

November 29, 2008, Toldot, The Message of Mumbai

I don't think that there is anyone who was old enough to know what was happening. Who will ever forget the Munich Olympics? As we watched, waiting to find out what would happen to the athletes who were captured and eventually killed. We held our breath hoping that they would be all right, and then came that devastating news, that in fact, the terrorists succeeded in their aim, which was to kill.

And although it has not the same drawn out drama that has fixed the world, what we have seen in the past couple of days has echoes. But it has echoes in a way that I think are important for us as Jews, both to recognize and also to hear the extent to which those echoes have enlarged and in some ways are different from what happened now over 30 years ago. First I want to read you the names, at least as we have them so far, of those who were killed in the Jewish compound, the Jewish Center, more Gabriel Holtzberg, the rabbi from Brooklyn, and his Israeli wife Rivka, an emissary, Leibish Teitelbaum, also a rabbi and Bentzion Chroman, and two unidentified women, all of whom were killed. And of course, the Holtzberg's 2-year-old son, who was saved by the nanny heroically and who now will grow up without parents, although I have no doubt will be embraced by a loving community.

I had intended on this Shabbat to give a speech about Thanksgiving, and I still will, but in a different way. Every time something terrible happens, and this, God knows, is terrible, it emphasizes both our obligation to mourn and our obligation to be grateful for the safety and security that prevails until this moment in our own lives. But this is not an isolated terrible incident. This is not like what happened in the Valley a few years ago when a lone, crazed gunman decided to kill people. This is an organized, strategically planned, carefully thought out operation that shows either a terrorist organization or a governmental organization behind it. And I have no doubt, as the days go on, we will learn more, and I am reluctant to draw conclusions from insufficient information. There are already officials in India and in Israel who are tentatively assigning blame to this or that group or this or that country. I don't know, and I won't say.

But here is what I feel very confident in saying. What we have discovered throughout history, but especially in the last couple hundred years, is that the enemies of the Jewish people sooner or later become the enemies of the world. And that is an astonishing fact. People who hate Jews never just hate Jews. Sooner or later, they will turn their hatred to a wider circle.

Now it seems clear that whoever did this specifically wanted to make sure that the Jews in the center were killed. They were not killed in bombings, they were targeted and shot. But of course, many, many other people died. Not only Jews. Jews, Christians, Hindus, tourists, probably some Muslims as well. Since it was in India, there is a mixed population. In other words, hatred spreads out. It's not only us, although sometimes it's us first, and whatever organization is responsible for this, the same mentality of hatred and fanaticism, cruelty and self-justification will certainly prevail. Whatever their cause, they will see it as so important that slaughtering innocent people doesn't matter.

And that brings us to Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving in origin is a sort of quasi-religious holiday, although not exactly a religious holiday. It doesn't have origins as, for example, Halloween does, and specifically religious celebrations, though it's tied to them. And there is argument among scholars about exactly what the first Thanksgiving was. And the only agreement seems to be that they didn't have Turkey and cranberry sauce.

But one thing we do know is that in time, the Puritan legacy was transmuted into a legacy of religious tolerance that didn't restrict the way people could worship in America, but gave them license to worship as they will as part of this cacophony of religious voices that makes up our country. And that from the very beginning drained some of the venom from religious animosities that still plague the world.

If you say to people there is, first of all, a governmental world that is independent from religious dictates, and a religious world that won't be interfered with, to the extent that we can avoid it, by the government. And now religions, you go and you compete and you make a case. What you get is a proliferation of all sorts of religions, both reasonable and irrational, but you get very little religious violence.

But when you tell people this is the way it must be, it can be no other way, then you have a very dangerous prescription. And when you ally that ideology with political power or the desire for political power, then you have Mumbai, then you have much of the Middle East, then you have much of Bosnia, then you have death, then you have a betrayal of the vision of God.

In this morning's parsha, as in the previous parsha, you have twins who take different religious paths—Jacob and Esau, Isaac and Ishmael. But one thing that you don't have interestingly in the Bible is you have no religious clashes between them. Never does Jacob or Isaac or Ishmael say to the other, I'm going to get you because you believe differently than I do. And in fact, the rabbis say the reason that the Bible condemns idolatry is not because God's so upset that you believe the wrong thing, but because of the lives idolaters lived, it was what they did, not what they thought.

When you have people who believe you must think a certain way, you must be part of a certain group, then the group that is different will always be an enemy. And as you know, for thousands of years “different” meant Jewish. In Muslim lands, in Christian lands, “different” was Jewish. And still to this day, for many people all over the world, despite the tremendous variety of groups of beliefs, of faiths, of practices, still when they think of the difference that threatens them, they think Jewish.

It's a beautiful thing that there are 4,000 Jews in Mumbai. And in fact, I don't know if you saw this, but there was an article this morning in the New York Times talking about HindJews, which is Hindus and Jews, not who practice each other's religions. They explicitly say, it's not that Jews are adopting Hindu practices or Hindus are adopting Jewish practices. Not at all. It's just that they both find that their attitude towards the world, their need to make the world better, their

opposition to Muslim fanaticism, has given them a certain sense of kinship, a certain sense of alliance.

And as one Hindu scholar says, as he concludes the article, what we've discovered is that with 900 million people, no matter how many reincarnations you go through, Jews and Hindus still can't please their mothers. Now that may be, I didn't know that Hindu had a stereotype about their mothers. Go figure. But the point is that he was joking, not the content of the joke, which you're free to take issue with, but write the New York Times, but the idea that different traditions see the world the same way. This is a beautiful thing.

Realize that this is an opening up from what Jewish tradition used to be when we were always the group on the outs and there was no one to make alliances with. And that the world is a much more fluid place. And the world will see once again in Mumbai that people who hate the Jews, deep in their hearts, hate the values that the free world loves. And out of that tragedy, I won't say will come good, but maybe will come some realization about the battle that our people is really fighting in this world and how desperately we need the civilized world of any religious orientation, the civilized world to help us.

Because really, bottom line, you can divide people in lots and lots of different ways, but there are only two kinds of people in this world at this age. And those are people who allow others to be different and those who don't. And the world will survive if the first kind prevails and it will perish if the second does.

So to the extent that we can make alliances and common cause with anybody of any religious orientation in this world who believes the difference is good, that God made people different, just as the Mishna says, where it says the difference between God and a king is a king stamps coins and every one looks the same, but God stamps faces and every one looks different. To the extent that someone can believe that vision as the people who founded this country did, then Thanksgiving is not just an American holiday, but a universal one, a critical one, the holiday on which the future of the world depends.

I hope that you will take some time over the next few days to think about those who perished—our Jewish brothers and sisters, but not only our Jewish brothers and sisters, everyone who died, because they died unwilling martyrs to the intolerance of evil people. And if that renews our faith in the battle for diversity, for tolerance, for belief, that you are allowed to be different, which I must say is a battle that began with Abraham and is still not won, if it renews our faith, then although their deaths were cruel, they will not be in vain. So on this Shabbat of Thanksgiving, we remember them and we ask God to watch over their souls. Shabbat shalom.