

On Thursday, December 1, 1955 after a long day at work at the Montgomery Fair department store, Rosa Parks boarded the Cleveland Avenue bus at around 6 p.m., in downtown Montgomery. She paid her fare and sat in an empty seat in the first row of back seats reserved for blacks in the "colored" section. She sat near the middle of the bus and directly behind the ten seats reserved for white passengers. As the bus traveled along its regular route, all of the white-only seats in the bus filled up. The bus reached the third stop in front of the Empire Theater, and several white passengers boarded.

Following standard practice, bus driver noted that the front of the bus was filled with white passengers and there were two or three men standing, and thus moved the "colored" section sign behind Parks and demanded that four black people give up their seats in the middle section so that the white passengers could sit. Years later, in recalling the events of the day, Parks said, "When that white driver stepped back toward us, when he waved his hand and ordered us up and out of our seats, I felt a determination cover my body like a quilt on a winter night."[\[1\]](#)

"People always say that I didn't give up my seat because I was tired, but that isn't true. I was not tired physically, or no more tired than I usually was at the end of a working day. I was not old, although some people have an image of me as being old then. I was forty-two. No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in."[\[2\]](#)"

This is a very well know story in American history. When we hear this story most of us are automatically flooded with emotions. For many of you, this is not hard to imagine because you lived through this time. For me and others in this room, I can't even begin to imagine living through this injustice. Except when I stop and think about it— I really do live through it. Maybe not as blatantly as this story or as close in proximity, but I hear stories like this one every day from around the world. And all of these stories bring tears to my eyes. I remember hearing Oprah say years ago, that any woman born in America should be grateful. Having just been born here we are granted rights that we would not have living in many other places around the world.

We feel so comfortable weighing in on the oppression in the Muslim world yet many of us turn our backs to what happens in our own back yard.

On September 6th, only a few weeks ago, I opened my email and scrolled through a few different news articles. I regularly read The Pluralist, an email newsletter sent out by the Israel Religious Action Center, commonly known as IRAC – an organization that is part of the Union for Reform Judaism that does incredibly important work on the ground in Israel. It read,

"Dear Friends of IRAC,

Last Sunday, seven IRAC staff members and I boarded at the front of Bus No. 40, one of Jerusalem's segregated bus lines. After paying the fare, we sat down right behind the bus driver, which prompted shouts of "women in the back, women in the back!" from the ultra-Orthodox men on board. Two men rushed to the front and complained to the driver; I couldn't make out what they were saying, but I did hear the driver say, "it's hard enough to drive a bus in Jerusalem traffic without having to deal with all this balagan [chaos]." Our protest was part of a larger demonstration that day co-sponsored by IRAC and other organizations. Forty people, men and women, boarded several segregated buses around the city and sat together up front. None of the protestors sat next to ultra-Orthodox

passengers or deliberately provoked them in any way other than our boarding and sitting in the front.

In this case, there was no altercation. The driver chose not to interfere, which allowed us to stay up front, though one ultra-Orthodox man covered his eyes and ears with his pais while others chose to bury their noses in prayer-books.

At the next stop, three Orthodox women sat next to us, since the back of the bus was now filled. We handed out leaflets to all of the women. The next day IRAC received phone calls from three ultra-Orthodox women thanking us for what we were doing and begging us to continue our struggle against state-sponsored segregated bus lines. This case is far from over; we promise to keep you up to date.

L'Shalom,
Anat Hoffman”

This update could not have made me more proud. I then searched other news sources only to find this story had made it all around the world, showing up in the NY Times and Haaretz. But there were some mixed responses. You had bloggers saying that we should not condemn the ultra-orthodox for their culture. I was shocked. How could people still think this way? These are not privately owned busses; these are public busses discriminating against 50% of the population. These are not just women. They are our mothers, our sisters, our daughters. And yet there are those that see the other side to this severe situation.

This got me thinking, how do I know my beliefs are correct? How should I make decisions on important issues, with intelligent academics presenting clear theoretical arguments for either side of the issue? The question seems to be focused on cultural relativism. Where do we draw the line on culture, or religious belief? If Israel is not the place for an orthodox man to feel comfortable, then there must not be a place for him at all.

After having all of these questions present, I asked myself what does Judaism say? Yoni Jaffe a reform rabbi in San Francisco writes, “In an era of religious revivalism, scripture has become a weapon. The Bible is quoted in nearly every contemporary debate, most often by *both* sides of the issue”.^[3] Is God playing off both ends, or do we have it all wrong? Because the Bible is considered to be the authoritative moral guide, each camp tries to prove that they have the Bible securely on their side. So we are left to wonder...Can we look to the Bible as proof for anything?

