

HIJACK!, A RESPONSE TO TERRORISM

A High Holiday Sermon by Rabbi Herbert M. Baumgard, DHL
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The world was still careening from the air-plane hijacking in Karachi, Pakistan, when Arab terrorists struck again-this time in Istanbul, Turkey. In Karachi, the attack was aimed at an American airplane. In Istanbul, the assault was on a Jewish Synagogue. To the Arab terrorists, it was incidental in either case that the victims were totally defenseless and utterly innocent of any wrong against Arabs. Eighteen died in Karachi. Twenty two died in the Synagogue. Scores more were wounded in both attacks, and many were maimed for life.

The New York Times said of the Synagogue massacres, "To call these murderers Palestinian Freedom Fighters is like describing Count Dracula as a promoter of blood banks. Their cause is not freedom but nihilism, which means 'a total disbelief in...moral principles and obligations'".

This Rabbi, in his capacity as President of the Synagogue Council of America, was one of several speakers at a memorial service for the Turkish Jews which was held in New York City. The Defense Minister of Israel, Yitchak Rabin, was among the speakers. Mr. Rabin said, "We must remember that the terrorists specifically attacked people on the Sabbath while they were at prayer. We must remember that they specifically sought out the defenseless and the innocent".

Since the memorial service for the Turkish Jews, Arab terrorists have struck several more times, especially in Paris, where people including women and children have been indiscriminately slaughtered in public places like restaurants and department stores. Again the target has been the innocent and the defenseless.

While the background of the terrorists captured in Karachi is being investigated, some nations have spoken out about the need for retaliation, but the truth is that after every retaliation in the past, the terrorists have merely broadened the arena of their activities. As I said in my remarks at the memorial service in New York, "If both sides maintain the ethic of an eye for an eye, soon everyone will be blind physically as well as spiritually".

Can we then extract no positive message out of the recent wave of senseless killings? Is there no plan of action which can give solace to the Jewish people which continues to be tormented by fanatic enemies seemingly without any sense of human decency: yes, I think there is one message which clearly emerges from this carnage which points to a path of action. The message which emerges is simply this; we Jews are indeed different from our enemies. We are different in the values we uphold and different in the mores by which we live. If we follow that train of thought far enough, I think our plan of action will be clear.

As we note the sharp difference between ourselves and our enemies, we find that we are led back to the very origins of our people. It happened by sheer chance that the Torah reading for the week following the massacre in Istanbul, referred to a very ancient example of terrorism. Following the traditional cycle of reading the Torah, all the Synagogues of the world that week read about the attack of the Amalekites on the Hebrew refugees who were fleeing Pharaoh. As the slaves trudged wearily in the wilderness, the Amalekites maliciously sought to attack the women, the aged, and the small children, who were struggling along at the rear of the Israelite column. The Torah reads: "Z'chor Amalek. Do not forget the Amalekites, for they attacked you when you were completely defenseless and they attacked precisely those who were the most vulnerable (see Deut. 25:17-19)."

This passage in the Torah describing an event 3300 years ago reminds us that there has always been terrorists who have preyed upon the innocent and the weak. Such destructive attacks were an integral part of the activity of European Barbarian tribes as they

preyed upon unsuspecting villages, and such brutal assaults were part of the way of life for the Russian Cossacks, who sporadically attacked Jews amongst others. In the ancient Near East, however, where Israel was born, terrorist attacks were part of everyday living. The Assyrians, for example, frequently an enemy of our ancestors, were particularly known for their cruelty and for their lack of respect for human life.

This being so, we might well ask ourselves, how is it that a religion like Judaism was able to emerge from the ancient Near East? How is it that a nation, like the Israelites, which emphasized justice and mercy, could have catapulted out of this morass of barbaric nations? How is it that while all the other nations worshipped the sun and the moon, Israel did not? How is it that while all the other nations taught that their king was divine and above the law, Israel did not? How is it that while all their neighbors separated religion from morality, Israel taught that God was the exemplar of morality and that we had to imitate Him in His holiness?

It is part of traditional Jewish teaching that the Israelites were so different from their contemporaries for one simple reason - God. God, the Bible teaches, called us to be an "am kadosh, a holy people". God called us to be an "ore l'goyim, a light unto the nations". "God called us"; but for some of us, this answer is a little too simplistic. We want to know why it is that God called specifically to this small people, and how is it that this people miraculously responded and so valiently tried to be God's messenger to the world. To be able to answer this even in part, we have to study Israelite origins. We have to know Israelite sociology and history; but when we are armed with this academic knowledge which tells us something about how this people evolved, we still must stand in awe at the miraculous nature of this fact; one people alone out of the hundreds of peoples in the ancient Near East came to believe that we must protect especially the weak and defenseless!

We Jews must use the event in Istanbul, this latest experience of Jewish suffering, to come to understand ourselves better. What is it that our tradition actually says about the innocent and the defenseless? We ought to learn the specifics of our heritage. We begin in the Book of Leviticus, (Ch. 19:14). Moses taught "YOU SHALL NOT CURSE THE DEAF NOR PUT A STUMBLING BLOCK IN THE PATH OF THE BLIND". This has always been to me one of the most profound teachings in the Torah, and it comes in that same code which teaches us to love our neighbor as ourselves. "You shall not curse the deaf nor put a stumbling block in the path of the blind". The obvious meaning of this teaching is: Don't take advantage of those who are handicapped, those who do not have the physical capabilities that you have. The ancient Rabbis understood that the implications of this teaching do not stop with the deaf and the blind. Like all teachings in the Torah this one must be interpreted and extended. Doesn't the teaching also mean that we should not take advantage of those who know less than we do, who have an inferior education to our own? Does the teaching not mean that the young must show a special compassion for the aged, and does it not mean that the aged have the responsibility to divert the young from their errant paths? Isn't Moses telling us that the healthy have the responsibility to take care of the infirm? "Do not curse the deaf nor put a stumbling block in the path of the blind".

