

Orlando and the Dangers of Arrogance

Parashat Naso:

Rabbi Neil Cooper, June 18, 2016 /12 Sivan 5776

Parashat Naso, a full and rich *parasha*, includes a list of assignments for the transport of the Tabernacle in the desert. This job, the transport of the Tabernacle and its accoutrements, was assigned exclusively to the tribe of Levi and, specifically, by members of only one family of the tribe of Levi, the family of *Kohat*. Other families in the tribe had different jobs. But it is the assignment and the inherent dangers of the task were reserved for the *Kohat* family. The danger, simply put, was the punishment for touching the Tabernacle as it was carried by long staves. The punishment was death. I would like focus our attention there.

Generally, a death sentence comes as a result of a serious transgression. What then was the potential transgression which the Kohatites might commit? What made this task so dangerous? I turn first to the *midrash*:

Rabbi *Eleazer Ben Pedat* said in the name of R. *Yose Ben Zimra*: The sanctity of the ark caused people to be struck down by it and, therefore, people would run away from it. They would prefer, at all costs to carry something else: a vessel, a table, the candlesticks and the altars. The ark would, thereby, be slighted and the Holy One would be angry with them. It was for this reason that the Holy One, Blessed be He, instructed Moses and Aaron to institute a precautionary measure that would ensure that the *B'nai Kohat* would not cut off, leave, and run away (*Bamidbar Rabba*).

Hence, the Torah includes a death penalty (a quite convincing precautionary measure) to assure that the *Kohatites* don't abandon their responsibility.

There are numerous other explanations of the rationale of the death penalty being associated with erring in the transport of the *Mishkan*, , but it is the 16th century Italian commentator, **Rabbi Moshe Hafetz**, which I find most compelling and most relevant today. He writes as follows:

I believe that the text contains a warning against the temptation of high office and the cure – humility...The sons of *Kohat* were in danger of becoming victims of pride and vanity as a result of

the privilege of carrying the Ark, which had been bestowed on them... The prohibition against touching the Tabernacle was designed to dis-inflate their pride. They should not imagine that they were in control [of the tabernacle] and become over-inflated/or prideful. Ultimately [therefore] this provision [of the death penalty] was for their benefit, a reminder of the punishment for haughtiness and arrogance.

Pride and arrogance. In these two concepts one finds not only the potential pitfalls which members of the family of Kohat would face as they carried the Tabernacle. But this warning against pride and arrogance goes beyond the years of wandering in the desert.

You see, in the realm of religion, pride and arrogance are ongoing dangers. Pride and arrogance come as a result of a mindset of superiority. Those who have the best job, the most desirable and envied task may deem themselves more worthy or better than others. And this notion of superiority, particularly in the realm of religion, can lead those who revel in their superiority, to claim not only their superiority over others but to internalize the notion that they are, in fact, superior in the eyes of God as well. This danger, whether in the desert or in Orlando this week, is not simply an **attitude** of arrogance and haughtiness. It is the danger of how this sort of arrogance can lead to violence and death.

As we try to understand the horrific events which transpired early Sunday morning, there are no simple answers, no single unifying explanation which can enable us to understand what took place. There is no simple answer to the question: could this have been prevented? There is no simple answer to the question of how this might be prevented in the future. For anyone to suggest that they know **the** answer and that by taking one, simple step, by catching the one thing that was missed, we could avoid future massacres, is **itself the epitome of hubris and arrogance**.

As I ponder the events of last weekend, I cannot escape the observation that there was in this case, and in other cases of ideologically based terrorism, a high degree of arrogance which was part and parcel of the crime. As he took out his assault rifle and began shooting, Omar Mateen believed that he was killing for Allah. And, among other things, the events of early Sunday morning must serve as a wake-up call to both the power and the danger inherent in religions which suggest superiority and the arrogance of certainty that he had the approval of God, that he acted in the name of Allah.

What motivates someone to kill without reason, without explanation, without any degree of humanity or compassion? To call the shooter crazy does not suffice and, in fact, does a disservice to people who suffer mental illness. If he is deemed "crazy", then we cannot link his actions to anything other than

mental illness. We absolve him of a degree of culpability because he is sick. I believe that Mateen suffered mental illness. But what motivated him went far beyond that. I believe that Mateen, a complicated and confused person, to be sure, was motivated by his own overgrown arrogance, an arrogance which went beyond the point of:

I am right and you are wrong.

His arrogance was that of serving as God's, Allah's, executioner:

I know what God wants. God speaks to me. I know that my religion is right. I know that God wants all people to behave in a particular way and those who don't need to be punished. And I am God's servant. I can enforce God's will. I can cut down the sinners and those who do not obey God's laws. And (for Mateen) I can prove that I am not gay by becoming a martyr and, in the process, killing scores of gays and lesbians and, for that, I shall become a *shahid*/martyr. For that, having proved myself worthy and as a defender of singular the truth of the word of Allah, I shall gain entrance into the next world.

