

SOCIAL MEDIA: A STATEMENT OF MY VALUES

v1



INTRODUCTION

This document consists of two sections. The first sets out the values which guide my behaviour on social media, and which motivate me to post and behave in the way that I do. The second section sets out the most important values which my social media presence seeks to protect and uphold. Each value is accompanied by a biblical or rabbinic text, as well as an explanation of how I see it as an important component of my Judaism and of my rabbinate.

SECTION ONE: VALUES OF BEHAVIOUR ON SOCIAL MEDIA

(A) THE RABBINATE SHOULD NOT REMAIN ALOOF

1 Kings 18:17-18, 27

When Ahab saw Elijah, Ahab said to him: “Is that you, Troubler of Israel?” And he said: “I have not troubled Israel; rather, you and your father’s house did, when you forsook the commandments of the Eternal and began worshipping B’al.” And at midday, Elijah mocked [the prophets of B’al], and said: “Call out in a louder voice, for your gods may be in conversation, or busy, or travelling, or maybe they are sleeping and need to be woken!”

וַיְהִי כִּרְאוֹת אַחָאָב אֶת אֵלֵיהוּ וַיֹּאמֶר אַחָאָב
אֵלֹהֵי הָאֱתָה זֶה עֹבֵר יִשְׂרָאֵל: וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא
עֹבְרֹתִי אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי אִם אֶתָּה וּבֵית אָבִיךָ
בַּעֲזָבְכֶם אֶת מִצְוֹת יְהוָה וַתִּלְךְ אַחֲרֵי
הַבְּעָלִים: ... וַיְהִי בַצְּהָרִים וַיְהִי לְבָהֶם
אֵלֵיהוּ וַיֹּאמֶר קְרָאוּ בְקוֹל גָּדוֹל כִּי אֱלֹהִים
הוּא כִּי שִׁיחַ וְכִי שִׁיג לֹו וְכִי דָרַךְ לֹו אוֹלֵי יִשָּׁן
הוּא וַיִּקְצֹץ:

Rabbis are not holier than other people. We are not priests, who were considered soiled if they entered cemeteries. Rabbis should not remain aloof from the real world, with its dark sides and dirt and grit. Far from demeaning the rabbinate when we ‘lower ourselves’ to comment on matters on the earthly plain, rather than remaining purely in the realm of the spiritual, the scriptural and the Talmudic, we enhance our reputation. We make ourselves more relatable and Judaism easier to connect with. Elijah rolled up his sleeves and dealt with grubby wrongdoing face-to-face; so should we.

(B) THE RABBINATE SHOULD BE SEEN TO BE DOING THE RIGHT THING

Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1953

By the demands of prophetic precedent, the Rabbi has the right, duty and obligation to express himself on all matters which he feels involve moral and ethical issues. He is not necessarily the spokesman of his individual congregation, but is a spokesman for Judaism and its principles. His expressed opinions are his own, but must reflect the principles enunciated by Judaism. The right to dissent is inherent in Judaism. There should exist in every congregation a climate welcoming differences of opinion.

Religion does not have a universally positive reputation. It is often seen as backward, bigoted, reactionary. In fact, Liberal Judaism is none of these things, but this message will not get out unless we put it out. Clergy should be seen to be living and articulating our values, loudly and in public spaces (that is, not solely in Jewish spaces, where our words will only be heard by those already 'in the tent'), and in reaction to events happening in the real world.

(C) PROTESTING WRONGDOING

b. Shabbat 54b

Anyone who has the ability to protest the sins of their household and does not protest – they are accountable for the sins of their household. For the sins of their city [and does not protest] – they are accountable for the sins of their city. For the sins of the entire world – they are accountable for the sins of the entire world.

כל מי שאפשר למחות לאנשי ביתו
ולא מיחה – נתפס על אנשי ביתו,
באנשי עירו – נתפס על אנשי עירו,
בכל העולם כולו – נתפס על כל
העולם כולו:

Being personally opposed to wrongdoing means more than just mutely believing in its wrongness. It means protesting against it. Preventing wrongdoing may be impossible, but voicing opposition – letting the perpetrator know how badly they have behaved, and ensuring that Liberal Jewish values' disapproval of their conduct is firmly on the record – is always doable, and also vital.

