

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Efrat, Israel – “**You shall smite, yes smite, all of the inhabitants of that city by the sword...and you shall burn entirely with fire the city and all of its spoils to the Lord your God, and it shall be an everlasting desolation (*tef*); it shall not be rebuilt again**” (Deut 13: 16,17).

The Bible ordains the destruction of an entire city which has been seduced and deceived into practicing idolatry. And, although many sages of the Talmud maintain that such a situation “never was and was never created” (B.T. Sanhedrin), the harsh words nevertheless sear our souls.

What is even more difficult to understand are the concluding words of the Bible regarding this idolatrous and hapless city: “...[And the Lord] shall give you compassion, and He shall be compassionate towards you, and He shall cause you to increase as he has sworn to your forbearers. ... This is because you have hearkened to the voice of the Lord your God to observe all of His commandments... to do what is righteous (*hayashar*) in the eyes of the Lord your God” (13:18,19).

Compassion? Righteousness? Are these fitting words to describe such an extreme punishment?

To understand the simple meaning of the Biblical command, it is necessary to explore the actual meaning – and nature of the offense – of idolatry.

The Bible lashes out against idolatry more than any other transgression, and of the fourteen verses that comprise the Decalogue, four of them focus on idolatrous worship, its evils constantly reiterated.

Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, in their penetrating study *Idolatry*, cite various commentaries as to why idolatry is presented as so repulsive in the Bible. For Maimonides the sin of idolatry is theological; for the Meiri it was the number of innocent children sacrificed to Moloch, the eating of flesh cruelly torn from living animals, and the wanton sexual orgies associated with the Dionysian rites which so incensed the Lord. Indeed, the Bible seems to support the Meiri position; to give but two examples: “You shall not bow down to their gods and you shall not serve them; *you shall not act in accordance with their deeds* (Exodus 23:24)”... “You shall destroy, yes destroy [the seven indigenous nations of Canaan] *lest they teach you to do all the abominations which they do before their gods* (Deut. 20:17,18).”

The Bible never understood monotheism in terms of faith alone; from the very beginning of God’s election of Abraham who was commanded to convey to subsequent generations not only belief in one God, but rather in a God “...whose path it is to do compassionate righteousness and justice” (Gen. 18:19), belief in *ethical monotheism*. Moses asks for a glimpse into the Divine (Ex. 32:18). The Almighty, after explaining that no mortal being can ever truly understand the Ineffable and the Infinite, does grant a partial glimpse: “The Lord, the Lord, is a God of Compassion (*raham*) and freely-giving love, long-suffering, full of lovingkindness, and truth ...” (Ex. 34:6. Even Maimonides suggests that these descriptions, known as the 13 Attributes of the Divine, are not so much theological as anthropological, to teach us mortals –commanded to imitate God– precisely how to do so: just as He is Compassionate, you humans must be compassionate, just as He gives love freely, so must you humans...

Hence, the essence of Judaism is not proper intellectual understanding of the Divine, (which is impossible), but rather proper human imitation of the Divine traits, acting towards other human beings the way God would have us act, in compassionately righteous and just ways. And so Maimonides concludes his Guide for the Perplexed, written at the end of his life, with a citation from Jeremiah:

“Thus says the Lord: But only in this should one glory if he wishes to glory: Learn about and come to know Me. I am the Lord who does lovingkindness, justice and righteous compassion on earth. Only in these do I delight, says the Lord” (Jeremiah 9:22,23).

From this perspective, only a religion which teaches love of every human being, which demands a system of righteousness and morality, and which preaches a world of peace, can take its rightful place as a religion of ethical monotheism. Islam, for example, has enriched the world with architectural and decorative breakthroughs, glorious poetry, mathematical genius, and philosophical writings influenced by Aristotle. And certainly the Kalami and Sufi interpretations of the Koran, which present jihad as a spiritual struggle, place Islam alongside Judaism and Christianity as a worthy vehicle and noble model for ethical monotheism. Tragically, however, the Jihadism, spawned from Saudi Arabia’s brand of Wahhabi Islam, the Al-Qaeda culture of homicide-bomber terrorism wreaking worldwide fear and destruction -from Manhattan to Bali- and threatening anyone who is not a Jihad believing Muslim, is the antithesis of ethical monotheism.

George Weigel, a Catholic theologian and distinguished Senior Fellow at the Ethical and Public Policy Center in Washington D.C., cites a definition of Jihadism in his compelling study, *Faith, Reason and the War against Jihadism*: “It is the religiously inspired ideology which teaches that it is the moral obligation of Muslims to employ whatever means are necessary to compel the world’s submission to Islam.” He also analyzes the theology of Sayyid Qutb (d.1966), who stresses the fact that God’s one-ness demands universal fealty, that the very existence of a non-Muslim constitutes a threat to the success of Islam and therefore of God, and so such an individual must be converted or killed; other religions and modern secularism are not merely mistaken but are evil, “filth to be expunged.” The goal is Global Jihad. Such a perverted “theology” only transmutes true Sufi Moslem monotheism into hateful Wahabi mono-Satanism. The enemy of the free world is not Islam; but it is Jihadism.

Let me return to our Biblical passage regarding the idolatrous city. An army hell-bent upon the destruction of innocent people, whose only sin is to believe differently than they do, enters the category of “...the one who is coming to kill you must be first killed by you.” One cannot love the good without hating the evil, ‘good’ defined as the protection of the innocent and ‘evil’ as the destruction of the innocent. The only justification for taking a life is in order to protect innocent lives – when taking a life is not only permitted but mandatory. Hence the Bible refers to the destruction of the murderous inhabitants of such a city as an act committed for the sake of righteousness. Just imagine the world today if the United States had not committed its forces to help fight Nazi Germany!

But even the most justified of wars wreaks havoc, collateral damage can never be completely prevented, and the soul of one who takes even a guilty human life must become in some way injured to the inestimable value of human life. Hence some of our Sages determine that such a city’s destruction had never been decreed, that the Bible is speaking in theory only. Certainly all other possibilities must be exhausted before taking such a final step of destroying a city.

Nevertheless, the Biblical account – well aware of the moral and ethical ambiguities involved –guarantees that those who fight rank evil will not thereby lose their inner sense of compassion for the suffering of innocent individuals or their overarching reverence for life. To the contrary, he who is compassionate towards those perpetrating cruelty will end up being cruel towards those who are compassionate.

Shabbat shalom.