

The Growth of Anti-Intellectualism Sermon

Rapper BoB and TV celebrity Tia Tequila, both of whom I had never heard of until recently, have taken to social media recently with one belief in common – that the Earth is flat. They present their cases in an array of posts, ranging from stating that if the Earth were round then buildings in New York would be at an angle to each other, to the basic question that if it were round, how come the horizon is flat? While the media has reported on these with incredulity, the truth is that there exists an open strain of anti-intellectualism in this country that is, unfortunately, growing stronger. Isaac Asimov famously said that “there is a cult of ignorance in the United States, and there has always been. The strain of anti-intellectualism has been a constant thread winding its way through our political and cultural life, nurtured by the false notion that democracy means that ‘my ignorance is just as good as your knowledge’.”

How bad is this culture of anti-intellectualism? Well, according to a Pew Study, only 29% of the public claims to regularly read the newspaper, and the Jenkins Group reports that 42% of college graduates never read a book after graduation. 80% of American families did not buy a book in the last year. Only 58% of Americans can identify the Taliban, two-thirds cannot name a single Supreme Court Justice, and 29% do not know the name of the Vice President. 70% of Americans do not know what the Constitution is. That’s just ignorance, widespread ignorance. 20% believe that the Sun goes round the Earth. But are these staggering displays of ignorance anti-intellectualism?

According to author Susan Jacoby, a 2006 survey by National Geographic found that nearly half of Americans between ages 18 and 24 do not think it necessary to know the location of other countries in which important news is being made. More

than a third consider it “not at all important” to know a foreign language, and only 14% consider it “very important.” Jacoby writes, “That leads us to the third and final factor behind the new American dumbness: not lack of knowledge per se but arrogance about that lack of knowledge. The problem is not just the things we do not know... it's the alarming number of Americans who have smugly concluded that they do not *need* to know such things in the first place.” It is the belief that knowledge is not important that is anti-intellectualism, or anti-rationalism, and it is on the rise.

Why? Conspiracy theories are part of it. The other day, I was talking to someone outside and they pointed up at an aeroplane contrail. “Do you know what that is?” she asked. “Yes,” I said, “It’s called a contrail, it’s the emissions from the plane.” “Do you know what’s happening there?” she asked. “Yes,” I replied, “the vapour from the plane is condensing as it comes into contact with the cold air, forming a long line that eventually evaporates.” “No,” she said, “it’s going to turn into a cloud. I read about it in a newspaper. They’re doing it up in Taos.” And it’s possible true – it’s possibly the case that there is cloud-seeding up in Taos. It wouldn’t be the first place in the world to engage in cloud-seeding. But it doesn’t come from commercial liners flying overhead. Five minutes later, when the contrail had completely evaporated, I said to her, “It seems your theory about it turning into a cloud didn’t work out.” It seemed like a fairly open/shut experimental failure to me. Her response? “Well, I read about it in the newspaper. Some people say that there are neurotoxins being sprayed but I’m not sure about that. What I do know is that it makes it impossible for me to grow my organic garden because of all the chemicals coming down.” It was truly an extraordinary answer that showed all the hallmarks of anti-intellectualism – despite what is observably true, someone said something so, without any evidence, I believe it.

And I fear this phenomenon is getting worse. I and many others thought that Facebook would open up dialogue, would allow people to debate and discuss complex matters, while apparently sharing photos of their current meal as well as holiday snaps. But I was on the receiving end of the harsher side of Facebook a couple of weeks ago when a rather left-wing Jew from North London, whom I had never actually met but who seemed to share a lot of things with me, took exception to the fact that I held a different opinion about Hillary or Bernie. Within moments, he had sent me a private message, spewing out vitriol, calling me tedious, immature and judgmental. I tried to reason with him but within moments he had launched another attack, this time on the content of my sermons, and then blocked me from all further communication. And this is, it seems, how Facebook really works. People like me who try to have reasonable dialogue are now regularly called “trolls,” which is a term for someone who deliberately posts a counter-opinion to be difficult and to annoy others. Apparently, attempts at discussion are now widely seen as trolling. I think my hopes for Facebook to be a tool of social change have been far too high. Instead, it’s more often than not an echo chamber – a place where we unfriend individuals who disagree with us and then discuss worldly matters with those whose opinions are only very slightly different to our own. Instead of opening ourselves to other intellectual possibilities, we now actively shut them off to protect ourselves from so-called trolling.

