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The Ethical Line Connecting Hieroglyphics to Hyperlinks

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ABSTRACT

In this day and age, societies are disrupted and their order is unraveled at an unprecedented pace due to accelerating technological and societal change. Millions of people and countless communities are faced with hitherto unknown and complex conditions, on a breathtaking scale. This reality requires creating more societal knowledge, faster than ever before. Such knowledge-creation will be significantly enhanced if it relies on civilizational dialogue and shared wisdom across religious, national, ethnic, and political lines. This article points to a surprisingly inspiring story in contending with such challenges – which is the biblical story about the gladiatorial clash in ancient Egypt between Pharaoh, the demi-god representing polytheism and ancient Egypt's caste-based society; and Moses, the teacher-leader of the enslaved Hebrews, representing monotheism and the ethos of natural universal human rights. That clash was a turning point in human history because the victory of monotheism over idolatry allowed for the inception and evolution of constitutional and legal systems that were based on the notion of fundamental equality among all humans. Moses is one of the most influential historical figures in human history, whose legacy continues to inspire billions of Muslims, Christians, Jews, and others. The issues that underlie his bout with Pharaoh – justice vs. idolatry, equality vs. privilege, and freedom vs. bondage – continue to challenge and shape our modern societies. Therefore, Moses's outlook remains the cornerstone of any modern worldview that embraces diversity and advances tolerance.

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Background

This abstract and article are respectfully submitted as a response to the call for paper by the International Dialogue of Civilizations and Tolerance Conference to be held in Abu Dhabi, UAE, on February 19-22, 2024 under the auspices of HE Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak Al Nahyan, Minister of Tolerance & Coexistence, and in collaboration with the Ministry of Tolerance & Coexistence of the UAE and the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC). My article corresponds with the title "ethical and philosophical foundations of tolerance" within the conference's broader theme of "bridging culture, nurturing diversity."

The Ethical Line Connecting Hieroglyphics to Hyperlinks The Abstract

In this day and age, societies are disrupted and their order is unraveled at an unprecedented pace due to accelerating technological and societal change. Millions of people and countless communities are faced with hitherto unknown and complex conditions on a breathtaking scale. This reality requires creating more societal knowledge faster than ever before. Such knowledge-creation will be significantly enhanced if it relies on civilizational dialogue and shared wisdom across religious, national, ethnic, and political lines.

This article points to a surprisingly inspiring story in contending with such challenges, which is the Biblical story about the gladiatorial clash in ancient Egypt between Pharoh, the demi-god representing polytheism and Egypt's cast-based society, and Moses, the teacher-leader of the enslaved Hebrews, representing monotheism and the ethos of natural universal human rights. That clash was a turning point in human history because the victory of monotheism over idolatry allowed for the inception and evolution of constitutional and legal systems that were based on the notion of fundamental equality among all humans.

Moses is one of the most influential historical figures in human history, whose legacy continues to inspire billions of Muslims, Christians, Jews and others. The issues that underlaid his bout with Pharoh – justice vs. idolatry, equality vs. privilege and freedom vs. bondage – continue to challenge and shape our modern societies. Therefore, Moses' outlook too remains the cornerstone of any modern worldview that embraces diversity and advances tolerance.

The Ethical Line Connecting Hieroglyphics to Hyperlinks The Full Article

Our societies are disrupted and their order is being unraveled at an unprecedented pace due to the acceleration of technological and societal change. Millions of people and countless communities are faced with hitherto unknown and complex conditions on a breathtaking scale. These crises require creating more societal knowledge faster than ever before, while balancing "particular" conditions with universal values. That balancing act makes tolerance and respect for diversity essential for societal progress.

The origin of blending particularity and universality can be traced to the beginning of the Bible itself, in the book of Genesis. The late Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, the greatest Jewish thought leader of our time, points out in his book Future Tense that the Bible begins with fourteen chapters that share archetypal stories about humanity such as Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, the tower of Babylon and Noah's Ark. Only then does the narrative focus on one person, Abraham; on the ordeals of his descendants, the Hebrews, who become the Jewish People; and on his message to humanity. Rabbi Sacks learns from this narrative that the Jewish People is both an integral part of humanity, but also a distinct entity within it. That lesson is true for all other nations as well.

The greatest innovation that Avraham introduces to humanity is a religious outlook – monotheism – that there is only one God, which is the creator of the universe with no physical shape or form beginning or end. This outlook was a transformative philosophical innovation since most other nations of the ancient world were idolatrous, believing in demi-gods, oftentimes kings or priests, and in many idols that may have taken the shape of trees, rivers, mountains, animals or stones.

The ideological clash between a handful of monotheists and all nearby polytheistic cultures was direct and uncompromising: if the former were right, all others were wrong. In fact, monotheism challenged the entire political structure of all neighboring societies, which were based on casts. For example, Egypt's ruler, Pharaoh, was held to have divine powers; Egypt's priests were believed to have superhuman ability to manipulate forces of nature; and the Nile River and other objects were treated as representing godly powers. Indeed, a lot was at stake in that encounter.

A few centuries later, Moses steps onto the scene by accepting the mission to free his people, the Hebrews, from their bondage in Egypt. This was a monumental undertaking since Egypt was the superpower of the ancient world possessing the most advanced military technology of the time, which was horse-driven chariots. Nonetheless, after a dramatic struggle, the Hebrews leave

Egypt in what became known as The Exodus, which is the greatest redemption story in human history. Forty years of wandering in the desert ensue with many groundbreaking experiences that become transformative for all of humanity, the most important of which is the receiving of the covenant on Mount Sinai.