(D) DEFENDING THE VULNERABLE

Leviticus 19:16

Do not stand by the blood of your neighbour; I am the Eternal One. לא תעמוד על דם רֵעֶךָ אֲנִי יְהוָה:

Defending the vulnerable is not a goal that is fulfilled solely by issuing generalised statements – whether in sermons or otherwise – against the general phenomena that threaten. A column in *The Jewish News* saying, “Racism is bad,” is not sufficient. Being an ally also means defending on the ground: individual instances of attacks on the vulnerable need to be challenged directly and on the spot.

(E) SEEKING TO PREVENT STUMBLING-BLOCKS

Chofetz Chayim, Lashon Hara, Be'er Mayim Chayim 8:23

That which we sometimes find in the writings of the great ones of earlier generations, that one of them rebuked their fellow in harsh language, was always where there was a halachic dispute between them, and they acted for the sake of heaven. One saw that the other's position did not reflect the recognised halachah, and in order that others should not follow it, and to avoid stumbling-blocks, for this reason they wrote what they wrote. But their intention was never, heaven forbid, to ridicule or degrade each other.

ומה שנמצא לפעמים בדברי הגאונים
בדורות שלפנינו שאחד מקנטר לחבירו,
היינו רק בויכוחים שהיה ביניהם בדברי
תורה וכונתם היתה לשם שמים, לפי
שראו שהדבר אינו מוסכם להלכה וכדי
שלא יסמכו העולם על זה ויצא מכשול
מזה על־כן כתבו מה שכתבו, אבל לא
נתכוונו ח"ו מעולם להלעיג ולהתלוצץ
אחד מחבירו:

A huge amount of content on the internet is (at best) misguided, and (more often) intentionally dangerous. It has a tendency to lead astray. Those disseminating such material may be beyond reason: in fact, they not even be real human beings at all. Nonetheless, it is important to debunk and decry in these instances, lest innocent onlookers be taken in and fall over the stumbling-blocks left for them by the unscrupulous. A further implication of this principle is that words matter: it isn't just 'practical' wrongdoing that needs challenging, but also the words and discourses that lead thereto.

(F) BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

m.Pirkei Avot 1:6

Obtain for yourself a companion.

קנה לך חבר:

Companions don't drop out of the sky; they have to be 'obtained' or 'bought' (in the language of Pirkei Avot). Effort and outreach is required on our part. It is hugely beneficial for us to forge connections with those who are 'on the same page' as us when it comes to values. Sometimes these people may be Jewish or Jew-ish (in which case we want to build a relationship with them so that we can welcome them into our tent). Sometimes they may not be, but these relationships are also valuable, whether for interfaith, educational or social opportunities. Since potential acquaintances aren't necessarily going to come into our synagogues, attend our services or read our sermons, we need to go to them. We need to be seen, in their spaces, clothed as rabbis, saying and doing things of which they approve, speaking in their language. Connections are made on social media, and these are valuable.

(G) COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY

b. Shabbat 116a-b

Imma Shalom was the sister of Rabban Gamliel. There was a certain philosopher in her neighbourhood, who falsely claimed that he never accepted bribes [when sitting as a judge]. They decided to mock him. She presented him with a golden lamp, then they went before him [to expose his bias].

אימא שלום ... אחתיה דרבן גמליאל
הוא. הוה ההוא פילוסופא בשבבותיה
דהוה שקיל שמא דלא מקבל שוחדא.
בעו לאחוכי ביה; אעיילא ליה שרגא
דדהבא, ואזול לקמיה:

There is no point in communicating if one is restrained from communicating effectively. Effective communication means not only having the ability to reach a large audience, but also being allowed to put the communication in a form which will capture that audience's attention and help them to understand it (and persuade them to agree with it). Imma Shalom and her brother could simply have exposed their local judge's corruption by standing in the town square and announcing details of what he had done, but such a bland proceeding would not have captured anybody's attention, and the judge would likely have been able to continue his unethical activities. Instead, they arranged a graphic and public illustration of what was wrong with his conduct, and this – although it involved resorting to mockery and jeering, and although it will have humiliated him – will have gotten through to the local citizenry, and perhaps also deterred other officials from corruption. A message which may only be communicated in such a nondescript form that nobody will heed it is not being communicated at all.

