

What Bernie Sanders should have said in response to Gwen Ifill's strange question about "thwarting history"

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During last week's Democratic presidential debate, Bernie Sanders was asked a strange question by moderator Gwen Ifill and gave an even stranger response. But it was not what he said that was strange, but what he failed to say. Ifill asked, "Senator, do you worry about being the instrument of thwarting history, as Senator Clinton keeps claiming that she will be the first woman president?" Sanders responded by explaining that his victory would also be historic because he has spent his entire life taking on big money interests. Sanders omitted the obvious, that his victory would be historic because it would make him the first Jewish president.

This is not the first time that someone has failed to mention their Jewish identity. Moses remained silent when he was referred to as an "Egyptian man" in Midian. You would have expected him to proudly proclaim, "I am a Hebrew." After all, he had just bravely chosen to cast his lot with the lowly Hebrew slaves by killing an Egyptian taskmaster, instead of continuing to live the good life as the adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter. Yet, when referred to as an Egyptian, Moses silence is deafening. Indeed, according to the Midrash (Devarim Rabbah 2:8), when Moses asks why Joseph's bones are being allowed to enter the Promised Land but he is not,

G-d explains that, unlike Moses who remained silent when he was referred to as an Egyptian, Joseph readily identified himself as a Hebrew when imprisoned in Egypt (Gen. 40:15).

Some consider pride in one's ethnic identity to be a form of tribal primitivism. One only needs to recall the utopian lyrics of John Lennon, who asked us to imagine a world without countries and religion. But this assumes that national identity and religion only lead to divisive conflict. While national and religious identity certainly has led to a tremendous amount of brutality, it has also revolutionized humanity for the better.

Just take a look at the Ten Commandments, which Moses himself delivered to the Israelites. These pronouncements appear to follow the pattern of ancient Near Eastern *suzerain*-vassal covenants, in which the *suzerain* ("ruler") demands the absolute obedience of his vassals because of a past act of kindness performed by the *suzerain*. The Ten Commandments begin with a statement of introduction, "I am the Lord your God who delivered you from the land of Egypt, the house of slavery," which are followed by nine decrees." Typically, the covenant provides rewards for the obedient vassal and punishments for the disobedient.

However, the Ten Commandments do not fully conform to this model. In the typical *suzerain*-vassal model, the *suzerain* is only concerned with obtaining the vassal's continued obedience. Not so with G-d. The second side of the commandments (which deal with

man's relations with his fellow man) demonstrates that G-d is not solely concerned with securing our loyalty, as an autocrat would be, but is focused on our interpersonal relations as well. In other words, G-d is not solely concerned with the establishment of monotheism; he is concerned with the establishment of an ethical monotheism.

G-d did not impose his commandments in order to enslave us; he gave us his commandments to draw us closer to him by sanctifying ourselves with the following of his laws. We sanctify ourselves by loving G-d with all our heart, soul and might, but this does not simply mean that we refrain from worshipping the gods of others. It means that we treat fellow humans with dignity, respect and kindness, for they too are created in the image of G-d.

Sanders missed an opportunity to proudly state that he sees his proposals, which he claims will aid the common man, as a continuation of an ancient tradition that revolutionized the world for the better by legislating protections for all humanity. Additionally, Sanders could have added that the revelation at Sinai produced not only the Ten Commandments but the world's most famous book, the Torah, which commands us time and time again not to forget the less fortunate.

Today's Torah portion is the first one since Moses' birth in which his name is not mentioned. If you think it is strange not to have the name of our great teacher mentioned even once, try to

imagine a world not only without Moses but a world that has not received the benefit of the Torah's teachings. Perhaps when Moses was referred to as an Egyptian, he remained silent because he had not yet experienced the revelation at Sinai and did not understand how it would revolutionize the world for the better. We, on the other hand, have the benefit of living in a world that has been shaped by that revelation and the Torah it produced and should proudly continue to claim it as our people's teaching and share it with the world.