

Terrorism, Religious Zealots, & the Israel Double Standard

Rosh HaShanah Day 2: 5777/2016

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For those of you who were in shul early enough this morning to hear the Torah service, do you remember what was read from the second Torah scroll? The Maftir Torah reading today was from the Book of B'Midbar/Numbers 29:1-6. And the name of the Torah portion from which that reading is taken is ***Parashat Pinchas***. In fact, the Maftir Torah readings for both days of Rosh HaShanah, as well as for Yom Kippur, are all taken from this same parasha. And, as it turns out, ***Parashat Pinchas is the Torah portion from which most other holiday Torah readings are taken, not just on the High Holidays.*** If you come back to shul later this month on **Sukkot, Shemini Atzeret, &/or Simchat Torah** (as I hope you will), you will see that the Maftir Torah readings from the second scroll for all of these holidays are from ***Parashat Pinchas***. And if you are here in the spring, you'll see that the Maftir Torah reading from the second scroll for **Passover & Shavuot** is also taken from ***Parashat Pinchas***./ But that's not all! Every single month, when we read Torah on **Rosh Chodesh**, the Torah reading is taken from, guess where? You got it: ***Parashat Pinchas***.

So who was this guy, the man who is the namesake of this popular Torah portion, the parasha that is read from over and over again during the Jewish calendar year? Who was this **guy named Pinchas**?

Well, for starters, Pinchas was a Kohen, an individual from the tribe of Levi who was a direct descendant of *Aharon Ha-Kohen HaGadol*, Aaron the High Priest. You know Aaron, the brother of Moses & Miriam. In fact, Pinchas was Aaron's grandson.

Wurzburg, GERMANY **July 19, 2016**

Munich, GERMANY **July 22, 2016**

Reutlingen, GERMANY **July 24, 2016**

Ansbach, GERMANY **July 25, 2016**

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ISRAEL: **24/7**

Now, there are some leftist ideologues who would argue that acts of terrorism in Israel don't belong on this list because those are acts of protest by Palestinians who are fighting there for a justifiable cause, but that terrorism cannot be justified in France or Germany or Belgium or the United States.

It would be laughable, if it wasn't so tragic, to suggest that terrorism is acceptable in one region but not in another.... Or that terrorism is acceptable when the victims are one set of people, but not another. Imagine someone arguing that he could "understand" Nazi atrocity against Jews but not against Americans...

If it is justifiable for a Moslem Arab to murder a 13-year old Jewish Israeli girl sleeping in her bed in Kiryat Arba, if stabbings, beheadings, bombings, car rammings and other forms of terrorism are "acceptable" in Jerusalem,

then it is just a short step away from terroristic religious violence becoming "acceptable" in Nice, Munich, Brussels, Paris or Orlando.

The Holocaust made it abundantly clear that injustice in one place is injustice everywhere. Hatred to one people is hatred to all.

Between last year's High Holidays & this year's High Holidays, it seems that not a month has gone by without the news of a hateful terrorist attack somewhere in the world.

Again and again, lives have been crushed & dreams have been up-ended by terrorists consumed with vitriol and hatred

And **most of these violent acts of terrorism have been religiously motivated, people who claim to have been acting "in God's name."**

And lest we were to think that the violence has stemmed purely from a rejection of Western secular values, there was the terrorist attack that took place at a Catholic Church in the Normandy region of France on **July 26, 2016**, when two knife-wielding Islamic State terrorists stormed the church, taking hostages & murdering some of them, including the 84-year old **priest** whose throat was slit while he was celebrating Mass.

There is a recently published book (2015) by **Rabbi Jonathan Sacks**, the former Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, entitled, "**Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence.**" In this book, Rabbi Sacks uses the term "**altruistic evil**" to describe "the deadly phenomenon that can turn ordinary non-psychopathic people into cold-blooded murderers of ...children, aid workers, journalists, and people at prayer." "Altruistic evil [is] evil that is committed for a supposedly sacred cause, in the name of high ideals." (page 9).

Rabbi Sacks goes on to say (pp. 265-266) that "terror is the epitome of idolatry... If anything is evil, terror is. In suicide bombings and other terrorist attacks, the victims are chosen at random, arbitrarily and indiscriminately..... The rage is purposeful and programmatic. It aims at general vulnerability: 'Kill these people in order to terrify those [people].'"

"The victims of terror are NOT ONLY the dead and injured, BUT the very values on which a free society is built: trust, security, civil liberty, tolerance, the willingness of countries to pen their doors to asylum seekers, the gracious safety of public places. Religiously-motivated terror desecrates and defames religion itself. It is a sacrilege against God and the life that God endowed with His image."

