

On Second Thought

By Joel Rebibo

Tolerance for Everything but Judaism

The story gets more bizarre and upsetting by the day.

It started early last week with a cellphone video of a woman caught in a crazed, anti-Semitic rant directed at two men at Ben Gurion Airport, one helping the other put on *tefillin*.

In footage that was posted on social media, the woman, her face blurred, is heard screaming at the men and laughing derisively at what they are doing. “Move because you are bothering,” she demanded. “Why are you doing this here? There are people here!”

It wasn’t the two men she found bothersome but the *mitzvah* of *tefillin* and the fact that it is still being kept faithfully. Had it been a Muslim prostrating himself in prayer next to her, she wouldn’t have said a word. But Jews engaged in the *mitzvah* of *tefillin*? That’s threatening, and therefore grounds for ridicule and outrage.

But the story gets worse. Turns out the woman wasn’t just any old *meshuggener* that regularly gets caught in cellphone videos that go viral — like the “chocolate lady” who went berserk when she wasn’t served a chocolate by the flight attendant on an Israeli airline. It was a professor, Pnina Peri, an Israeli who teaches pluralism and multiculturalism at the University of Maryland.

There’s nothing new about Jewish liberals showing tolerance and respect for everyone and every way of life, no matter how perverse, except for when it comes to Judaism. It’s not enough that they abandon their heritage, they feel a need to make fun of those who don’t. Israeli playwright Joshua Sobol derided “mezuzah-kissing” Jews as “fools,” while painter and political pundit Yair Garbuz referred to them as “amulet kissers and pagan worshippers.” Army Radio broadcaster Gidi Orsher was suspended for making fun of the beliefs of Sephardim (believe me, he would have been fired had he made fun of Muslim beliefs — the secular media would have demanded it — but if it’s “only” Sephardi Jews, a suspension will do).

But in the case of Peri we’re talking about a professor whose “expertise” is pluralism and multiculturalism. Evidently, even pluralism experts know that there are limits to what is acceptable and draw the line at Torah Judaism.

And then, when you thought



Illustrative photo. Mendy Hechtman/Flash90

Peri couldn’t possibly disgrace herself any further, she decided to take the offensive (in more ways than one). Embarrassed at having been caught in her infantile rant, she claimed that *she* was the victim in the whole sad story, the one deserving of an apology. After all, she had been subjected to “the most nasty kind of personal shaming” in the video. (How ironic that the woman who thought nothing of screaming publicly at two Jews engaged in putting on *tefillin* is complaining at having been shamed — because of her own misdeeds.)

She apologized for her comment — a feeble attempt at damage control — but in the same sentence said she “looked forward to an apology for the terrible things that hurt me and caused me to be angry.”

And why was she entitled to an apology? She claims she “politely” asked the men to move to another part of the airport, so as not to disturb her, and they responded by calling her “Hitler” and commenting that it was “a pity that he did not kill me and my family in the Holocaust.”

These words “made me react harshly,” she said, in a classic liberal attempt to evade responsibility for one’s actions.

The two men involved in the

story give a different account, and frankly I believe them over her. First, because the cellphone video shows them displaying superhuman restraint in the face of her maniacal rant. Second, because anyone who knows the attitude and behavior of Chabad *shluchim* toward nonreligious Jews knows that her claim is preposterous.

Rabbi Meir Herzl, who runs the Chabad House in the Yerushalayim neighborhood of Pisgat Ze’ev, was volunteering at the airport, offering people the chance to put on *tefillin* and providing other forms of assistance, all free, of course. One of the people he approached was Gad Kaufman, a traditional Jew, who recounted the event as follows:

“I was politely asked by a Chabad man if I wanted to put on *tefillin*. I said yes, and then a woman with a crazy look jumped up and started cursing, harassing and disturbing.”

A few years ago, I had a stopover at Orly Airport in Paris, where I had to *daven Shacharis*. I found a corner and put on my *tallis* and *tefillin*. My wife, who sat nearby, told me that I got many dirty looks from passersby. But not one person raised a voice in anger or outrage. And in Israel, of all places, a Jew shouldn’t feel comfortable to put

on *tefillin* at the airport?

What’s the appropriate response to Professor Peri’s behavior?

The Coalition for Jewish Values, which says it represents over 1,000 Rabbis in the United States, asked that Peri’s employers at the University of Maryland and the American University “immediately review the course load assigned to Professor Peri for the upcoming semester” as “one could not anticipate that the woman portrayed on that video would necessarily treat [religious students] impartially and with complete fairness.”

“The universities should require diversity and tolerance training before she returns to the classroom,” said Rabbi Steven Pruzansky, CJV’s East Coast regional vice president. “They must examine her teaching assignments to ensure an environment of mutual respect for students in the fall.”

With all due respect, I don’t think that goes far enough. Not even close. She needs to be dismissed immediately, for two reasons.

First, this woman’s ugly attempt to ridicule Jewish beliefs is not an isolated act. It’s standard fare for elitist Jewish liberals

Continued on page 65

Tolerance for Everything but Judaism

Continued from page 64

who look down their noses at the “primitive” sorts who “need” religion. Peri’s dismissal will send a message to this clique that dialogue and criticism are legitimate forms of expression, but belittling people for their religious beliefs is not.

Second, we have an obligation to protect Jewish university students from such professors. As one student wrote in a review of Peri’s teaching:

“She denigrates Jewish practice and culture in the name of multicultural learning. I felt very uncomfortable as a Jew taking her class.”

Said another: “Most horrible person I ever met. She needs to be fired for being an anti-Semite. Get rid of her if you want to keep a good reputation.”

