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**Daniel Greenberg**

**Script for BBC Thought for the Day**

**8 July 2019**

**Statues**

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Good morning.

Prince Harry’s intervention earlier this week continues the debate about the need to confront past and present attitudes to racism, in the course of which statues of public figures continue to come under scrutiny.

As I pass through the Palace of Westminster in the course of my work I encounter statues and portraits in every corner and on every wall. About many of the older figures we know little or nothing, and their representation therefore fails to perpetuate their memory meaningfully. For some more recent figures, looking at their statue or portrait reminds me as much of their failings as of their achievements: amongst those of unimpeachable reputation I pass portraits of former holders of high political office who were later publicly exposed for harassment, expenses fraud or other undesirable behaviour.

We are presently in the middle of Sabbath Torah readings that discuss the public action taken by Aaron’s grandson Pinchas to oppose idolatry. The Biblical laws of idolatry as interpreted by the Rabbis include a prohibition of making statutes of any human figure. One objection is that putting any human being on a pedestal, figuratively or literally, is doomed to lead to disillusionment and disappointment: nobody is perfect, and at the time when a statue is erected, who can say whether the longer-lasting influences and memories of a person will be good or bad?

I share the public resentment at having to pass statues and pictures of people who, celebrated in their time, are now exposed as having supported slavery or other evils of their age. But I fear that selective removal of some and their replacement with people of presently spotless reputation is unlikely to solve the problem: reputations inevitably become tarnished as more is discovered or as standards change. We look back on past generations with a more refined moral perspective in some respects, but doubtless future generations will do the same to us.

Perhaps we should consider abandoning the tradition of statues and portraits of public figures altogether. When Jews mourn for family and friends we say a Kaddish prayer which helps us to focus on what they did in their lives that continues to inspire us in ours. Their memory and influence lives in our hearts and oral tradition handed down between generations, and not in figures of stone whose memories may come to be either forgotten or discredited.