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A Shabbat Message from Rabbi Arthur Weiner

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Whoopi Goldberg is Not the Problem

Dear JCCP/CBT family,

Have you been following the Whoopi Goldberg scandal that resulted in her being suspended as a host of *The View*? If you haven't, this message may not make much sense to you. If you have, I hope my comments will add something to your understanding and perspective on this entire affair.

If you haven't been following this, and need a quick overview of the controversy, this article should help:

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/entertainment/celebrities/2022/01/31/whoopi-goldberg-holocaust-the-view/9291405002/>

Earlier this week the subject and very meaning of the Holocaust came up among the hosts of *The View* amidst a discussion of the Holocaust themed graphic novel, *Maus*. This Pulitzer Prize award winning book was recently banned by a school district in Tennessee. This decision was widely condemned. But during the discussion, Whoopi Goldberg made several comments about the Holocaust, suggesting that it was an example of "man's inhumanity to man" and not racial in nature. She understood the Holocaust to be an example of "white on white crime" and completely mischaracterized the racial element of the Nazi's war against the Jewish people. She was, of course, wrong. The idea of Jewish racial inferiority motivated much of Nazi ideology. One might have expected more of a person who chose to take on the stage name "Goldberg" and has at various times in her career expressed her affinity for and connection to Jews as well as Judaism. I'll accept her at her word as she explained that she, as a black woman, understands race as a black and white issue. To her credit, she

has publicly apologized several times for her comments on *The View* and taken responsibility for them. Her suspension for two weeks makes no sense and does not serve any particular interest of the Jewish community. What it does show is that two generations after the Holocaust, people still just don't get it. Whoopi Goldberg should not be made to pay for that.

The Jewish community has both the right and responsibility to make sure that the Holocaust is understood in all of its profundity. So of course, we are mortified when Whoopi Goldberg gets it so wrong on national television. But the real assault on the history of the Holocaust is how it is being misused for political purposes that serve the interests of those who use its symbolism for ugly and destructive purposes. Think of how many opponents of COVID-19 restrictions have compared government efforts to stop the spread of this health hazard to Nazi restrictions on Jewish rights and freedoms? How many people have compared mandatory vaccination policies to the Nazis' experiments on Jews in concentration camps? How many rallies in the US, in Europe (and last week in Canada) have featured protesters wearing yellow stars, invoking Holocaust imagery to demonstrate their objections to policies enacted by democratically elected governments. It goes on every day.

Misuse of the Holocaust knows no bounds. In perhaps the cruelest inversion of the meaning of the Holocaust, the enemies of the Jewish people regularly invoke the Holocaust to criticize Israel. Accusing Israel of behaving like Nazis is a staple of Palestinian propaganda, regularly printed in leading newspapers throughout the Arab world and remains a favorite motif of the anti-Israel left in both Europe and the United States. It even finds expression in the anti-Israel positions adopted by many mainline Protestant churches, most recently expressed by one of the leaders of the Presbyterian Church USA, who used a Martin Luther King Day celebration to accuse Israel of "enslaving the Palestinians", and chiding American Jews for our support of Israel. Even Palestinians don't make that claim but during the Holocaust, many of the Jews that the Nazis didn't murder were actually made into slaves.

Each day, in one form or another, the memory of the Holocaust is deliberately distorted. This, after more than a generation of mandatory Holocaust education in

classrooms. This, after more Holocaust museums, Holocaust classes, Holocaust commemorations, than can possibly be counted. The assault on the memory and meaning of the Holocaust began literally in the minutes after WWII ended, and continues to this day.

American Jews understand this. *American Jews in 2020*, an amazing of demographic and sociological survey of the American Jewish community by the Pew Research Center, taught us much about the American Jewish community and the inner lives of American Jews. It told a story of a community that was divided on many issues, but united in its understanding of the importance of the Holocaust, and the understanding of its impact on actual Jewish lives. According to the Pew Report, more than 75% of survey respondents said that remembering the Holocaust was essential to their Jewish identities, more than any other measure of Jewish identity. So of course, Whoopi Goldberg's comments were wrong, hurtful, and disappointing, and even potentially dangerous. But they were not criminal. They did not come from a place of malice. She was misinformed and uneducated. She, like so many others, understands race solely through the experience of being black in America. Her apologies were sincere, heartfelt, and responsible.

Whoopi Goldberg is not the problem. Let's not make her the poster child of those who are truly using the Holocaust to injure the Jewish people. Certainly, people in positions of authority and leadership who have a national, if not international stage must be held accountable when they make mistakes. When discussions of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, and sexual orientation are handled insensitively, it causes real pain, and can even lead to violence. But ask yourself a question. In our time, when assaults on Jews, on Jewish history, and the meaning of the Holocaust are on the rise, when Israel is under attack by both the far left and the far right, when Iran threatens to incinerate Israel with nuclear weapons it swears it does not have, where Hamas makes no secret of its desire to murder every Jew living within the borders of Israel, is Whoopi Goldberg a friend or an enemy? I think we can all agree she is not an enemy. So why treat her as such?

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Arthur Weiner