives in both houses that they bring pressure to bear on the Biden Administration to cut all aid to Jordan and Interpol until Tamimi is extradited.

What Leviticus is really about is service to God, sacred service, the service that makes this world a better place than it is now. And that includes speaking out when wrongs are committed.

In the words of the anti-Nazi evangelical Lutheran minister Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Silence in the face of evil is itself evil. God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act.”

He also said this: “Who stands firm? Only the one for whom the final standard is not his reason, his principles, his conscience, his freedom, his virtue, but who is ready to sacrifice all these, when in faith and sole allegiance to God he is called to obedient and responsible action….”

Bonhoeffer was executed by the Nazis 76 years ago next Friday, but his words live on.

“Silence in the face of evil is itself evil.”

It is also a sin, as Leviticus makes clear in so many ways.