

It was an age of oppression. A dictator ruled with terror. Jews, children of Israel, lived in fear. Some were forced into oppressing their own people - and the authorities used people whose brutal character cowed others into submission. Money was redirected to support the regime and the elite who protected the ruler, while most lived in poverty. Some of our people hid their identity, hoping through assimilation to escape the tyrant's wrath. They hoped that the contributions they made to the country in the past would help them. They were wrong. The dictator not only ignored their role, but re-wrote history. As the situation worsened any middle ground became impossible. High and low, all of us were seen as outsiders, betrayers of the country. So horrific and pervasive became the hate that the regime used genocide to achieve its goals. Children were murdered, not only because they were too young to be used for forced labor, but as a means of psychologically terrorizing the people into submission.

Aspects of this scenario echo what we have come to learn about Iraq under Saddam Hussein. But this is not a description of that nation. Nor is it a recollection of Nazi Germany. It is, instead, the Egypt described in the opening chapters of the book of Exodus. Oppressive regimes are not new to the modern world. Indeed, our People was forged in one.

“Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who knew not Joseph.” (Exodus 1:8) A number of commentators suggest that the Pharaoh must have known Joseph, and the contributions he made, but simply chose to ignore them. The late Pinchas Peli observed that Pharaoh was probably the first to realize that the family of Joseph was emerging as a people. No one before him, including the Israelites themselves, had referred to Israel as “a people” (1:9). He knew, therefore, but tried to hide from the consequences, to “know not” the implications and deprive them of a peoplehood even before they themselves became aware of it.

In the Torah we read of the refusal of the Hebrew midwives to kill the first-born baby boys, but their act of civil disobedience is striking largely because most of the people willingly became taskmasters, informers and executioners.

When Moses, who grew up as part of the Egyptian regime, first goes out to the labor camps he is confronted with the reality of a nation given over to cruelty. “He

saw their oppression” (2:11), Torah records. At that moment, Moses does not reflect on the grand scheme of how this mighty nation is propped up by slavery, but reacts simply to the brutality of one person unfairly harming another. “He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kin ... He turned this way and that and, seeing no one about, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand.” (2:12)

Commentators on this passage have long struggled with its implications. This was, after Moses, the lawgiver who brought to the People the command, “You shall not murder.” Yet it is an act of murder that impels him to leave his life of ease and become identified with his oppressed kin. Some commentators defended Moses’ actions - after all, we ought not be surprised that brutal societies breed a commensurate response. Some have been less comfortable with this rationalization, claiming instead that Moses was only acting in self-defense. There are even some sources that condemned Moses for what he did.

But whatever the explanation, all agree that what took place was not a “nice” act. Moses, faced with oppression and brutality, made a harsh choice, for in a world of terror, the response can rarely be morally untainted.

This week’s Torah portion, the first in the book of Exodus, touches on the difficult choices we sometimes face in an oppressive world. Though ours is a tradition of peace, we cannot escape the fact that the opening chapters of Exodus speak of a freedom gained through a series of plagues afflicted upon the Egyptian nation and the ultimate annihilation of Pharaoh’s army. And it begins with the gory killing of an anonymous brutish taskmaster who was beating a slave.

Though not a pleasant choice, Moses’ act was, I believe, a justified one. When it says in Torah “and he saw that there no person there (*va’yar ki ein ish*) he realized that there was no one prepared to rise up and act with decency and humanity. *Bimakom she’ein anashim* - “in a place where there are no people,” Hillel taught 2000 years ago, *hishtadel l’hiyot eish* “strive to be human.” (Pirke Avot) Moses was faced with a world where inhumanity was the norm and injustice was the law. In such a world, where evil is called good and good is illegal, it takes a person of moral vision and courage to decide to act. Moses looked “this way and that”, but his neighbors were paralyzed, passively accepting the violence that surrounded them.

Ahad Ha-am, the great spiritual Zionist of the early twentieth century, claimed that Moses' greatness is that he stood up for the justice not only for his own people, but all. After intervening to stop the Egyptian from harming the Hebrew slave, the next day he intervened in a quarrel between two Hebrews. This is followed by an incident where neither party is of his people, as he helps the daughters of Yitro against shepherds who attacked them. Ahad Ha-am says that in all three cases - between non-Jew and Jew, between two Jews and between two non-Jews - Moses championed the just cause. It is not simply the defense of his own people that hints to his greatness, therefore, but his willingness to rise up against oppression in whatever form it takes.

