

The Death and “Legacy” of Arafat

*Toldot 2004 ** November 13, 2004*

All of us have those moments when you can't help but have self-doubt. You know and are certain you are right, but it seems that everyone else around you thinks otherwise. Inevitably, self-doubt enters, and you begin to think maybe you are the one who is mistaken.

Examples abound. Remember Dan Quayle's famous misspelling of the word potato. He knew there was no *e* on the end of the word, but he had in his hand given to him with the word spelled p-o-t-a-t-o-e, and so he prodded a student to add an e.

Or how about the famous “No soap radio” joke. You get a bunch of people together and tell them to laugh when you say that line. Even though it isn't funny, 9 times out of 10, a person not in on the joke will laugh anyway, since they don't want to appear to be out of it, and since they assume maybe the problem is with them.

Perhaps that is why to this day, one of my favorite stories remains the Hans Christian Andersen story “The Emperor's New Clothes.” Everyone in the town, including the king left their senses, and refused to believe what they knew to be true, because they did not want to be the sole dissenting voice.

Oftentimes, as a Jew, I feel like that person who stands in contrast to what everyone else around us is saying. I identify with that tendency to defy conventional wisdom and go against the norm, and what everyone else in the world believes, says, or does.

The Christmas season is one of those times. While everyone else is decorating and celebrating this one day, we decline to join in, and our differences with the surrounding culture stand out.

The reaction this week to the death of Yassir Arafat, and hearing him praised as a world leader by other world leaders is another one of those times, when you can't help but wonder – Is it just us? Is it possible that the whole world is fooled and wrong?

The European Union praised him for his single minded commitment to the Palestinian cause. British Foreign Minister Jack Straw said, “Such a towering figure in the Middle East, its hard to imagine the Middle East or world without him.” French President Jacques Chirac said, “With him disappears the man of courage and conviction who, for 40 years, has incarnated the Palestinians' combat for recognition of their national rights.” And the Vatican offered condolences, calling him a leader of “great charisma.”

Is it just us, or are we missing something?!

Derek Brown wrote in the British daily, [The Guardian](#), that Arafat's "undisputed courage as a guerrilla leader" was exceeded only "by his extraordinary courage" as a peace negotiator. The BBC's Barbara Plett, burst into tears on the day he

was airlifted out of the West Bank. "When the helicopter carrying the frail old man rose above his ruined compound," Plett reported from Ramallah, "I started to cry," praising him as "a symbol of Palestinian unity, steadfastness, and resistance"

The United Nations flag was lowered to half-mast.

All this for a man who desecrated the hall of an institution founded on the principle of the Hebrew prophet Micah, whose words are inscribed in the wall in front of the plaza, expressing the Jewish people's eternal longing that one day "Nation shall not lift up sword against nation"—all this for a man who came to that hall and addressed the delegates there with a pistol on his hip.

How interesting to describe him as courageous. Jeff Jacoby in The Globe wrote, "It is an odd kind of courage that expresses itself in shooting unarmed victims -- or in signing peace accords and then flagrantly violating their terms. The same article points out that another commentator, "columnist, Gwynne Dyer, asked, 'So what did Arafat do right?' The answer: He drew worldwide attention to the Palestinian cause, 'for the most part by successful acts of terror.' In other words, butchering innocent human beings was "right," since it served an ulterior political motive. No doubt that thought brings daily comfort to all those who were forced to bury a child, parent, or spouse because of Arafat's "successful" terrorism."

I cannot help but cynically wonder if the outpouring of adulation expressed for this thug and murderer is somehow tempered by the fact that his victims were Jews.

People cheered the guilty verdict for Scott Peterson, who killed his wife and unborn child. That is the reaction that should accompany the exposure of a cold-blooded killer. Where were the condemnations of this mass murderer who was responsible for the deaths of more Jews than anyone since Adolph Hitler?

Do those same people who praise Arafat have any idea how many innocent pregnant mothers he killed; how many children he maimed and murdered; how many children are now orphans as a result of orders he gave; how many people must now live the rest of their lives without a loved one, or who will bear emotional scars and have to live with their loss the rest of their days, or who are now physically disabled due to his barbaric acts.

This man introduced terror as a tactic to the world. He was the spiritual godfather of Osama ben Laden. Just imagine for a moment how much better off the world would be had this monster never been born.

He stole billions of dollars from his people, money which had been donated from around the world to ameliorate the plight of the Palestinians. In fact, the Marshall Plan allocated \$ 270 per person to rebuild Europe after World War II.