Most of us have seen the pictures. Anti abortion activists standing outside an abortion clinic holding up signs with biblical quotes like “Thou shalt not murder (Ex 20:13 and Deut 5:17)”, “For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb (Psalm 139:13)” to show that God does not approve of abortion and that those who perform them or have them are taking part in murder. And many of us have also seen the sign holders that hold up quotes like Exodus 21:22-23, “If men quarrel, and hurt a pregnant woman, so that her fruit depart from her, and yet no further harm follows; he shall be surely punished, according to what the woman’s husband will lay upon him; and he shall pay as the judges determine, but if any further harm follows, then you shall give life for life,” which shows that God distinguishes between the life a fetus, which is worth monetary compensation if lost, and that of a person to which a ‘life for a life’ applies. In today’s religious world, both sides claim to prove that God and the Bible on

their side, thus giving them the moral authority. And so it goes with many of today's controversial topics- war, immigration, poverty, and even same sex marriage. But this method isn't new, nor is it limited to Christianity. In the 19th century, rabbis used the Bible to both defend and protest slavery.[\[4\]](#) Yes, well-respected rabbis were able to find biblical justification for the peculiar institution of American slavery.

If this is the case, then it proves that the Bible can almost always be used to argue both sides of almost any issue. On January 4, 1861 Rabbi Morris J. Raphall, a rabbi at a prominent New York synagogue, delivered a sermon in which he outlined the biblical justification for slavery. Although he said that he "(is) no friend to slavery in the abstract, and still less friendly to the practical working of slavery,"[\[5\]](#) he nonetheless felt compelled to share his view that slavery is biblically justified. His first argument was that two of the Ten Commandments, allowing your slaves to rest on the Sabbath and not coveting your neighbor's slaves or property, deal with the treatment of slaves and that Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Job were all slaveholders. By showing that slavery was accepted in Biblical times, Rabbi Raphall set out to find the precise time when it became a sin, and finding no such answer, concluded that sacred Scripture continues to allow slavery.

Rabbi Raphall's sermon sparked a flood of refutations and embarrassment in the Jewish community.[\[6\]](#) Many contended that his analysis was wrong or misrepresented. Rabbi Einhorn, a rabbinic contemporary of Raphall from Baltimore refuted him by arguing that when G-d created the world G-d gave men and women "dominion over the fish in the sea and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that creepeth upon the earth (Genesis 1:28)." G-d did not give men and women dominion over the Negro or any other human.[\[7\]](#)

When looking at Rabbi Raphall's statement that "Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Job... were slaveholders,"[\[8\]](#) Rabbi Einhorn argued that Abraham not only considered making his head servant, Eliezer, his heir, but also entrusted him to find a wife for his son. Neither did Job consider his slaves property, as he said "Did not G-d that made him in the womb make me? And did not One fashion us in the womb (Job 31:13-15)?"[\[9\]](#) Dr. Heilprin argued that the servants of Jacob were voluntary followers that enjoyed all the privileges of free persons, as they are referred to as "brethren," not just slaves, of Jacob.[\[10\]](#)

This is a very good example of cultural relativism when culture of the time influences our beliefs. It is also an excellent example of how easily the Bible can be used dramatically to support almost any idea. Can we walk away from hearing a sermon, reading a book, or flipping through the newspaper written by a religious or other well-respected authority and look back on it with a critical eye. English teachers try and teach children to read with a critical eye always looking for the problems within the text, but as we grow older do we do this as well? Do we often get caught up in good justifications, rhetoric or relying on people we trust? Do we fall back on the line, "well that's the culture, who am I to judge others culture." Slavery and segregation were once the culture here. Thank G-d cultures can be changed.

So since we cannot rely on the Bible alone, or culture alone, then we are left with our conscience and our reason. We need to look into the issues ourselves— read about both sides, educate ourselves, and then make our own decisions. We cannot make a decision based on how our spouse feels, what our teachers say, how any religious leader

or politicians tell us to think. We each need to be able to look into the mirror each morning and figure out how we believe and what we think. This is the only way we will be able to sleep soundly each night.

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- [1] Williams, Donnie; Wayne Greenhaw (2005). *The Thunder of Angels: The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the People who Broke the Back of Jim Crow*. Chicago Review Press. p. 48.
- [2] Parks, Rosa; James Haskins (1992). *Rosa Parks: My Story*. Dial Books. p. 116.
- [3] Jaffe, Yoni. High Holiday sermon delivered in 2006.
- [4] Dalia Samansky
- [5] Raphall, M.J. "The Bible View of Slavery." *Herald* (New York) January 4, 1861. Found online at <http://www.jewish-history.com/civilwar/raphall.html>.
- [6] Korn, Bertram Wallace. *American Jewry and the Civil War*. Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, 1951.
- [7] Einhorn, David. "Anti-Slavery Response to Dr. Raphall by Dr. David Einhorn." *Sinai* vol. VI. Baltimore, January 9, 1861. Found online at <http://www.jewish-history.com/civilwar/einhorn.html>.
- [8] Raphall, M.J. "The Bible View of Slavery." *Herald* (New York) January 4, 1861. Found online at <http://www.jewish-history.com/civilwar/raphall.html>.
- [9] Einhorn, David. "Anti-Slavery Response to Dr. Raphall by Dr. David Einhorn." *Sinai* vol. VI. Baltimore, January 9, 1861. Found online at <http://www.jewish-history.com/civilwar/einhorn.html>.
- [10] Heilprin, Michael. "Anti-Slavery Response to Dr. Raphall." *Tribune* (New York) January 15, 1861. Found online at <http://www.jewish-history.com/civilwar/heilprin.html>.