Though we do not live under the threat of such an evil empire, we are not strangers to a world where oppressive acts are justified and viciousness is glorified. Just two days ago, in Gaza, a young mother killed herself, four Israelis and wounded seven others. She gained access to her target by asking Israeli security personnel for medical help, limping and claiming that she had a metal pin in her leg. In a pre-recorded tape, the suicide bomber justified her violent actions as part of a righteous cause. The fundamental flaw in the logic, of course, is that her attack succeeded by exploiting the Israelis' fundamental humanitarianism. In ancient Egypt the crucial flaw at the heart of its society was that it did not care. This suicide bomber succeeded because the Israelis she murdered did care, treating her with the basic dignity our traditions teach us ought to be afforded all people.

The struggle for Israelis and those of us who believe in what Israel represents, of course, is how to allow for the expression of Palestinian national claims. Is any reversal from a hard-line approach simply a reward for Palestinian violence? Is it possible to fight terror aggressively, while not alienating those who would use peaceful means to create an independent Palestine? In the face of an implacable enemy, who uses brutality as a method of weakening our will, can we justify cruel choices in response?

Some who claim that any act is justified against Palestinians quote the Talmud, "if someone comes to kill you - kill him first." (BT Sanhedrin 72a) This is based on the verse in Torah: "If the thief is found while breaking in and is beaten to death,

there is no bloodguilt in this case” (Exodus 22:1) Rabbi Chaim David Halevy, Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv, was once asked whether this applied to all Palestinians as if they were “breaking in.” He answered that, “It is not permitted to kill an individual even if he is a member of a hostile group, even extremely hostile, as long as this hostility is not expressed in deeds.” (*Evolving Halakah*, Moshe Zemer, Jewish Lights, p.195) His teaching underscores a basic principle of Jewish law - that brutal acts are not justified except in cases of self-defense (the story of Moses and the taskmaster notwithstanding).

The current struggle, however, has created a heated debate in rabbinic circles about what is justified in the face of a violent enemy. Supporters of the most virulent right-wing approach of Zionism have taken positions Reform Jews cannot help but find repugnant. When asked by a soldier in the early 1970s whether it is permissible to kill unarmed civilians, such as women and children, Rabbi Shimon Weiser asserted, “Although in peacetime it is forbidden to kill non-Jews ... in wartime it is a mitzvah to kill them.” (Zemer, p.208) Though written by a rabbi, it is a view that is a desecration of God’s Name - a clear distortion of the meta-halakhic values in Judaism of justice, human dignity and a basic respect for human beings being created in the Divine Image. In response, a number of rabbis argue that Jews must treat Palestinians with the goal of building peaceful relations, based in Torah’s command to treat the stranger who lives amongst us with respect.

So which view is right - that which advocates a vicious response to oppression, or a more humane perspective? For Jews who believe that Jewish law must respond to the historical needs of the day - and the democratic impulses of our age - the answer is clear. What we seek for ourselves we understand as legitimate for others. Palestinians deserve a homeland and they are oppressed. The only debate is the source of that burden. Does responsibility lie at the feet of Israel or does it primarily lie (as I believe it does) with those Palestinians who refuse to accept for Jews what they demand for themselves, and who use a creed of hate and methods of destruction to achieve their ends. Palestinians must eschew violence, and only a disavowal of terror as a political tool should be rewarded.

If brutality is a technique that continues to be used, however, we might do well to recall the response of Moses to the taskmaster. Evil will not be destroyed by good intention nor by signs of passivity. In the Talmud we learn that “those who are merciful to people who deserve cruelty will end up being cruel to people who deserve mercy.” To refuse to counter oppressive regimes and ideologies is, our sages teach, as bad as supporting evil itself. There are times when the greater good can only be accomplished through a show of strength and by striking out at those who engage in brutality. It is a difficult, harsh choice to make, but one that may be the only legitimate one in a cruel world.

When our enemies conduct war in an unjust way, why, then, must we be restrained? Because to do otherwise results in the corruption of our souls. We are Israel - children of those enslaved, who knew the hand of the oppressor. Weaned on the “bread of affliction”, have we returned to power only to feed it to others? That is a bitter herb too hard to swallow - unworthy of our heritage, a desecration of God’s Name, a xenophobic perversion of the Zionist idea of Israel as haven and refuge.

After Moses killed the Egyptian, he was forced to flee. And in the wilderness he encountered God - a God who seeks not the death of sinners, but that they turn from their evil ways. When he returned to Pharaoh he came not to smite the Egyptians, therefore, but to free his people and his oppressors from the tyranny that blinded them to the oppression that defined their society. We must seek the same for ourselves and our enemies - to liberate not only ourselves, but them, from hate.

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*Tanhuma, Devarim 3b*

God told Moses to make war on Sihon, but Israel did not make war: they sent messenger of peace. God said, “I ordered you to make war, but you made overture of peace. “There is not peace for the wicked,” said the Eternal (quoting Isaiah 47:22). Yet God was not angry with them. How great, then, must be the words of peace if Israel disobeyed God for the sake of peace, yet God was not angry with them.