

If God Does Not Want Martyrs, What Then Does God Want From Us ?

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Rabbi Neil S. Cooper

Over the summer, traveling home from Israel, Lori and I stopped for a few days in London. London was delightful. Wonderful sites. Wonderful history. Wonderful people. We toured Buckingham Palace, the Tower of London and both the British Museum and the Tate Museum of Modern Art.

As a student of religion, I found Westminster Abbey particularly impressive. As we walked through the enormous church, I could not help but be awed by the beautiful sculptures, the details and quality of the craftsmanship and, of course the sheer size of the building. (I confess that I had to consciously turn my thoughts away from the question which, I assume everyone asks: how do they heat this place?).

Our guide rattled off a litany of important events, coronations, weddings and other momentous events which have been held there. He pointed out the crypts of several notables buried beneath the floor: Sir Isaac Newton and Charles Darwin among others. But when we reached Britain's Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, no explanation was necessary. We simply stood and read the moving words of the inscription:

Here lie the remains of a British warrior, unknown by name or rank... who during the Great War of 1914 - 1918 gave the most that a man can give, life itself, for God, King and Country.

As I stood there in solemn silence, what came to my mind was the magnitude of inner strength, the unwavering devotion and courage it surely takes to fight **and die** for King and Country. At the same time, as a student of religion, I had trouble understanding the third notion included in the inscription: Sacrificing one's life for God. During World War I, had soldiers really fallen on the battlefield for God? Did God really want soldiers to die for Her? Does God ever want us to die?

Today, given the state of terror and violence in the world, other questions come to mind, taking us beyond those one might ponder about Britain's Unknown Soldier Memorial:

Is it possible that there are times when a Divine command **requires** that we kill others, especially non-combatants?

How far have we gone, or should we go, to follow God's words and commands if we believe that God wants us to kill?

It is hard to believe that, in our time, these are questions **still** being asked and answered affirmatively and even passionately. Today, Radical Islam, ISIS and other extremists have answered these questions for themselves. Terrorist attacks in both Israel and around the world have become routine and even, sad to say, anticipated. Beyond thwarting and responding to these attacks, we must now reconsider this old/new reality of life in the 21st century. This is a reality of life today which affects us all.

Before the High Holidays, for example, our local Jewish community hosted several meetings, one held in our synagogue, which addressed how to secure and prevent attacks in our synagogue. At the last meeting, one topic discussed was what to do **in the event of** an attack. Neither geography nor political persuasion protects anyone.

Attacks in Europe, Israel and the US have continue unabated over the last several months. I need not go into the gruesome details about these attacks. We are all aware of the devastating results of each:

In Brussels, thirty five people, including several Americans, were killed in two simultaneous attacks.

In the Sarona café in Tel Aviv, four were cut down as they sipped coffee.

In Orlando, FL, 49 were murdered in a gay dance club.

A speeding truck became a lethal weapon in Nice, France, killing 84.

In Turkey, a child, barely a teen, became a suicide bomber killed 50 in a crowded wedding celebration.

These attacks, and hundreds of others, have much in common: All are unprovoked. All are inexplicable. All are inscrutable. And all are perpetrated in the name of *Allahu Akbar*. In each of these attacks, the perpetrators died. And each perpetrator was lauded as a *shahid* / a martyr.

The use of the term “martyr”, whether in the context of attacks in Europe, the Middle East, Israel or the US, is jarring for us to hear. Jews use the term “martyr”, not to praise those who kill innocent people. We use the term to refer to those who have been killed specifically **because** they were Jewish. On Yom Kippur we use the term “martyr”, in a part of the service known as the **Martyrology**, to describe the torture and the deaths of ten rabbis in ancient times, executed for teaching Torah. For us, the term “martyr” is used as we remember those who perished during the Holocaust.

I must confess, however, that the terms “martyr” and “martyrdom” are terms about which I had rarely given much thought. But, during the summer, when I heard, in a single news report, **both** the victims of attacks and the perpetrators who had “sacrificed” their lives for Allah, **referred to as martyrs**, the term itself lost its legitimacy and, to my mind, became toxic. The glaring contradiction, the jarring “illogic” of assigning the same term to both victim and perpetrator, left me dumbfounded.

How could both be God’s martyrs?

Shall we now engage in a war of words convincing our respective constituencies that, “No, **we** are the real martyrs?”

Or can it be that there is some Divine plan in which the innocent die along with the guilty?