And another: “Peri was, on the whole, one of the worst professors I’ve had. ... Her lectures were factually inaccurate and she routinely berated students for pointing out these inaccuracies or disagreeing with her.”

Professors wield enormous power over their students,

determining their academic future and sometimes career options, and Peri clearly cannot be trusted with such power, especially with Jewish students interested in pursuing Israel studies.

While it wouldn’t be fair to blame her husband, Professor Yoram Peri, a former head of the New Israel Fund, for his wife’s vile behavior, as the head of the Gildenhorn Institute for Israel at the University of Maryland, which employs her, I would have expected to hear him denounce it as nonrepresentative of the Jewish liberal left. But, to the best of my knowledge, there’s been no such condemnation, not on his part and not on the part of all non-Torah movements who claim that all they want is equality for all “streams” of Judaism.

The reason is obvious. They don’t condemn her behavior because deep down they have no problem with it. Dr. Ran Froman, chairman of the Secular Forum in Israel, in response to the incident at the airport, wrote an Op-Ed last week hailing the “secular revolution” that has led to successful efforts at keeping

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It was a slip of the liberal mask that hides a deep-seated hatred for *frumkeit*.

Chabad *shluchim* from offering people a chance to put on *tefillin*.

Professor Peri’s tirade wasn’t a slip of the tongue. It was a slip of the liberal mask that hides a deep-seated hatred for *frumkeit*.

On the one hand, these outbursts are a healthy sign. They show that those who’ve turned their back on authentic Judaism feel threatened by the success of the Torah world. They also show that they feel guilty about being the ones who severed their families’ connection to a *mesorah* that goes back thousands of years. Otherwise, why make fun, why

feel a need to mock? Just live and let live, as they claim to do with everyone else.

On the other, these attacks are unacceptable. There’s no reason that we or our children should be subjected to ridicule for holding on to faiths and practices that go back to Sinai.

There must be consequences for mocking religious Jews, just as there are for mocking other minorities. Only if there is a price to pay will the Professor Peris of the world think twice before insulting the Torah and those who faithfully practice it.

An Open Letter to Professor Peri

Opinion

AKIVA FOX

Dear Professor Peri,

I was among the many people who were shocked and dismayed at your strong display of negativity and abhorrence towards a man who was helping a fellow Jew to don *tefillin* in Ben Gurion Airport. I do not know you personally but I read that you are an Israeli professor presently living in the United States. I’m sure you are aware that America’s first amendment advocates freedom of speech and freedom of religion as part of a person’s constitutional right to practice, unhindered, his religious beliefs.

It is not uncommon to find Muslims and Hindus bent over in prayer or Christian prayer groups holding hands and meditating. Surely you wouldn’t disturb them or consider their religious customs offensive. If you would choose to interfere or disrupt them, technically you would be committing a crime.

It is ironic, and quite sad, that when witnessing a man of your own faith following the dictates

of your own religion in your own homeland, you felt the need, and the right, to interrupt him and disgrace him. (I also read that your husband Yoram is closely aligned with the New Israel Fund. Their doctrine recognizes the State of Israel as “the sovereign expression of the right of self-determination of the Jewish people and as a democracy dedicated to the full equality of all its citizens and communities,” including civil and human rights and religious tolerance. I’m sure that as self-proclaimed protectors of religious tolerance they would strongly denounce any display of prejudice against worshippers of the Jewish faith.) As a side point, I would be very interested in hearing your opinion on the Women of the Wall and those of their ilk who deliberately choose to break from tradition and wear *tefillin*. Recently they began erecting stands throughout the Israeli thoroughfares offering women the chance to don *teffillin*. How would you have reacted to seeing them in the airport or on Rechov Ben Yehuda?

The newspapers wrote that you are a respected professor whose expertise is in Israeli “culture.” I am not sure how you define

“culture.” Usually it refers to the philosophy, values, principles and beliefs of a certain people or nation that are most often found in their literature. I assume that since Israel is the Jewish State, their culture would somehow include following the ancient Jewish laws and traditions. Wearing *tefillin* is one of the 613 commandments in the Bible, which the Jewish nation received at Sinai. It is certainly logical to assume that one who observes them is unquestionably a “cultured” individual and deserves respect; he definitely should not be publicly scorned.

It seems to me that there is perhaps a deeper, underlying trigger for your outburst.

I watched the clip quite a few times and noticed how emotionally involved you were in shaming the individuals involved.

You screamed and yelled, ranted and raved and even laughed loudly and scornfully, all to disturb their silent prayer and evict them from within your proximity.

Excuse me for pointing this out but, in all honesty, you absolutely lost it with them.

Interestingly, the two men you tried so hard to vociferously humiliate remained absolutely

calm and quiet throughout your tirade. In contrast to your unrestrained diatribe, they were stoic and completely in control of their emotions. I point this out not to chastise you but because I think you should know that, in the Talmud, the most famed of Jewish sources of philosophy and literature, it is written that specifically *tefillin*, the religious article that you so detested, holds the power to infuse a person with self-control. By binding them around our hands and our heads, in a sense we are submissively “limiting” ourselves, our thoughts and actions, to comply with the Will of G-d. Inevitably this fosters an aura of obedience and servitude to adhering to His dictates.

The Talmud tells of Sages who, when wrapped in *tefillin*, had complete control over their feelings and emotions and were thus protected from any unbecoming manners or unworthy outbursts. I encourage you to take a deeper look at your seemingly negative experience and perhaps it will propel you by enlightening you to discover the beauty and positivity of the ancient Jewish culture which has eluded you until now. *B’hatzlachah*.