(H) RESPECTING OTHERS' ROBUSTNESS

Rosh, responsum 101:6

Two people who are wrestling together, and one pushes the other to the ground, and falls on him, and in falling on him blinds him in one eye: it seems to me that he is not liable. And here is the law: they were wrestling one with the other, both knowingly, and any injuries sustained by either were unintentional. And it is known that when two people wrestle, each one sought to push their fellow over. And when the one vanquishes the other, it is impossible to manage this so that he falls over in comfort and free from injury. This is known by those who wrestle together.

שנים שנתאבקו יחד, והפיל האחד את חברו לארץ ונפל עליו, ובנפלו עליו סימא עינו של התחתון, נ"ל דפטור ... וכן בנדון זה, נתאבקו זה עם זה מדעת שניהם, והזיקו זה את זה שלא בכוונה, כי הדבר ידוע כששניהם נתאבקו עיקר כונתם שיפיל האחד את חברו, וכשהאחד נותן על חברו, אי אפשר לו לצמצם ולכוין שיפילהו בנחת כדי שלא יזיקו ... ואדעתא דהכי נתאבקו יחד. עכ"ל:

People don't log onto social media and enter into controversial topics by accident. Those who choose to share contentious opinions or material, in public, on a platform which they know invites and encourages direct response, should generally be presumed to be robust enough to be able to handle a direct response. When someone enters into this arena, they accept and undertake the risk that they will receive responses which they dislike or which are unflattering. Just as a football player has no right to stipulate that they will only play on condition that nobody accidentally injures them under any circumstances, the controversialist on Twitter does not have a right to stipulate that their tweets be immune from critical attention. This principle has three riders, however: firstly, it is a rule of thumb and not limitless, so where it becomes apparent that someone is, in fact, vulnerable, this must be taken into account. Secondly, it is not a positive reason to respond in any particular way, but rather a reason why one should not be deterred from responding robustly when other values provide such a positive reason. Thirdly, there are some lines which simply must not be crossed under any circumstances, vulgar personal abuse being the most obvious.

SECTION TWO: VALUES TO BE PROTECTED AND UPHELD

(I) UNIVERSAL HUMAN DIGNITY

b.Berachot 19b

Come and hear: great is human dignity!

תא שמע: גדול כבוד הבריות:

Everyone has an innate Divine spark. 'Everyone' means everyone. There is literally nothing a person can say, do or be which robs them of the right to be treated with some level of dignity. Some are more vulnerable than others; some are more vilified or hated than others; some inspire more fear (justified or unjustified) than others. All were created in the image of God and all deserve to be free from public odium, especially where this relates to characteristics such as race, sexuality, gender, appearance and so on.

(J) PRESERVATION OF LIFE

b.Ketubot 19a

There is nothing which takes priority over saving lives.

אין לך דבר שעומד בפני פיקוח נפש:

Life-saving takes many forms. Standing against dangerous discourse is one of them. Judaism has never taken a 'sticks and stones' approach; it has never asserted that words are harmless. Rather, words are powerful. Demonisation, incitement; Holocaust denial, anti-vaxx conspiracy theories; all lead to real-world effects which endanger lives, and all need to be challenged.

(K) THE RULE OF LAW

b.Sanhedrin 7a (and Rashi ad loc)

One who walks away from the courthouse having had their garment confiscated: let them sing their song and go their way. ('Sing their song – since the court's ruling was a sound ruling, they have not lost anything; rather, they have been relieved of stolen property.)

אזיל מבי דינא שקל גלימא ליזמר
זמר וליזיל באורחא: (ליזמר וליזיל
– הואיל ודין אמת דנו לא הפסיד
כלום אלא גזילה הוציאו מידו:)

The law is not only there for our own benefit, and it applies in all cases, whether or not we agree with it. Discourse which challenges the rule of law – arguing that our political opponents should be stripped of legal protection, or that judges should be removed from office for taking decisions we dislike – harms the whole of our society.