To die as a martyr, *al Kiddush ha-shem*, in Hebrew, means, “for the sanctification of God’s name” as if this is what God wants: God acquiesces to and approves of the murder of innocents in acts which “sanctify” God’s name. That is what dying for God means. That is what the inscription at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier suggests.

But how could it be that God wanted both perpetrator and victim to die? Of course, one might say that martyrdom is in the eye of the beholder. But, if the beholder is God, what is it that God wants? Even God cannot root for both sides?

During the Civil War, a form of this question was posed to Abraham Lincoln. War-weary and demoralized, the troops of the Union Army wanted to know that God was on their side. In the midst of the long, drawn-out and bloody war, knowing that God was with them would provide a much-needed sense of purpose, of motivation and resolve for the troops to persevere. Indeed, the Confederate troops surely would have liked the same assurance as well.

Abraham Lincoln was not denominationally affiliated as a Christian. Yet, he had a deep and abiding faith in God. In 1862, in a short speech which Pres. Lincoln wrote but never delivered, he addressed the question of fighting and dying for God. I am sure that he wanted to provide the troops with the assurances they wanted to hear. But, honest Abe simply could not do it, which may be the reason the speech was never delivered. Here are Lincoln's words:

In great contests, each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both may be, and one must be wrong. God cannot be for and against the same thing at the same time. In the present civil war, it is quite possible that God's purpose is something different from the purpose of either party...I am almost ready to say that ...God wills this contest, and wills that it shall not end yet. By His mere great power, on the minds of his now contestants, He could have either saved or destroyed the Union without a human contest. Yet the contest began. And having begun, he could have given the final victory to either side any day. Yet the contest proceeds.

Lincoln believed that God may be on either, or neither side in their conflicts. But God cannot be on both sides of a conflict. The question, therefore, may not be whether God is on our side. The question may very well be, are we on God's side? And, as Lincoln suggests, it is impossible to know whether or not that is the case. But I wonder if the fact that Lincoln never delivered the speech was connected to something else: Perhaps Lincoln wondered as well: Does God want anyone to kill in his name? Does God want anyone to die in his name?

Those who believe that the deaths of innocent people bring glory to God are mistaken. Is it really possible that God is, somehow, "sanctified", whatever that term means, by the death of one of God's children, regardless of which side they are on? The answer is, and must be, a resounding "no": No from Judaism. No from Christianity. No from Islam.

Those who foist upon our world the barbaric and merciless violence we have witnessed, do not represent any religion. The perpetrators who indiscriminately, without concern for age, gender or religion, kill innocent people while proclaiming "*Allahu Akhbar* / God is great", do not represent Allah. They use God's name as an excuse to murder and wreak havoc. Their violence is not an expression of religion. It is an expression of a hateful and murderous ideology which has been introduced into this world thinly veiled in the burka of Islam.

To connect religion to the murder of the innocent and the vulnerable is to make a mockery of religion and faith. To perpetrate murder in God's name is the ultimate distortion, the ultimate lie to tell. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, former Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, states emphatically that this has never been, nor

will it ever be the case. He suggests, that when this kind of violence occurs, God weeps, and, in a voice barely audible, God says: "Not in My Name".

The time has come to retire the term "martyr". Neither victims nor perpetrators sanctify God, either by killing or by being killed. Simply put, God does not want us be martyrs. Nor does God want us to make others into martyrs. Rather, God desperately wants us to live. And it is from this point, in this context, that I would like to re-read and re-consider the role which Abraham plays on Rosh haShana and the lesson which we may previously have missed.

The Torah readings for Rosh HaShana, as you know, focus on Abraham. Today, we read of the birth of Isaac, tomorrow, the binding and near sacrifice of Isaac at the hands of Abraham. But this is not, of course, all that we know about Abraham. Abraham's reputation precedes him.

Abraham comes to us on Rosh HaShana having earned our great respect and admiration. We envision Abraham as a quiet and pensive, though deliberate man. It is Abraham who never lost faith, who never stopped believing in God. He never stopped hearing God's voice, the voice of a commanding yet ethical God. And Abraham was his servant.

Abraham was also a man whose notion of justice, fairness and compassion, whose views about humanity and the sanctity of a single life were indelibly imprinted upon his soul. And so, when God was ready to kill the sinful citizens of Sodom and Gemorrah, it was Abraham who demanded that God relent:

Ha-shofet kol ha-aretz lo ya'aseh mishpacha?