The anti-intellectual movement is not just whimsy. Lives are at stake. The anti-vaccination movement costs actual lives. A movement started by a British doctor who was struck off for his spurious and dangerous claims, a movement that is based in nonsense science, literally costs lives. People die from lack of vaccination. In fact, when we were considering home-schooling Zafra, one of the reasons against it was that the parents of local home-schooled children en masse refused to

answer whether or not they had vaccinated their children. And not just the lives of American children. The refusal by many Republican presidential candidates to accept the reality of anthropogenic climate change threatens millions of lives. The other day Noam Chomsky described the Republican Party as a “threat to human survival” because of their refusal to address the “looming environmental catastrophe.” Candidate after candidate have been known to say the line, “I’m not a scientist” to defend their ignorant position. The deliberate refusal to recognise the overwhelming scientific consensus on something as threatening as global temperature increases from 2-5 degrees Celsius is not just political posturing influenced by lobbyists, it’s willful and reckless anti-intellectualism.

Where does it come from? In the 1960s, Richard Hofstadter suggested that it was because so many students went to college to acquire engineering degrees, or degrees that ensured financial return, instead of degrees that fostered critical thinking and a love of learning. There’s no doubt that some of that is true – the obsession with results, standardised testing is an obsession that even my five-year old daughter is subjected to regularly. Educational systems around the world, from the US to the UK and beyond, are now so test-driven that the process of learning has become warped. We’re not training the next generation to think, just to remember. We’re training them to become memory banks and not critical thinkers. And when they do express critical thought, they’re lambasted socially for being geeks or trolls.

The joy of Reform Judaism, as far as I can see, the *strength* of Reform Judaism, is that it doesn’t give answers. It points to profound questions. We don’t tell people what to think or what not to think. But we celebrate the intellect. We take the best of human knowledge and we apply it to our tradition. We don’t ignore geology, archaeology, history, sociology, astronomy, and more, simply because our tradition

as it developed was unaware of such things. When Torah describes Avram as having come from Us Casdim, Ur of the Chaldean Empire, we don't ignore the science that unequivocally informs us that that must have been written by a later author since Ur wasn't part of the Chaldean Empire until much later. We don't gloss over that, we embrace it and use it to reflect on Scripture anew. We develop our understanding of God and of our tradition through our learning, not despite it. When we read Torah, we have a choice. On the one hand, we can accept that it was written in a different time with a differing understanding of the world and use that acceptance to try to understand what Torah means to us. On the other hand, we could believe, like Torah, that the world is flat with a vaulted heaven that holds back the upper rains while the lower waters are waiting to burst forth from the watery depths below. The consequences of our decision – and it is a decision, even if it is guided by society, parental upbringing and more – has enormous consequences and the consequences are simply to do with whether or not our religious perspective holds society back or helps it move forward.

So, in the future, I shall probably continue to troll. I shall continue to challenge anti-intellectualism when I see it. I shall continue to debate and discuss. I shall continue to ask searching questions, even if they make me unpopular. I shall try to do so in a non-judgmental way, although I shall reserve the right to publicly call out anti-intellectualism when I see it. Anything less would be anathema to my existence as a Reform Rabbi.

Today, then, let us commit ourselves to counteracting the growing tendency away from critical thinking. Let us engage in more intellectual debate. Let us pick up more books and actively seek more knowledge. And let us bring that newfound knowledge into our Jewish lives, so that they become richer with every passing

moment. May God guide us in our search to learn more about this wondrous world, and let us say, Amen.