(L) DEMOCRACY

Rema to Shulchan Aruch, Choshen Mishpat 163:1

On any significant matter where it is not possible to gain unanimous agreement, it is necessary to sit down all the full members of the community, and they accept upon themselves the responsibility to speak their mind, for the sake of heaven. And we follow the majority. And if a minority refuses, the majority are permitted to compel them. Anyone who fails to express an opinion on the matter: their opinion is discounted, and we follow the majority of those who have expressed an opinion.

כל צרכי צבור שאינן יכולין להשוות
עצמן, יש להושיב כל בעלי בתים
הנותנים מס ויקבלו עליהם שכל
אחד יאמר דעתו לשם שמים, וילכו
אחר הרוב. ואם המעוט ימאנו, הרוב
יכולין לכופ אותן ... והמסרב
מלומר דעתו על פי החרם, בטלה
דעתו ואזלינן בתר רוב הנשארים
האומרים דעתן:

'I want' doesn't get. Sometimes we have to cope with, and accept, and conform to, collective decisions taken by society, even if we would rather they were different. This is closely linked to issues of freedom of expression (on which see more later), without which an informed and free democracy cannot function.

(M) MINORITY RIGHTS

Recanti on Exodus 20:10

It is impossible to believe that the [Torah] omitted anything, and thus the Great Voice contained contradictory faces – one side against the other – and all the sages who stand in every generation, each of them received their own understanding. If one of the sages had erred in their understanding of the Torah they received, [God would] not have [allowed them to] speak thusly.

לא יתכן להאמין שהיה הקול ההוא
חסר כלום, ולכך בגודל הקול היו
הדברים מתהפכין מכל צד זה לעומת
זה ... וכל החכמים העומדים בכל
דור ודור, כי כל אחד קבל את שלו ...
כי אם היה אחד מהם טועה בקבלתו
לא היה אומר כך:

Just as important as doing what the majority wants is avoiding, so far as possible, stamping on the wants, needs and opinions of minorities. The fact that a person or group's viewpoint or practice is outnumbered by the rest of society is not a reason for that person or group to change. People have to be allowed to argue that (even) democratic decisions should be changed; just because something is the law does not mean it is undemocratic for a pressure group to seek its amendment.

(N) TRUTH

Rivash, responsum 309

The truth does not go away just because it is not accepted from the one who speaks it.

אין האמת נעדרת מפני שלא תקובל
ממי שאמרה:

Fake news and 'alternative facts' cause enormous problems to modern society, and the ease with which they circulate on social media is frightening. An opinion, no matter how strongly held, does not magically become a fact, and those who seek to deny reality – especially in important areas relating to science, health and safety – need to be challenged.

(O) ANTI-RACISM

Deuteronomy 23:8

Do not despise an Edomite, for they are your kin. Do not despise an Egyptian, for you were a stranger in their land.

לֹא תִתְעַב אֲדָמִי כִּי אֶחָיִךְ הוּא לֹא תִתְעַב
מִצְרִי כִּי גֵר הָיִיתָ בְּאֶרְצוֹ:

The Jewish community has relatively little difficulty in accepting that any anti-Semitic discourse – no matter how fringe its source – poses a real and present threat. Yet somehow there is less understanding that the same principle applies to hate speech against other ethnic groups. Even one tweet that is anti-Traveller, anti-black, Islamophobic, is one tweet too many. Every instance of racism should be called out with the same severity we would hope to see in relation to anti-Semitism.

(P) ANTI-BULLYING

m.Bava Metzia 4:10; b.Bava Metzia 58b

Just as there is wrongful conduct in buying and selling, so too there is wrongful conduct in words. It was taught before Rav Nachman bar-Yitzchak: “Anyone who whitens the face of their fellow in public, it is as if they shed blood.” He replied: “You have spoken well, for we see that the red leaves the face and a whiteness comes.”