This is not a message heard exclusively by Muslims. To say that this is only Muslims who see themselves in this over-important way, is to deny the warnings against arrogance in our own tradition. Do you know why the *B'nai Kohat* were warned about the pride and arrogance of being **closer to God than the rest? Because B'nai Kohat could arrogantly claim proximity to God.** It is this arrogance and pride,

I am better because I am closer, I know what God wants better than do you, I am right/you are wrong, I am better/ you are nothing:

is a danger in any religious system. There are Jews, as well, who believe that

If I am right (which I am) it means that you are wrong. You must be punished. I can become the punisher, God's agent in eradicating the evil of the world.

And whether this line of reasoning is used by a Jew, a Christian or a Moslem, what results is not Judaism. Nor is it Christianity or Islam. This is a different religion, a religion which uses the structures and strictures of known religions to excuse and justify hatred, murder, terror and mayhem.

You may be surprised to learn that there are, indeed, such ideas nurtured within extremist elements within our own religion. There are within the Bible any number of places, which might reflect a mindset of ruthless violence. Beyond the command to wipe out the Amalekites, men, women, children and even

animals, our Bible his replete with examples of our ancestors perpetrating upon others what, today would be called terrorism. I refer you to the story of the response of her brothers to the rape of Dina.

Fortunately, Judaism is not the religion of the Bible. Our Judaism has been redacted and re-constructed by our Oral Tradition. Our Sages rejected much of the religion of the Bible in order to create a religion, the religion we follow, which is characterized by kindness, by acceptance, by ethical behavior. And so, at least when Jews perpetrate terror we can condemn it and dissociate from it.

But it is, I believe, in the human DNA to strive for exceptionalism. I believe that human nature drives us to desire to be great, to be right and to be best. It is in assuming that you are better, that much evil can be perpetrated.

- Nazism, began as ethnic cleansing and the desire to eradicate the inferior Jewish race from infecting the Arian race. The premise of Nazism was that Jews are inferior human beings.
- The premise of the Crusades was that those who do not believe as I do are wrong. And so, you can change your belief (and join those who are right) or you can die. This death is required to remove from the earth those who do not believe as we do.
- And this is Radical Islam as well: the religion which claims that Western values are corrupting, that Allah, who opposes western values, is God to the exclusion of the God of the Christians or the Jews.

It is in this world of distorted thinking, a world divided between “I am right and you are wrong” that the height of arrogance is reached: It is not just that I am right, but that even God is wrong:

I know what is right even if God doesn't act on it. For God has created people who disobey. That these people deserve to die is revealed only to those who stand in “the light”. We are the ones who must act.

The terrorist justifies the killings as necessary for the truth to be upheld. The only truth. My truth. And this is the ultimate expression of arrogance: It is up to me to take a life, or two or 49 to express? To show? **To prove** that I am right. To bring cleansing and atonement to myself by demonstrating that (despite my homosexual tendencies) **they** are the ones who are evil, and those of us who see that, recognize the need to cauterize, to extricate and to erase these inferior beings from the world. And if I die in the process: *Shahid!*

In response to the massacre in Orlando, there have been responses by people from throughout the world expressing horror, sorrow pain and anguish. Within the religious communities, Moslems, Christians and Jews have been united in the condemnations and in the unequivocal rejection of terror as a legitimate expression of any religion.

Trying to look to the future, however, my natural optimism is being stretched thin. What will it take until the world wakes up and unites in their condemnation and in the battle against terrorism? After unrelenting terror perpetrated on Israelis by radicalized Palestinians, after Paris, Belgium, London, Sandy Hook, World Trade Centers, where does this end?

The messages common to all religions and in all societies must include the unwavering commitment to the sanctity of human life, the absolute right to believe in the God of one's choosing, to worship as one chooses and to express the religious values of that religion which can provide life-affirming values, hope, faith and courage to its adherents. But no religion can be considered legitimate if it encourages attacking others, if it endorses coercion and if in being right it deems others wrong and designates others as worthy of death. That is not religion. That is hatred. That is the epitome of arrogance.

At this moment, religious leaders and all people, religious or not, must take a stand against such philosophies. All good people should be able to stand together to say **no**:

No you do not know God's will.

No you do not know God's intent.

No you are not privy to the design with which God created the world and

No you may not kill and justify violence in God's name, for your actions reflect nothing but arrogance, hatred and evil.

For now, our thoughts, prayers and wishes go to those recovering from wounds, those who are trying to cope with the unimaginable losses of loved ones and those whose proximity to such unmitigated evil has left permanent, inner scars and wounds.

As we stand together to embrace and support the LBGQTQ community, which was the target this time, we must condemn those who bring to this world violence and death and claim to act on God's behalf. Instead, this must be the moment

To restore to this world the love, respect and value to all who inhabit this earth.

To reject without equivocation the notions of a vengeful God, a God of anger and a God who punishes as wants us to die.

To use our voices to cry out in unison *"lo zo ha-derech"* this is not how one acts in God's world.

To remind the world that religion is not an excuse to perpetrate evil but a force to provide the support we need in times of pain, the strength to lift us when we fall and the courage to hope when the world around us has been dark.

This moment calls to us, powerfully and unambiguously to replace evil and violence with compassion, healing and the will to repair our broken world.

May the events in Orlando serve as reminders of just how much work we have before us, just how much energy we must expend, just how loud our voices must be and just how poignant and deep our silent prayers must be.