The moral of the Biblical story about the liberation of the Hebrews transcends the "simple" inspiration that emanates from a courageous and successful challenge by the weakest to the strongest. Rabbi Sacks argues that the duel between Moses and Pharoh should be understood as a metaphor for a gladiatorial fight about the future of humanity. In that fight, the God of the Hebrews – which is the God of the entire universe and all of humanity – is in "one corner" represented by an imperfect and insecure Moses supported by his brother, Aharon. The idol-gods of the Egyptians, represented by Pharoh and his priests, are in the "other corner." Against this backdrop, the ten plagues could be imagined as ten rounds of boxing where an unknown contender inflicts on the reigning champion escalating blows until the incumbent kneels. The winner of the fight is the monotheistic God and a worldview that is founded on humanism namely that all humans were created in the image of God, notwithstanding their diversity and imperfections.

The practical universal implication of this formative story is a commandment to pursue justice. In other words, the insistence of Pharaoh and his priests on enslaving the Hebrews was defeated, and with it their claim to any superhuman capabilities. Hence, an alternative world view that is based on equal human rights prevailed. Indeed, seven weeks after the Exodus, humanity, through the Hebrew people, is introduced to the covenant and the ten commandments, seven of which – such as the prohibitions on murder, theft or lying – are universal. While in the desert, before and after that watershed moment at Mount Sinai, other foundational ideas are also introduced such as a law-based society with a judiciary and due process; a welfare system that redistributes wealth; or the idea of a constitutional monarchy where the king is subject to the law.

In the final episode of the Five Books of Moses, in the book of Deuteronomy, Moses, who is 120 years old delivers his parting message. He has led his people from bondage to freedom and through the desert for 40 years but will not enter the promised land. Now he is endowing the Jewish People, and humanity, with a legacy to uphold. Dr. Micah Goodman, in his book, the Last Words of Moses, highlights the fact that in that speech, Moses establishes that the foundation for a successful society is morality. Armies and weapons will not determine longevity, but rather ethics and justice, which are tested by the stature of society's weakest: the widow, the orphan and the stranger.

According to Jewish philosophy, at Mount Sinai, another formative transformation occurred. It is called "contraction" or, in Hebrew, Tzimtzum. The basic idea is that since the creation of the universe, God had been making direct interventions in humanity such as by bringing on the flood or speaking to Abraham. Such direct Godly interventions continued through the ten plagues and during the Exodus. But the giving of the covenant on Mount Sinai was the last such direct revelation of God to an entire group of people.

Henceforth, the management of life on earth became the responsibility of humans, and godliness would be revealed indirectly through interactions among individuals. In other words, the way in which a person treats their spouse, children, parents, siblings, neighbors, employees, community, society, the environment and even animals reflects their own godliness and exposes the presence of God on earth.

Furthermore, the quest for godliness is not only individual but also collective and societal. And because God has no physical form, justice, in its various and amorphous forms, is the manifestation of God's presence through the acts of humans and among them. Indeed, the elusive ideal of justice shapes multiple arrangements in our societies such as checks and balances in governance and among majority power and minority rights; the ideals of capitalism and the reach of the welfare state; the desire to do well with the obligation to do good; meritocracy and second chances; individual interests and collective concerns; the needs of human development, the protection of the environment and the rights of animals.

Hence, if all humans embody the image of God, and if "justice" is the only human aspiration that is truly universal, then the need for a civilizational dialogue, which can only take place in a tolerant and diverse society, is vital. Indeed, every case of evident sustainable progress in human security and prosperity can be traced to ideas that were humanistic in their core. At the same time, most major setbacks of societies and humanity emanate from chauvinism, insulation and a false sense of superiority.

The need for such civilizational dialogue is further enhanced due to increasing racial and ethnic blending of many societies, the rising global interconnectedness and the acceleration in the pace of change. New York Times columnist, Thomas Friedman, calls our time "the age of accelerations," referring to the accelerating and simultaneous transformations in environment,

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technology, business, society and politics. The "age of accelerations" disrupts many societies and places a growing number of people and communities in unprecedented conditions of insecurity and instability without solid societal knowledge in the form of laws or regulations to guide them. In such conditions, a vibrant ethical exploration is crucial for informing action. Clearly, all major scientific challenges faced by humanity – such as climate change, food and water security or healthcare – also have profound ethical and social implications that are better contended with through civilizational dialogues.

Indeed, Abraham and Moses are two of the most influential leaders to have ever lived. More than half of humanity, numbering north of three billion people including all Christians and all Muslims have embraced monotheism, and many more have now embraced key societal ideas associated with Abraham and Moses about human rights, constitutions, governance, laws, justice, economics and welfare. The outlook they stood for is now the cornerstone of any modern worldview that embraces diversity and advances tolerance.

The issues that underlaid the biblical bout between Pharoh and Moses and between monotheism and polytheism – including justice vs. idolatry, equality vs. privilege and ultimately freedom vs. bondage – linger. And so does the legacy of Abraham and Moses: the overarching ethical framework for humanity's success is respect for basic human rights and the tolerant embracing of their diverse manifestations.

Gidi Grinstein is the founder and president of TOM (Tikkun Olam Makers) which is an international humanitarian venture that creates and distributes radically affordable solutions for needs of people with disabilities around the world that don't have market or government solutions. Gidi is also the Founder and President of the Reut Institute, Israel's most cutting-edge think-tank, and served as the secretary of the Israeli delegation for the Camp David negotiation in 2000. Gidi published hundreds of articles and two books: Flexigidity: the Secret of Jewish Adaptability (2014) and (In)Sights: Peacemaking in the Oslo Process Thirty Years and Counting (2023), co-authored with Prof. Ari Afilalo of Rutgers University.

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