

LONELINESS IS LETHAL

Rabbi Yehoshua Engelman, Israel, Av 5774

“Love the ‘maybe’ ” (Kallah 3) is one of my favourite Talmudic sayings, commensurate with similar advice “Teach yourself to say “I don’t know” lest you be proved false” (Berachot 4a). So many people have certainty regarding what the government of Israel should and shouldn’t do, what Hamas are doing and why, but some doubt may be wise, especially when the fog of war not only prevents reliable information but cannot but cloud one’s vision – strategic, political and moral. Criticism and protest are always necessary, and there is no reason why one cannot protest in the name of one’s doubt just as well as one’s certainty.

It is in that spirit, then, that my intention here is not to advocate a particular course of action so much as to suggest, to the best of my understanding of key sources from the Torah and Talmud, what kind of ‘consciousness’ may be desirable during such dark times as these.

A paragraph in the Torah discusses what should be done when a murder has been committed and the perpetrator is unknown, for in the absence of a recognized culprit there is always the temptation to return to business-as-usual as if no crime had occurred. Here it is:

"If there be found a corpse on the soil that YHVH your God is giving you to inherit, fallen in the field, it not having-become-known who smote him. Then your elders and judges shall go out and measure to the towns surrounding the corpse. The town nearest to the corpse, its elders shall take a she-calf of the herd which has never been worked...take it down to a river... and there break-the-neck of the she-calf... and all the elders of that

town, the ones nearest the corpse, shall wash their hands over the neck-broken calf in the river. Then they shall speak-up and say: Our hands did not shed this blood and our eyes did not see. Atone God for your people who You redeemed and do not accrue clean blood among Your people” and the blood shall be atoned. But you – shall make sure to purge the innocent blood from among you by doing what is right in God’s eyes” (Deuteronomy 21:1-9).

As arcane as this ritual certainly sounds to our modern ears, what is described is a biblical method of atonement for an unsolved murder. The hypothetical situation is as follows: a body has been found murdered and, since no-one knows the identity of the murderer, the responsibility falls on the shoulders of the town closest to the corpse. Why?

A cursory reading of the Torah insinuates that the victim is assumed innocent, which is perhaps the sine-qua-non for meriting the name “victim”. If such is indeed the case then one may likewise assume that he was murdered in cold-blood and thus, were witnesses to come forth saying that, although they cannot identify the killer, they saw from afar that he killed in self-defense and it was the slain-person’s fault, then this ceremony would not be enacted since no atonement would be needed: the slain-person was not innocent, not altogether a “victim”.

However the rabbis in the Talmud understand this law of atonement along very different lines. Wondering about the repeated protestations of the elders of the town, “Our hands did not slay this blood, nor did our eyes see”, they ask why this emphasis – surely the elders and judges of the nearest town have no need to protest their innocence. Aren’t they already beyond suspicion? Yet the Talmud surmises that, in cases such as these, the least suspect may be the most guilty, for the relevant question is not who is the perpetrator, but who could have prevented the murder? And the ones

always responsible for prevention are the elders and judges - the leaders of the community. So under what conditions can they reasonably state that "Our hands did not shed this blood neither did our eyes see"? The Talmud insists that, in order for the elders to lay claim to their own innocence, they need to be able to make the following statement: "We did not see him off without providing food for the journey for him, nor did we allow him to leave without being accompanied". It's a remarkable reading of the Biblical passage. For while the perpetrator's responsibility for the crime is obvious, what, infer the rabbis, may be less obvious but no less significant is the manner in which the community leaders are responsible for the victim too; even when or if the victim has fallen foul of his own misdeed. The Talmud goes further in this direction. It imagines that the slain-person was not even a citizen of the town, but rather a transient wayfarer who passed through the town, who was hungry for food and so picked a fight with someone in order to obtain food, and in return his victim killed him in self-defense.

