

TRUE BIBLICAL LESSONS FOR OUR DAY

By Rabbi Joel R. Schwartzman

There is a danger in taking our immediate circumstances and reading them back into the Bible. This is especially true this week as Israel is under attack and is fending off missiles and rockets from Gaza. Why do I say that we shouldn't think that the Bible's literal meanings don't always apply to our circumstances? It's because Moses is commanded in Matot, in the Book of Numbers, to utterly destroy and annihilate the Midianites, including their men, women and children. Moses, in fact, upbraids his commanders because they don't follow through on committing genocide but rather leave the women and children alive. Moses knows that this will displease God whose plan this campaign is, and when God is displeased, bad things tend to happen to the Israelites.

There are those who will read this portion and apply it to the vicious targeting of Israeli civilians by Hamas over these last days, weeks and months. They will assert that here is Biblical justification that the IDF, the Israeli Defense Forces, ought to enter Gaza on the ground, just as it has done, but instead of rooting out tunnels and launchers, it ought to utterly annihilate Hamas. Just as Israel was commanded to avenge itself for the crimes that the Midianites

committed against them in their day, so, too, is Israel justified, nay obligated by God to do the very same thing to its modern day foe, Hamas.

There is always this danger of believing that the Bible is prophesying for our day and is to be seen as instructive as to how we should conduct our nation's business. This is to use Scripture as a horoscope. Tempting though this might be in our efforts to control our lives and what happens in them, this sort of divination is both ignorant and dangerous.

Any number of people commented on last week's portion, *Pinchas*, where in this Israelite priest, zealous for both God and God's word took vengeance on an Israelite and his non-Israelite wife by murdering them both. Knowing of the kidnapping and murder of the three Israeli yeshiva students, Naftali Fraenkel, Gil-as Shaer, and Eyal Yifrach, and of the subsequent revenge killing of Mohamed Abu Khadeir by three alleged Israeli soccer thugs, there were voices both in Israel and America who condemned anyone who might justify such a heinous and brutal crime by citing Pinchas' zealotry. I myself wrote a piece, entitled "This is Not Our Way" which I posted on the rabbinic chat-room of the CCAR, the Central Conference of American Rabbis, wherein I blasted the idea that revenge killing might in any way be acceptable within the framework of Judaism. The Bible

underscores the need not to take revenge, providing cities of refuge for those who commit man-slaughter in an effort to ward off revenge killings, these blood-avenging events. The Bible understands and teaches that no society can operate where a Hatfield and McCoy situation persists. The far better alternative, the way to stop the bloody cycle in its tracks is to have these types of cases adjudicated in courts of law. It's the rationale behind our not being allowed to take the law into our own hands. Were we to engage in vengeance, our society would certainly be reduced to survival of the fittest, a war of each against all.

Israel, indeed, is justified in going into Gaza to stop the rocket firing against its civilian population. As the Israeli representative to the United Nations and the Israeli ambassador to the United States, and the Prime Minister of Israel have all laid out, no country would permit the firing of over 1500 rockets into its territory, indiscriminately threatening its people. But to derive the approach for the IDF from the Biblical injunction to utterly destroy the Midianites would be as irrational as is Hamas' reasons for shooting missiles at Israel.

I am not here tonight to argue the legalities, exigencies and peculiarities of Israel's case. We've seen this scenario twice before and know about the claims of an alleged Israeli disproportionate response, ridiculous and false claims that Israel

targets civilians, that Israel is the aggressor in this recurring conflict. We know that Hamas is committing war crimes by firing at Israeli civilians, using their population as human shields, and setting up their launching pads in hospitals, ambulances, schools and mosques.

What I am here to speak about is the fact that although the TANAK can be a source of wisdom and guidance to us, we must use our heads when we read this greatest of Jewish resources, especially avoiding the temptation to think that our circumstances are the same as those of the Israelites and our fates are directed in some way by what Moses and God laid out as prophesy for the people in that day and age. What the Israelites went through may be instructive for our times, but it in no way ought to be interpreted as authoritatively binding or compelling.

The ethics and morals, laws and commandments, statutes and ordinances of the Jewish Scriptures do guide us if we but study and contemplate what they are attempting to convey to and teach us. Certainly the Israeli pilot who saw that there were possibly children scurrying around a target he was instructed to bomb but determined that the potential loss of innocent life was more critical than completing that mission, was acting on a code which is inspired by Torah. Would that the shell fired from an Israeli naval vessel which killed the Palestinian

children who were playing on the beach had had eyes and could have been called back before these innocents were blown up. For, we Jews are instructed that life is a gift from God, that each human life is precious and that we are to “choose life.”

Benjamin Netanyahu made the distinction between Hamas’ and Israel’s approaches to this latest war. He said that while Israel uses its Iron Dome missiles to defend its citizenry, **Hamas uses civilians to defend its missiles.**

The point is that Israel has been attempting to apply Torah *ethics* in its war fighting to honor both its self-image and the image of God that we believe adheres to and in every human being. We are each created in that image. Thus, every Palestinian casualty is a cause for mourning among us. In contrast, for Hamas, every Israeli casualty is a cause for celebration. Theirs is a culture of death; ours is one which deeply values and cherishes life.

Torah also teaches that if someone comes to kill you, you are obligated to take his life first. We Jews are not masochists. We understand the awesome responsibility that wielding superior power entails. It is for this reason that Israel doesn’t react emotionally to Hamas’ provocations by carpet bombing Gaza even though she has the capability to do so. The IDF behaves like no other modern day

army in attempting to instill in its soldiers a battle field ethic which is far superior to that of other nations. Believe me, the naval commander who fired that shell which destroyed the children on the beach will be investigated and, if found derelict in any way, will be prosecuted to the maximum.

When she succeeds, Israel can be a light unto the nations. When she fails, she investigates and brings perpetrators to justice. I am certain that, in Israel, hearts are heavy for the losses of innocents. They are also enraged that once again, an Arab entity is causing Israelis to kill civilians. As Golda Meir put it, “We can forgive the Arabs for killing our children. We cannot forgive them for forcing us to kill their children. We will only have peace with the Arabs when they love their children more than they hate us.”

Israel will make every effort not to cause collateral damage, the killing of innocents, in this conflict. She is operating as best she can by the ethics passed down to us by Hazal (the ancient rabbis) and TANAK, and is acting according to these precepts. We could all live better, more productive and fruitful lives were we to avoid trying to read into our Bible what isn't there, but study and absorb the lessons and laws that are, making them integral parts of our lives.