Will not the Judge of the all of the earth himself act justly!" (Gen. 18:25)

Will not an ethical God himself act ethically? Who says that to God?! It was Abraham who stood up for the people of those cursed cities, not because they had acted admirably but because they were people, they were human beings, created in God's own image. That is the Abraham we know. And this is why it is so difficult for us to understand how the one who would stand up for the people of Sodom and Gemorrah would not stand up for the life of his beloved son. And yet, he does not. Tomorrow we shall read of God's command to Abraham:

Kach-na et bincha, et yechidcha, ahser ahavta, et Yitzchak, v'lech lecha el ha-aretz asher omar elecha / Take your son, your only son, the one that you love, Isaac, to a land that I will show you. (Gen. 22:2)

Take your son, says God. Take him and slaughter him. Kill him. Why kill him? Why inflict this horrific act on an innocent and beloved son? Because I say so, says God: He will die for me, *al kiddush ha-shem*. He will die for my sake, as a martyr. That, says God, is what I want. At least that is what Abraham thinks that he hears from God.

But, I have come to the conclusion that was not what God wanted. God wanted Abraham to learn that the authentic voice of God could not command human sacrifice or murder. That is the lesson which God wanted Abraham to learn. And how can I be certain that God does not want to be a God who requires the deaths of children? That was the lesson which God learned from Abraham! That was the lesson of Sodom and Gemorrah. And yet, it is the teacher, Abraham, who forgot the lesson. God says

“Go” and Abraham goes. God says kill and Abraham raises his knife. In raising his knife, I believe that Abraham failed the test.

To be faithful to God does not mean to listen uncritically. It does not mean to walk forward blindly, to obey without considering the ethics of the results.

To follow God means to extend ourselves as human beings.

To follow God means to understand that God wants us to live, that God wants us to be kind and compassionate toward each other.

And to follow means to **assert** our humanity even if one thinks that God is demanding something else. **God wants our own sense of humanity to supersede even our obedience to God.**

Rabbi David Hartman uses the term “God Intoxication” to describe the phenomenon of identifying the voice of God as a voice instructing one to be anything less than kind, compassionate and “humane”. God intoxication results in an inebriated consciousness in which one mistakenly believes that whatever he/she does, is done in God’s name because that it is God’s voice which they hear. It is in that state of consciousness that zealots and terrorists reside. It is a state of consciousness characterized by distorted, even inverted thinking which convinces one to do things that are diametrically opposed to what it means to be human. Indeed, Judaism is a religion whose central message is that of ethics and moral behavior. Anything less is alien to our core beliefs.

As an illustration I share with you this well-known stories about Hillel, arguably the greatest of the Sages of the Mishnah. Hillel’s lesson here is among the most concise and well-known of his teachings. It is here that Hillel conveys in simple and straight-forward terms the central message of Judaism and, in doing so, teaches us about what is most important to God. It is one of many stories in which the views of Hillel and his legal adversary, Shammai, clash.

The story begins when a non-Jew, seeking to convert to Judaism, approaches each Sage for their advice and their wisdom regarding the essential message of Jewish Life and tradition (BT Shabbat 31a):

A rather head-strong non-Jew came before Shammai and said, “Make me a proselyte on the condition that you teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot”. Shammai chased him away... When that same man came before Hillel, however, Hillel accepted the challenge and said, “What is hateful to you, do not to your neighbor: that is the whole Torah, while the rest is commentary, therefore, go and learn”.

Here Hillel, distills the meaning of Torah into a few words. And what does he say? Not that the essence of Judaism lies in “believing in one God” (the theological response), nor is it found in observing all of the mitzvot” (a response which is weighted by strict adherence to laws and rituals). Hillel does not chase away the proselyte for having the *chutzpa* to suggest that this wonderful and rich way of life, this deeply philosophical and intellectual religion, could possibly be reduced to an elevator talk.

Rather, Hillel says to the proselyte, if you want to know the essence of my religion, learn this: think of those things which people might do to you which you don’t like, and don’t do that! Treat others in the

way you might like to be treated. Don't hurt others. Be kind. In short, (while standing on one leg) that is Hillel's message.

What makes this story remarkable is not just that the Hillel has the ability to distill the message of Jewish life into terms that are so succinct and simple. What is remarkable is that the message says nothing explicitly about God! In the response of Hillel to the non-Jew, belief in God, even awareness of God, is part of the "commentary" of which he speaks. Judaism is a religion in which God takes a back seat to ethical human behavior. We must put God second, if/when we feel that God is suggesting something which we believe is not moral or ethical.