כַּשֶּׁם שְׂאוֹנְאָה בַּמִּקַּח וּבַמִּמְכָר כֵּן אֹנְאָה
בַּדְּבָרִים ... תְּנִי ... קָמִיָּה דְרַב נַחְמָן בְּר
יִצְחָק כָּל הַמְּלַבֵּין פְּנֵי חֲבִירוֹ בְּרַבִּים
כֵּאִילוֹ שׁוֹפֵךְ דָּמִים א”ל שְׂפִיר קָא אִמְרַת
דְּחִזְנָא לִיה דְּאִזִּיל סוּמְקָא וְאִתִּי חוּרָא:

Mansplaining, harassment, stalking, insulting people’s family members: all are unacceptable under all circumstances. While it is vital to avoid fighting fire with fire – one cannot fix bullying with more bullying – a forceful voice against such tactics is an important way of sending a message, and of providing succour to the victim.

(Q) FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Rashi to Exodus 23:2

Speak judgment as it is: let an iron collar hang on the necks of the many.

אמור את המשפט כאשר הוא, וקולר
יהא תלוי בצוואר הרבים:

There is no requirement that anyone conform, in their opinions, to any 'mainstream', to any 'consensus', to any communal position. The right to formulate and express one's own position is vital both for democracy and for the development of an individual character. The majority has always sought to silence those who dared to go against its orthodoxies, and sometimes those it sought to silence turned out to be prophets. Freedom of expression must be robustly defended, even when we do not agree with the opinions being expressed.

EPILOGUE

(R) THERE IS VALUE IN SPEAKING WITHOUT FEAR OR FAVOUR

m.Eduyot 5:6

Akavia ben-Mahalalel testified concerning four things. They said to him: “Akavia, recant these four things which you said, and we will make you Av Beit Din over all Israel.” He said to them: “It is better for me to be called an imbecile all my days than that I should become even for one hour a wicked man before God; they will not say of me: ‘He recanted [his opinions] for the sake of power.’”

עקביא בן מהללאל העיד ארבעה דברים
אמרו לו עקביא חזור בך בארבעה
דברים שהיית אומר ונעשך אב בית דין
לישראל אמר להן מוטב לי להקרא
שוטה כל ימי ולא ליעשות שעה אחת
רשע לפני המקום שלא יהיו אומרים
בשביל שררה חזר בו:

There is always going to be a dilemma between protecting one’s own career prospects, and free time, and general wellbeing, on the one hand, and on the other hand being a fearless advocate for one’s fundamental principles. The correct place to strike this balance will vary from person, and indeed from time to time. However, the story of Akavia ben-Mahalalel provides a powerful role model of someone who sacrificed popularity for fealty to his beliefs.

(S) NUANCE IS NECESSARY

Ganimat v State of Israel CrimA 537/96

The notion of 'balancing' controls us and everything that is around us. Planet Earth revolves around the sun 'to balance' between the gravitational forces pushing it towards the sun and the gravitational forces pulling it back to outer space. Each and every one of us is a kind of 'balance' between their father and mother and their respective families. The same is true for every living organism. The same is true of the legal universe: every legal norm represents a balance between interests and forces pulling in different directions.

Nothing is black and white. Lots of the principles in this document could be said to 'point both ways', and certainly many of them will come into conflict with each other. Principle H endorses a robust response, but when does that shade into bullying and thus fall foul of Principle P? Principle Q espouses free speech, but does that mean we have to allow dangerous speech to percolate through society in spite of Principle E? There are rarely clear right-or-wrong answers, and the best one can do is seek to strike the most appropriate balance on a case-by-case basis to guide one's action.

מושג ה'איזון' שולט בנו ובכל אשר מסביבנו.
כדור הארץ חג – סב את השמש כ'איזון' בין
הכוח המושך אותו אל עבר השמש לבין הכוח
המושך אותו אל עבר החלל החיצון. כל אחד
מאתנו הינו מעין 'איזון' בין אביו ואמו
ומשפחותיהם. כך כל החי והצומח. וכך אף
בעולם המשפט: כל נורמה במשפט הינה
'איזון' בין אינטרסים וכוחות המושכים
לצדדים:

(T) KNOW YOURSELF AND BE YOURSELF

A parable told by Martin Buber

Before his death, Rabbi Zusya said: “In the coming world, they will not ask me, ‘Why were you not Moses?’ They will ask me, ‘Why were you not Zusya?’”

Continual self-reflection is a hallmark of a Jewish leader. It is important not to assume that one’s impulses are always correct, and it is equally important not to assume that things others urge of us are always correct. As with everything else, it is about balance.