So what the Talmud offers us for our ethical instruction is an almost impossible condition for atonement by means of the ceremony described in the Torah. According to the Talmud, it would not be easy for anyone in the town, and least of all its leaders, to claim innocence regarding the unsolved murder. Indeed, the town authorities are responsible not only for providing food for anyone who passes through their town, but also for ascertaining that, when the wayfarer leaves, he is accompanied to the outskirts of the town. This little known commandment is seen by Maimonides as the most important of all acts of kindness - "The sages taught that whosoever does not accompany is akin to a murderer... The courts would appoint messengers to accompany a person passing through, and if they do not do so they are seen as murderers" (Laws of Mourning chap. 14). It isn't hard to

understand why Maimonides regards this commandment as the highest form of generosity: when one hosts a stranger and says goodbye at the door one has done an act of kindness, but when one accompanies that person beyond one's own home one is saying: "I enjoy your company, I want to enjoy it more; if you have to go then let me accompany you". One thus gives to the stranger not only one's hospitality, but a sense of value and self-worth. Not only is there no greater kindness, says Maimonides, but one who does not do so is considered a murderer. Or in other words, while this may seem an astonishingly high expectation of the civil authorities, their failure to meet this expectation means they are guilty of turning this wayfarer into a potential murderer *even if they did provide him with food*, by not providing for his need for self-respect and honour. A person who feels respected is unlikely to murder.

Might we, in this context, begin to think again about what may be reasonably construed as our responsibility for all those murders happening in our midst today? The way Israel disengaged from Gaza nine years ago was, after all, anything but respectful. This unilateral move was not an act of caring for the welfare of the people of Gaza, nor was it in any sense concerned with their dignity. Rather, it was as if to say: Gaza is your problem now; we couldn't care less what happens to you.

The situation we're in is of course anything but a simple matter, and I do not know enough to be able to ascertain with certainty that the current situation could have been avoided. Claiming such certainty is not only arrogant but lacks respect for the very other one claims to defend by assuming that one can always control other people through one's own correct actions. One of the things which this current conflict has made evident is that not everyone conforms to our expectations and so,

regardless of one's own actions, no outcome is guaranteed. One's enemy qua enemy is, by very definition, unknown. The experience of enmity is in part caused by a failure to understand the other with whom one does battle. And isn't it precisely this terrifying doubt and lack of understanding - this feeling of being-in-the-dark about the forces opposing us - one of the reasons why so many Israelis insist on Israel being entirely in the right and the Gazans being entirely in the wrong, as if there were no middle ground? These past weeks here in Israel have brought out expressions of great solidarity (possibly as a result of widespread terror), far more, it seems, than in previous conflicts and "operations". But we have also witnessed much internal violence and strife, physical and verbal, from what some define as "extreme fringes" of society, right and left. Both seem enviably certain of themselves. Both cry out aloud "Our hands did not shed this blood". One group seems as certain of its members' innocence as they are certain of the Palestinians' evil murderousness. The other group distances themselves from the carnage by proclaiming "It's not us perpetuating this murder of innocent children, we are the good ones who protest". Too late. In times of war no-one is innocent, even if only by virtue of caring for one's own children more than for others (and who doesn't do this?). Someone who cares less for some human lives than for others is anything but innocent (which translates literally as "I do no harm"), and has lost part of their Tzelem-Elohim, their likeness-to-God. Yet one who does not care more for those close to him has also lost an essential part of their humanity, their Tzelem-Elohim, by reneging on the deeply personal nature of all genuine human affections and relations.

What the elders in the Talmud are able to claim is that: *We did all we could.* We did everything possible so that this wayfarer would not become a threat to others, so that he will not feel the need, physical or emotional, to fight

another person. Can Israel lay claim to those words? Can anyone honestly say “Our hands did not shed this blood”? No one can say “Our hands did not shed this blood”. True, the current situation has many causes, multitudes of causes, roots and roots of the roots. 1967, 1948, 1929, and before that too. But I think it can be agreed upon that Gazans have been segregated and left secluded from connection to the outer world, and Israel has not followed the Talmudic ruling that those with whom one has relations are entitled to respect and dignity. Maimonides emphasizes that even leaving someone alone is akin to murder. Loneliness, he implies, is lethal.

Insistence on moral superiority is itself a type of violence, albeit less immediately dangerous than physical violence, yet not necessarily any less dangerous for that reason. Maybe a day, maybe a week, transpired between the time the wayfarer left town until he became violent, but, according to the Talmud, the elders see themselves as none-the-less responsible if they did not provide the murdered person with a sense of dignity and worth.

So, according to Maimonides almost no-one can claim not to be a murderer. No-one can wash their hands of the blood. But herein lies some glimmerings of hope: for by recognizing one’s own guilt, even for the murderous acts perpetrated by others, one can begin the act of atonement by admitting one’s share in the responsibility for the death of that person and thus, in so doing, one can perhaps restore the dignity to the other that our tradition deems essential if we are to have any chance of peace.