**"[We cannot justify terrorism as the 'understandable'] 'cry of despair' of the weak [and disempowered].** The weak have different weapons. They know that justice is on their side. That is why the prophets used not weapons, but words. It is why **Gandhi** and **Martin Luther King** preferred non-violent civil disobedience knowing that it speaks to the worlds' conscience, not its fears. **True need never needs terror to make its voice heard.**"

Over 10 years ago, **Rabbi Simon Jacobson** wrote an article entitled, **"Radicalism in a Shaking World."** It was dated **July 21, 2005.**

"Forces are simmering. A one billion plus Muslim population is not complacently waiting for America to sell them Coca Cola and Big Macs.... The Muslim world is driven by a philosophy and a passionate belief system. Many of its ideas are quite noble and therefore appealing. .... The core of their belief system is the need to sublimate and spiritualize the material universe

However, like all strong belief systems, that same Muslim world is also a breeding ground for radicalism. At its extreme there is a powerful movement – no one knows the numbers, but it encompasses many elite, affluent Muslims – that advocates violent struggle against the West. They see Christian and Jewish influences as corrupt forces that need to be vanquished.

.....And this belief system is a hotbed of fermenting radicalism, which is giving birth and continues to give birth to thousands (if not more) of faithful individuals ready to sacrifice their lives in their Jihad against a world (in their minds) [that is] opposed to [their one true] God.

No one wants to hear this fact because then our battle is just too formidable of a task. How will a Western world, complacent with its comforts, ever face the violent passion of thousands of **religious zealots**?"

Those words were written by Rabbi Jacobson 11 years ago. How frightening, but prophetic, did these words turn out to be.

**So, if we are going to condemn the acts of religious zealotry committed by Islamic radicals in contemporary times, how are we to understand God's seeming approval of the act of religious zealotry committed by Pinchas in biblical times?**

First of all, it is important to point out that the Torah clearly and consistently condemns what **Rabbi Jonathan Sacks** refers to as "**altruistic evil.**"

For example, when **Avraham** hears about the impending destruction of the cities of **Sodom & Amarah**, Avraham doesn't celebrate or join in the attack, even though God wants these cities to be destroyed. Rather than participating in or applauding what God is planning to do to Sodom & Amarah, Avraham argues with and begs God not to destroy these cities.

Similarly, after the Israelites build the **Golden Calf** and openly defy the commandment against idolatry they had just heard and accepted at Sinai, **Moshe** also argues with God. Rather than committing an act of religious zealotry or approving of God's desire to destroy the people, Moshe insists that God forgive them.

After 80 days, Moses ultimately prevails, evoking the 13 divine attributes, reminding God that God is supposed to be compassionate. (And by doing so, Moshe opens the door of *teshuvah* for everyone, including those of us who strive to engage in the process of teshuvah during the High Holidays season every year.)

The **Torah is filled with the message of love and compassion.** Indeed, this is the entire undercurrent of Torah. As Rabbi Akiva taught, the most fundamental principle of the Torah is summed up in one verse in the Book of VaYikra/Leviticus Chapter 19 ( in *Parashat Kedoshim*). That principle is: "**V'ahavta l'rayacha kamocho**" "Love your neighbor as yourself."

The **Torah warns of the dangers of human beings who act in God's name** & it is acutely sensitive to the fact that people can create so-called 'biblically sanctioned' outlets for their own personal aggression. God never intended for human beings to use religion as a weapon. No one was ever commanded by God to form a lynch mob and kill infidels. Even when the Egyptians were drowning in the sea, a Midrash teaches us that God rebuked the angels for singing words of praise. According to the Midrash, God expressed his disapproval by saying to the angels, "My creatures are drowning & you have the audacity to sing?!"

Even though **King David** fought wars that God believed to be justifiable, God was not allowed to build the *Beyt HaMikdash*, the Temple in Jerusalem, because of the blood on his hands. God would only permit a man of peace, namely: David's son, Shlomo (Solomon), to build the Beyt HaMikdash.

In **Mishnah Makkot (1:10)**, Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah teaches that a Sanhedrin (Rabbinical supreme court) was labeled a "murderous" court if under its tenure even ONE verdict of **capital punishment** was issued once in 70 years. This rabbinic teaching emphasizes how abhorrent death is according to Jewish tradition, even when it may be justified.

**So it seems that the only example of a justifiable "altruistic" killing in the Torah is the case of Pinchas.**

**Why would the Torah seem to allow for the celebration of this one instance of religiously-motivated zealous behavior when it generally condemns and understands the dangers of “altruistic violence”?**

**Perhaps the story of Pinchas is included in the Torah *davka* (precisely) to encourage us to find it problematic, if not downright offensive.** There have been many traditional commentators throughout the ages who have condemned Pinchas’ actions. And there have been and continue to be rabbis and other leaders in the Jewish community who question and criticize Pinchas’ so-called ‘altruistic’ act of violence. As a religious leader I can certainly stand up here on this bimah and extol the virtues of Pinchas, and then try to urge each of you to follow his example by going out and stabbing Jewish people who aren’t religiously observant./ Or I could record a YouTube video or podcast and ask you to forward it to your friends and relatives, trying to incite every one of you to take a knife and stab non-Jewish people simply because they don’t believe in our God or observe Jewish traditions.

