

You may have seen this week that a statue that was paid for by a proud American Jew - the highest ranking Jew in the Navy at the time, Uriah P. Levy, was voted to be removed from the NYC Council Chambers.

The statue is not of Levy. No. It is of his greatest hero: Thomas Jefferson.

Levy was a huge fan of Jefferson, in part, because of Jefferson's ideology of the freedom of religious practice. The ideas promulgated by Jefferson - beautifully displayed on the Jefferson Memorial - inspired Levy and have created a nation in which we, as Jews, have found safe-haven as never before.

"What about the black slaves he owned?" Many have asked and protested. Yes, what of the black slaves he owned? The 18th century worldview of black slaves was not the worldview of blacks today, thankfully. And where it is, we are working hard to dismantle racist practices and systemic racism. The 18th century worldview - and the means by which Jefferson operated - was different. And as we know, there were some slave owners who were better than others, in a deeply flawed and horrific system. To say that Jefferson was "one of the good ones" is apologetic but honest given his era. Could he have been much more? The torah teaches us that Noah was good - in his generation. We may say the same of Jefferson - even a tzaddik, like Noah, dressed in peltz, furs (wigs, actually).

Uriah P. Levy loved Jefferson so much that he bought Monticello when it was for sale in 1834. As the story goes - we may well not have Monticello today were it not for Levy. In fact, his descendants owned the property until 1923 when it was sold to the Monticello Foundation, which continues to maintain it as a site for learning of American and Jeffersonian history. A foundation, by the way, with antisemitic members who for many decades not only downplayed the Levy's role but allowed the Levy name to be brushed aside and Uriah's mother's on-site grave to fall into disrepair.

In that same year that Levy bought the farm - literally - he commissioned a statue of his hero that began its life on the White House lawn and ultimately made it to the Capitol Rotunda, where it resides today. That statue - every state has two - is the only one financed by a private individual. A replica of that first statue of Jefferson is what is being removed from the NYC Council Chambers.

So - do we laud Jefferson for his insight and acumen or take him down for participating in the societal flaws from which he profited? Do we laud Levy for his preserving the home and estate of one of our country's founders or question his motivations?

I've heard that there are some who want to take down the Jefferson statue in the Jefferson memorial. To what end will we go? San Francisco is already working to remove the names of the critically important presidents like Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln from their school names. Why? So we can forget them and the genuine greatness they displayed and the real flaws they had in them?

As of right now, there is not a clear path where the statue from NYC is going. Some want it destroyed. The New-York Historical Society hopes to take it, in order to facilitate and create discussions - hard discussions if necessary - about history and humanity, human relations then and now.

I've spoken about this before from the bima and in my columns: we are living in a cancel-culture world that is so antithetical to Jewish tradition it is just yet another reminder of how outside we are as Jews - and quite frankly, I'm happy to be at times. I remain shocked when I see Jews seeking to cancel or remove, discourage dissent or support stifling whatever discussion.

We are the people of a book that not just challenges us to discuss but to question and find reasonable solutions - practical solutions, not convenient or intellectually disingenuous. We are a people of a faith that demands of us no abdication of the mind as Edmund Fleg, a Zionist thinker, wrote so eloquently around the time that the Levy descendants sold Monticello in 1923.

If we didn't like parts of Torah like ... you know - this week's parasha with Abraham and Sarah expelling Hagar and Ishmael or the following chapter of the binding of Isaac, we could have canceled and excised those sections.

Not only have we left them in - we have allowed for myriads and reams of commentaries - many of which are contradictory. That being said, there are points at which a commentary may go too far. When the theology or reshaping of the text goes against our belief then we do say no. Christian reads on Isaac as symbolic or somehow setting up the model for Jesus goes too far - way too far for us. It's why we remain Jews. Muslim interpretations that say it was Ishmael who was sacrificed - no, that won't work for us either. Too far. But inserting ideas about Sarah having been aware of what was happening or that Satan - God's adversary - had a hand in the experience, those are within reach for us. Even a treatment of the text that Isaac was indeed sacrificed - are open to our table for discussion. After all, why else would God have said, "...For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from Me." (Gen. 22:12)

The idea that Abraham was reluctant or that Isaac was not only aware but willing to participate in the endeavor - all fair game for Jewish commentary.

Thomas Jefferson was a slaveowner.
He sired multiple children from one of his slaves.

He also wrote the founding document - which was a team effort with others - that set the stage for our country's existence. A country that yes, has a very difficult and painful history which deserves and demands addressing. But removing a statue or school's name erases a person and with it a story. It denies the rights "...we hold to be self-evident," even if the writer and/or his era didn't fully hold them self-evident for every person. And that story is critical to understanding not just an era but human complexity and contradiction, which we display as well.

If those who seek to cancel think that they are any different or less contradictory - to think that they may be higher or mightier because they speak from a self-congratulatory or notably woke position, then they show a hubris which is not only unbecoming - it is unnerving, especially when those who pride themselves supposedly as enlightened begin to set policy, curriculum, or definitions for what is permissible or not - or what kind of teachers and professors are welcome or not.

I am grateful that no one took out the sections of torah we still have to grapple with. Without question, there was material left on God's cutting room floor. But what we have is a record of the issues we face as humans and in particular as Jews. Americans have grappled with slavery for 400 years. Removing a statue may be the right decision at times and at others - short-sighted.

This much I do know - thoughtful engagement and bringing parties together with multiple voices and lenses is critical. May we always allow for many voices but also recognize where there are certain fundamental truths. There are people of character worthy of being studied and followed and those who simply are characters who disturb and disrupt more than advance a society for betterment. May we shape respectful and understanding living as has been an aspiration of Jewish life through the millennia.