On a per capita basis, Palestinians should have received \$ 1330 per person. Can you imagine how much good could have been done to improve the lot of his people had that money not been stolen and stashed away in secret, private bank accounts. And by the way, he is not the only one of his cronies to have stolen money from his people intended to help them.

He lied and deceived. While denouncing various attacks, documents were later found with his signature authorizing the very same act he had condemned for the international media. He said one thing in English, and another in Arabic, and he got away with it!

Right after signing the Oslo accords, he spoke to his people and told them that they would be victorious in their march on Al Quds, Jerusalem, which he promised to take by blood and martyrdom. He violated every aspect of the accord, and used the time to arm, train, and build up an arsenal, and we let him get away with it. Rather than prepare his people for peace, concessions or accommodation with Israel, he continued to inculcate them with hatred and fanaticism.

Australian Prime Minister John Howard was the only world leader to get it right. He said that history will judge him harshly.

What actually was his legacy? His bio, his cv would have to include the following highlights:

The massacre in Maalot in 1974 in which a school building was seized and 22 innocent children, along with three teachers, were killed.

The Munich Olympics killing of eleven Israeli athletes in 1972.

The Lod Airport massacre,

Kiryat Shmonah, where all 18 residents in an apt building were killed.

The Coastal Road bus hijacking killing 35, and leaving 100 wounded.

In 1972 alone, PLO groups blew up a West German electricity plant, a Dutch gas plant and an oil refinery in Italy.

The Achille Lauro, Leon Klinghoffer, and countless other brutal acts were perpetrated by this “statesman.”

Ion Mihai Pacepa, a former Romanian intelligence officer who defected to the west after having worked closely with Arafat wrote that “Arafat represented an incredible amount of fanaticism, of lies, of embezzled funds.” Referring to liaisons with young boys, which I shall omit, suffice it to say, he concluded, “I

felt a compulsion to take a shower whenever I had been kissed by Arafat, or even just shaken his hand.”

And so, as we listen to the world leaders and press corps praise him, we cannot help but wonder why our reaction is so different. The stories told by Elie Wiesel of the one sane man in a world gone mad, who tries to retain his sanity come to mind. We are the sane ones.

He was given ample opportunities to help his people achieve the goal of a homeland. But as always, the question has been; what was that goal? For if it was the establishment of a Palestinian homeland, it would have happened.

Never in the history of the world has a people been more willing than Israel to negotiate and give away its land in the hope of peace. Yet the problem is that the true goal was never the establishment of a homeland, but rather the destruction of Israel.

It reminds me of the midrash about this week’s parasha.

Why did the twins fight in the womb of Rachel? Tradition tells us that Jacob wanted to leave his mother’s womb in order to study torah, whereas Esau wanted to go to the temples of idolatry. Esau, being first, was able to block Jacob’s exit and prevent him from leaving. But R. Yechezkel of Kuzmir asks, why couldn’t Esau just go out to the house of idolatry? He explained that Esau was willing to forgo his own idol worship in order to insure that Jacob would not enter the Torah academy.

There are those who are more content to thwart their enemy from knowing any satisfaction than they are in achieving what they may want.

Similarly, Arafat was more interested in killing Jews and attempting to destroy the Jewish homeland than in doing anything truly constructive for his own people.

Elsewhere in the parasha, we read that Esau was a cunning hunter, and that he knew how to “trap with his mouth.” Rashi interprets the unusual words as meaning that Esau knew how to trap people with his words. He deceived his father by asking a technical question about the procedure for tithing salt and straw. In so doing, by appearing to care about halacha, he would trap and deceive others with his mouth.

Throughout his life, Arafat was such a man. He would trap others with his words, his lies and deceptions. He was no man of peace. He was evil incarnate, and no different than the other Esaus we have faced throughout history.

The rabbis viewed the struggle between Jacob and Esau as paradigmatic of our eternal struggle against those nations and people who throughout the millennia have sought our destruction.

And so what should the response be?

First of all, the Talmud says, “those who extend kindness to the cruel, in the end, wind up finding that the cruel extend cruelty to the kind.”

Beyond that, we should take to heart the rabbinic interpretation of the words, “The voice is the voice of Jacob, and the hands are the hands of Esau.” So long as the voice of Jacob is heard in prayer and study, the hands of Esau are powerless against him. Esau wields power with his hands, but Jacob’s power is in his words, his ideas, his deeds of lovingkindness, which the midrash reminds us, can and do reach anywhere and everywhere.

May the voice of Jacob, the voice of the people of Israel, be united. We will thereby be triumphant and prevail in our ongoing struggle to maintain our people and our vision.

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