But I’m not doing that: I’m saying just the opposite. I’m saying that someone like Pinchas should never be a role model for any of us. *Chas v’chalilah*, God forbid that anyone should look to Pinchas and then be inspired to injure or kill another person in the name of religious beliefs.

When a so-called biblical ‘hero’ or a person in contemporary times kills others in the name of the God of Israel, this is not an act of sanctity; it is an act of sacrilege.

Individuals like the biblical Pinchas, as well as modern-day religious extremists, such as **Baruch Goldstein**, are **exceptions that prove the general rule**. On **February 25, 1994** (that year’s Purim day) in the West Bank city of Hebron, **Baruch Goldstein** entered a room in *M’arat Ha-Machpelah* (the Cave of the Patriarchs) that was serving as a mosque. He opened fire, killing 29 Moslem worshippers and wounding more than 125 others, after which he was beaten to death by survivors of the massacre.

Most notable was the **Israeli government's reaction to the massacre:** The prime minister and other Israeli leaders not only condemned it; they responded by arresting followers of Meir Kahane (who incited this type of violence as part of the Kach movement), by criminalizing Kach and affiliated movements as illegal terrorist organizations, and by demanding that all Israelis belonging to these movements who owned any weapons be disarmed immediately. / And, in 1999, when Israeli legislation was passed that outlawed monuments to terrorists, Israeli Army officials dismantled the shrine that had been built by some Jewish extremists on the site of Goldstein's burial plot.

Unfortunately, there are people (including some self-hating Jews) who point to Baruch Goldstein to try to prove that Moslems are not the only ones who are guilty of religiously-motivated violence; that Jews are also capable of committing **violence in the name of God.**

Sure, there might be some examples of individual Jews who are guilty of this unconscionable behavior, but these examples are few and far between; they are **exceptions that prove the rule.** While there might be some Jewish people on the fringe who applaud this kind of 'altruistic' violent behavior, most Jews, including most Jewish leaders in Israel, America, and all over the world, condemn it. STRONGLY.

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And yes, even though we can find many historical examples of non-Moslems committing acts of violence in the name of God, the fact of the matter is, that when we look at the long list of terrorist attacks that have taken place over the past year, from **Paris & Nice** to **Istanbul & Orlando**, most of the terrorists have indeed been Moslems. In an article written a couple of months ago (8/1/16) by **Ray Starrman** , he says, "This does not mean that every Muslim is a terrorist, but most terrorists..... are indeed Muslims."

People who make statements like these are often accused by knee-jerk leftists of being Islamophobic or racist. But maybe they are just being realistic.

So, how are we supposed to deal with the current reality? Should we live in denial, ignoring the reality and refusing to admit that the terrorist attacks that have occurred over the past year are somehow connected to Islamic radicalism? / Or should we go to the other extreme and be realistic, yet live in constant fear, believing that the world is unsafe place?

Is there even a glimmer of hope that the world we live in can be changed? Is there any hope for peace between Islamic civilization & Western civilization? Is there any hope for peace between Moslem Arabs & Israelis?

Hope is expressed in one of the most well-known lines in Jewish liturgy. This line appears at the end of every Mourner's Kaddish, at the end of the Silent Amidah, and in *Birkat Ha-Mazon* (the Grace After Meals):

***"Oseh Shalom bim-ro-mav,
Hu yaaseh shalomaley nu v'al kol Yisrael. V'imru Amen."***

"May the One who makes peace in the heavens above, make peace for us and for all Israel."

What does it mean to say that God makes peace in the heavens above? What peace was made in heaven? According to a midrash in B'raisheet Rabbah:

The heavens initially consisted of *Esh & Mayim* / Fire & Water.

When Fire & Water were first created, each of them saw the other as an enemy.

They believed that they could not co-exist in peace:

Fire claimed that Water was going to extinguish it,

and Water feared that Fire would cause it to evaporate.

But God was able to make peace in the heavens between Fire & Water by demonstrating to these two polar opposites- that ultimately, they were both needed & that they needed each other.

Likewise, we must believe that someday, this same realization will come to those who commit acts of violence and terror in God's name.

Until then, let us remain strong in our support of Israel and the United States, in our faith in God, & in our hopes for peace:

As the Psalmist says (Ps. 29:11),

"Adonai oz l'amo yiten, Adonai y'varech et a-mo ba-shalom."

"God gives strength to His people, may God now bless us with peace."

And let us say, "Amen."