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A Message to Those Who Call For the Destruction of the Jews

By Rabbi Chaim Landau

Today Israel stands threatened by two implacable foes who have called for its destruction. The President of Iran, and Hamas, the newly elected representatives of the Palestinians. They have, in unison, called for the eventual destruction of Israel with, this time, the full force of national authority behind their statements.

Thousands of years ago, the Torah recounts the story of a righteous individual who, in his search for the true God, finally finds the God of the Israelites after having experienced many religions prior to his eventual conversion. What brought about this change in Yitro's religious world-view ?

Yitro hears from his son-in-law Moses "...all that God has done on behalf of the Jewish people, and how He has brought them to this point in their history." To all of this, Yitro states: "Atah yadati ki gadol Hashem mikol ha-elohim, ki vadovor asher zadu alei-hem." "Now I know that Hashem is greater than all the gods, by virtue of that which he caused to happen to them." But how was it that, just by listening to the stories, Yitro could feel absolutely confident that the God of the Israelites was truly the greatest divine power?

Rashi responds, based on the Midrash, by saying that it was because Yitro saw that it was precisely in the manner that they intended to do evil against the Jews, that they themselves were punished, that is, "middah ke-neged middah." Or, as Onkolos states, the very evil deeds the Egyptians intended to launch against the Israelites were turned against them as their punishments.

Rav Velvel of Brisk comments that, evidently, the Egyptians were punished not only for what they actually did to the Jewish People, but even for the many evils that the Egyptians wanted to direct against the Jewish people, which failed. Likewise, the Tosafot, commenting on a passage in Talmud Tractate Kiddushin, teach that when nations plan the destructions of the Jews, even though they are eventually thwarted, the very thought of what they wanted to do is accounted to them as if they actually did it.

But how could anyone know what the Egyptians planned ? The Gemara in Sotah informs us that three people were made privy to Pharaoh's plans: Bilam, Job and Yitro. Bilam egged on the Egyptians to go for it. Job maintained a diplomatically balanced position. Only Yitro argued against the implementation of plans to destroy the Jewish People. Having been in the cabinet room, as it were, listening to Pharaoh, Yitro was totally aware of all the plans, both actual and intended, that were drawn up against the Israelites.

Therefore, according to the Midrash, when Yitro heard the accounts from Moshe of what God had done to the Egyptians, he was in the distinctive position of being able to realize that not only had God responded "middah ke-neged middah" for all the plans actually implemented against the Israelites, but also "midah ke-neged midah" for all the intended plans they had devised as well.

With this background, as we witness once again Israel on the receiving end of calls for its destruction, we can only pray and hope that as in the past, the nations who wish to inflict such evil upon the Jews will find that it is they themselves against whom the God of history will respond with "midah ke-neged midah."

Rabbi Chaim Landau is the Rabbi of Congregation Ner Tamid in Baltimore, MD.

Conviction Without Fanaticism

by Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

If I could make everyone in our world read one text, and really take it to heart, it would not be the Shma, or any other section of the Bible. It would not be a selection from the Mishnah, the Talmud, or any subsequent rabbinic writing. Although I am an Orthodox rabbi, the text I would choose would be Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address. If you pushed me, I would settle for twelve words from that address: "with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right".

Here's why I think Lincoln's words are so important. The major threat to world peace today is fanaticism. Abroad, we face enemies who are genuinely willing to die if only they can kill us first. Fanatic nationalisms and tribal hatreds led to genocide in Rwanda and the Balkans, and are fueling attempted genocide in Darfur today. And of course, there is fanaticism as well within the Jewish community... (You may want to fill that one in yourself).

Fanaticism has always been a powerfully malignant force. Fanatic communists kept much of the human race oppressed, and murdered millions, before the Berlin Wall was finally toppled. Fanatic nationalism and anti-Semitism engineered the Holocaust. Suicide bombing of civilians is a genuinely new tactic, but "kamikaze" has been a word in English since the 1940s.

Many contemporary thinkers believe that the proper response to fanaticism is relativism. In other words, they believe that the way to fight fanatics and fanaticism is to deny the possibility of genuine conviction. Peace and tranquility will come when each person understands that they have no more chance of being right than anyone else.

In a utopian world, perhaps everyone would be convinced, and this response might work. But practical strategies have to work in our world. This means that they need to work even if not everyone buys into them. Fanaticism will always be with us. Rather than fantasizing that we can eliminate it entirely, we need to be able to respond to it effectively,

Relativism can diminish fanaticism, but if even one fanatic survives in a relativistic world, he or she will soon be running it. Relativists can't plausibly fight, as they don't know with confidence that the aggressor is wrong. And as Edmund Burke compellingly argued, "All that is required for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing".

There is a middle ground between fanaticism and relativism, and we desperately need to find it, because we need to fight our enemies with all the power at our disposal - but without turning into them. There is a way to tell a fanatic off without being a fanatic oneself, and to resist fanatic terrorists without unleashing our own terror. Lincoln's words are a luminous beacon guiding us to that way. "With firmness in the right" - effective resistance to fanatics can only come from those who have deep-seated convictions, to the point that they willingly risk their lives in defense of those ideals. How are these resistance fighters to be distinguished from those they are fighting? "As God gives us to see the right" - even as we act on the basis of our best perception of the truth, we need to be fully aware of the possibility that we are erring.

Lincoln's formulation can be seen as a reformulation of a key rabbinic dictum. According to the Talmud, the House of Hillel and the House of Shammai argued for three years as to whose positions would have legal force in Judaism. Ultimately, a heavenly voice emerged and said: "These and those are the words of the living God - but the law follows the House of Hillel". The recognition that there is truth on both sides does not mean that one cannot choose between them, and choosing one side does not require one to dismiss the other as baseless.

The Talmud goes further, and says that the House of Hillel merited having the law follow then because "they were pleasant and forbearing, and taught the words of the Shammaites together with their own - even placing the words of the Shammaites before their own". In other words, the House of Hillel never saw their own positions as infallible, or stopped learning from their opponents. In several recorded cases, they were convinced by the Shammaites and reversed their positions. But none of this stopped them from championing their own positions with all the vigor at their command. Lincoln's words, which echo the sentiments of our sages, enable us to act with conviction without having to believe that we are infallible. They allow us to make judgments and act on them, without requiring us to ignore inconvenient facts, and thus they leave open the possibility of reversing our judgments in the light of new evidence. They enable us to use force against our enemies when necessary, without requiring us to dehumanize them.

This Lincoln's Birthday, I urge everyone to read the Second Inaugural and take its message to heart. Take the time to examine your convictions, and to make sure that they result from admirable motives and adequate understanding. That done, we should proceed with malice toward none, with charity toward all, and with firmness in the right - as God give us to see the right.

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