Moses and the Torah carry the attitude about protecting the innocent further. In the ancient societies, women and orphans could not possess real property. Only men could own a farm or a house, and women were protected through their husbands, as children were protected through their fathers. But suppose the husband was dead. The Torah teaches that there must be special concern for the widow and orphan precisely because the law does not protect them economically. "If you don't uphold them", God is quoted as saying, "they will cry out into Me, and I will surely hear their cry, and it will be accounted unto you for evil".# Our Torah describes God as being especially sensitive to the needs of widows and orphans. Their prayers were heard first.# (A paraphrase of Exodus, 22:21-22; cf Deut. 10:18).

In every other ancient society, the stranger had no rights. Only the home born, the citizen, only those who were native members of the society could own land and sue in the courts. The Egyptians called all foreigners "barbarians". The famous Greek Democracy was for Greeks only with a strong foundation of slavery underpinning it. This was not true amongst the Israelites. The Torah read: "You shall have one manner of law for the stranger as for the home born. And you shall love the stranger as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt". (Leviticus 19:34, and 24:22, cf Deut; 10:19)

Always the memory of slavery, always the memory of oppression, always the inclination to support the weak and the defenseless.

The great legal code of the ancient Near East, which preceded the Mosaic Code, was the Code of Hammurabi, renowned king of mighty Babylonia. This code, which was considered a vast improvement over pre-existing codes, reads, "If a slave escapes his master and comes to you and you do not return him to his master, you are guilty of a felony, and you will be killed". Our Torah reads, "If a slave escapes from his master and comes to you seeking protection, you must permit him to stay with you. You shall surely protect him and help him in every way possible". (A paraphrase of Deuteronomy 23:16-17).

We cannot bring back to life the Turkish Jews who were viciously murdered in Istanbul, but we can bring back to life our Jewish sensitivities which have lain dormant these many years. The death of the Turkish Jews will not have been in vain if it brings life to us, if we permit it to resurrect in us our Jewish sensibilities.

Who are the innocent and powerless in our American society? The poor and the uneducated, the handicapped, the aged and infirmed, the person with "Aids", whether he or she is homosexual or not, the child who can't learn as quickly as others because of a birth defect or because of psychological problems. Sociologists tell us that women increasingly are being pushed over the poverty line, especially divorced women with children. All of these are defenseless before us, silently pleading for us to notice them and to help them.

Is it not true that we sometimes long to turn aside even from those who may be close to us and who may be old or chronically ill? We would prefer to deny their claims and we would prefer to believe that all of life is a bowl of cherries. True, we do not have to sacrifice our life for the chronically ill, but we do owe them loyalty and concern. How often it is that when we do take care of an afflicted child or an adult that the effort brings with it a reward of a special kind. One woman told me that she had been taking care of her ailing mother night and day for ten years and now that her mother had died, her life seemed to be empty, because what would now fill her time? Who would give her the opportunity to give of herself in such a meaningful dimension?

Over the summer, I read a play by Sophocles which was most touching. The play was about Antigone, the daughter of Oedipus. Oedipus, you know, was banished from his homeland and compelled to wander from country to country, when it was discovered that he had unwittingly killed his own father. The person who chose to stick with him, to take care of him in his old age, and to accept the burden of the wandering, was Antigone, the daughter of Oedipus.

When the old man died, finally freed from his conflict and suffering, Antigone tearfully looked back on her years of wandering and poverty with her father and said:

"AH! WHAT WAS PAIN WAS JOY.
WHAT LACKED ALL LOVE WAS LOVE...
WHEN I HAD HIM IN MY ARMS."

Antigone had found a meaning for her life in the intense care that she gave to her outcast

father. Though he lacked all love, though all others condemned him, to her he was love. Again, her words at her father's death.

"AH! WHAT WAS PAIN WAS JOY.
WHAT LACKED ALL LOVE WAS LOVE..
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I wept silently when I read these words, for they contain in them so much of the truth of human relationships. It is in caring for those who are the most rejected and defenseless that we sometimes carve out our deepest meaning.

In my remarks at the recent memorial service in New York, I pointed out that we Jews are an endangered species. There are many like Amalek or Arab terrorists who lie in ambush for us and seek to kill us; therefore, we Jews must move closer together. We must come to value our tradition more. We must become students and practitioners of that tradition, for it is the noblest of traditions, unlike that of most of the people of the world even today.

As we become stronger in our religion, as we become stronger as a people sharing a commitment, we will be able to help others all the more. In the end, it will not be Amalek who can make an end of us. It will not be Arab terrorists who can make an end to us. The terrorists have always been there. It is only we in our isolation from one another, in our ignorance of our tradition, in our failure to act as Jews are commanded to act, it is only we who can make an end to the Jewish people.

Let us pray that the tragedy in Istanbul can somehow bring strength to life. Let us pray that the souls of the departed Turkish Jews will quicken in our own souls!