When we put God **first**, when our Judaism begins by listening primarily to what we believe to be the voice of God, when we subordinate our inner sense of morality, our humanity or our sense of what is right and just and ethical, we betray our humanity and, ultimately, we betray God. When we put God first, when all we can hear is God's voice, when we no longer can hear the inner voice of our own conscience, we can justify any action, no matter how horrible, how horrific or how despicable, by saying that this is what God wants me to do. Indeed, it is exactly here that putting God first creates problems in the name of religion.

A terrorist does not sanctify God's name. That person is not a martyr. Yet this is the message which spews from some of their radicalized religious leaders who encourage this sort of thinking, using their pulpits to spin webs of hate, to hatch plans contrived in cruelty, to manufacture criminals who lack any sense of humanity and who cynically turn away from any notions of restraint or compassion. A terrorist may well hear voices but those voices are not God's. God does not sanction the destruction and death they cause. And, in listening to those voices one does not glorify God's name.

Do you know what the opposite of martyrdom / *Kiddush HaShem* is? *Chillul HaShem*. And what is "*Chillul HaShem*" / to desecrate God's name? A *Chillul HaShem* is to ignore the plight of others, to treat your workers unfairly, to exploit, to enslave, and without a doubt, to kill. *Kiddush HaShem* is not about dying, killing or believing. It is about living. It is about treating others generously. It is about how we speak, how we help, how we behave. When we act in a way which expresses the best of our humanity, when we help, when we bring healing to those who are broken, when we care about our neighbors that is *Kiddush HaShem*.

My friends, we are living in a world which has been burned and broken in God's name. Evil, murderous forces lie in wait to kill those with whom they disagree. They wait for the right time to conquer land and to kill their ideological enemies with their swords, all the time listening for a voice they identify as God's. But, if they hear a voice commanding violence, it shall not be the voice of Allah, nor the voice of the God of Abraham nor they voice of the Father of Jesus. The voice they hear, the only voice they here, is their own.

For Jews, the High Holidays are assigned to us as times to scrutinize our actions, to judge ourselves. The questions we must ask of ourselves are: Have we done our best to live a life which reflects the life-affirming, Jewish values implied by our concern for all people? Has our righteousness been pure, not tainted by self-righteousness? Have we claimed to act in God's name while acting with hatred and cruelty? For, in the end, it shall be the acts of kindness, the gentle nurture of our children, the quiet comfort created when we reach out to our neighbor or when we care for the stranger on which we shall be judged both collectively and individually. And we shall be judged on whether, in the midst of a

tumultuous and troubled world, we have heard the voices and cries of others. Those are the voices which God wants us to hear.

There is a famous Hasidic story of a Hasidic master who is walking along the cobbled streets of the village when he hears the cry of a baby coming from his student's house – a cry that pierced the night. He rushed into the house and saw his student entranced in prayer, swaying to and fro in pious devotion. The rabbi walked over to the baby, took her into his arms, sat down and rocked her back to sleep. When the student emerged from his prayers, he was shocked to find his master there, in his house, holding the small, sleeping baby.

"Master" he said, "what are you doing? Why are you here?" "I was walking in the street and heard the baby crying," he responded, "so I followed the cry and found her alone." "Master," the student replied, "I was so engrossed in my prayers that I did not hear the cries". The master replied, "My dear student, if praying makes one deaf to the cries of a child, there is something flawed in the prayer".

From the beginning, it has been our responsibility to bring to this world this *chesed*, caring, concern and kindness to the rest of humanity. In a cruel world which has been burned and broken, we pray for the strength and for the power which can enable us to uproot the evil which abounds. But as Jews and as caring human beings it is our job, as well, to teach the world to hear the cries of the neglected and to extend *chesed* to those in need.

We listen, not for a commanding voice of anger and violence. Instead we listen for the small voices, voices neglected, voices ignored. When we hear and heed those voices, when we care for and bring comfort to those in need that is when we honor God. When we reach out for each other, God is never neglected. Indeed, as we care for one another, God waits. And, I believe, as God waits, God smiles

As we begin a new year, we pray for God's blessings of life, health and peace, for ourselves and for the world. May we remember to hear the cries of children and the voices of those who need our help. Only then, if we listen carefully, shall we hear the true voice of God, a small voice emerging from the depths. And, indeed, when we hear that voice, we shall know, as well, that God is smiling.