

September 11: What Went Wrong

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September 11th was a global trauma. Thousands of people lost their lives and millions of others saw both their theories of religion and their notions of security shattered. A world presumed to be safe was exposed as extremely dangerous and deadly. Toward the end of the previous century, we assumed that we had launched a post-cold war era of international calm and interconnected prosperity. We hoped that, after a tumultuous 20th century during which two world wars took hundreds of millions of lives, we could settle peacefully into a future of international harmony.

All those hopes were dashed on September 11th, and we began to realize that, in 21st century, the civilized world is facing an unholy alliance between terror and religion. We naively thought that religious wars were a relic of the past, and that a modern secular world which separates religion and state had eliminated murder in the name of Hashem. Sadly, Sept 11 was just the beginning: innocents continue to be murdered by religious fanatics and our world continues its critical struggle against the blight of Islamic fundamentalist terror.

Overwhelmingly, the *broader* Islamic world still shares common cultural, moral, and social values with the West, preaches tolerance toward others and desires to live peacefully with other nations. That being said, Islamic fundamentalist terror draws upon core beliefs of Islam which are being expressed through hostility and hatred toward the infidel. How did civilization get here and what does religion have to say about the jihad being waged against Western values and Western culture?

Muslim rage

In his book entitled "What Went Wrong", a Middle-Eastern historian named Bernard Lewis, correctly identified "Muslim rage" as the root of this modern wave of Anti-Western hostility. For centuries, the Islamic world enjoyed supremacy in the fields of arts, sciences and commerce and was the dominant military power. As Islam rapidly spread both East to Europe and West to Russia and Asia, Muslims had every reason to believe that, within a short period of time, the entire world would convert to their new religion. For the first 700 years since its founding in

the 7th century, there was great reason for Islamic optimism. It was the one "true religion" and it was quickly capturing both territory and human hearts. The prophecies of the Koran appeared to be springing to life.

Gradually, both Islamic supremacy and Islamic influence precipitously declined. First Islam lost its military supremacy, as it was ousted from Europe and from Russia. Afterwards, Western forces invaded its heartland, establishing colonies and outposts of political and economic influence. Finally, over the past 150 years, Western culture has penetrated Islamic societies, unseating old fashioned "true" Muslim values. These cataclysmic shifts generated rage and hostility toward the West in general, and toward America, the seat of modern Western culture, in particular. Though Lewis penned his book before the tragic events of Sept 11th, his prescient warnings erupted with volcanic force on this dark day of tragedy.

Lewis also traces numerous political, social and cultural factors which hampered the progress of Muslim civilization, while also identifying various factors which catapulted Western civilization to its current position of technological and cultural supremacy.

Religious Roots?

Are there *religious* roots to this historical shift? Can *religion* explain why Islam stalled, while a Western world based primarily on Jewish religious ideas, continued to flourish and, eventually, overtook the Islamic world? Are there differences between Judaism and Islam which have accounted for this historical swing?

The Jewish *image* of Hashem

Hashem is compassionate, cares about His creatures and seeks their welfare. All human beings are divine creatures, even those who have not yet recognized Hashem's presence. When any creature of Hashem suffers, He is pained, and He takes absolutely no delight in the suffering of innocents.

Man is divinely empowered with freedom of choice with the hope that he achieves a life of virtue and morality. Those who wander from this

desired path are always afforded the opportunity for teshuva or repentance.

In Hashem's messianic vision the entire world recognizes His presence, conducts moral lives, and enjoys broad peace and prosperity. Those who commit grievous crimes and remain unrepentant are judged and punished, but without delight or vindictive retribution. Sinners aren't considered "unholy" or the "enemies of God" and there is no larger battle between the forces of God and the enemies of God. The only battle lies within the conscience of every man who must choose between obedience and disobedience to Hashem. Hashem isn't hateful, He isn't angry, and he doesn't dislike any of His creatures.

Tikkun Ha'olam

Sadly, the state of our world doesn't always reflect Hashem's desire for human welfare. Poverty, war, repressive political institutions, and natural causes, all ravage humanity introducing hardship and suffering. Often, our world feels asynchronous with the divine will. Hashem desires human happiness, but the world and its human inhabitants don't always cooperate.

Jews are religiously driven to "resolve" this discrepancy between the fallen human condition and the will of Hashem. For a Jew, Tikkun ha'olam isn't just a social project but a theological mission. The march of science and the advance of the human condition are religious crusades. Hashem wants us to improve our condition and to enrich human experience, and human progress is a religious calling.

Avraham was the first to discover a "one God", but not by studying cold and impersonal science. He uncovered a world which was delicately orchestrated to support life and he sensed an intelligent and compassionate Creator who had calibrated His world for human welfare. Avraham craved to spread knowledge of Hashem, but, more so, to mimic His moral behavior. For this reason, he was not just a philosopher, but also a do-gooder who extended prosperity to his ancient world. He ended wars, distributed charity, forged bonds of friendship and loyalty, and stabilized a violent and chaotic world. He began the project of relandscaping a fallen world in the image of divine will.

His descendants have continued his tradition by forging a world of science and progress, supported by enlightened forms of government, and boosted by egalitarian economic systems. They have launched societies which respect the dignity of all religions, races, and genders, and which preserve the supreme value of human life. The progress of Western civilization was driven by a religious impulse- to synchronize the world with the will of a kind and caring G-d.

The image of God in Islam

Throughout the Koran, God is presented as kind and merciful. Yet, He was often misconstrued by various Islamic sects as angry and vengeful. This may not represent mainstream Islamic theology, but throughout history, this portrait of a militant and wrathful God has reared its face in various Islamic fundamentalist movements.

Islam was initially spread through military conflict and through the military conquest of pre-Islamic cultures. Islam casts Mohammed as a prophet but also as a warrior and conqueror. Converts to Islam were perceived as redeemed, while those who didn't embrace this religion belonged to the "house of unbelief" and were portrayed as infidels or enemies of God. The war against these infidels is a holy war and the military defeat of these "enemies of God", is clearly God's interest and agenda. In Islam there is a vengeful or angry quality to God which fundamentalism highlights. God delights in the suffering of infidels or non-Muslims.

Once God is depicted as angry or capricious, the religious motive to improve dysfunction in our world is diminished. If God dislikes his enemies perhaps the world should remain broken, so that those enemies continue to suffer. If God cares only about the true believers, He can be counted upon to deliver prosperity to that limited group and there is little reason to crusade for the general advance of the human condition. Once God's image is tarnished and He is viewed as hateful, or worse, as capricious, there is little religious motivation for change and for progress.

On September 11th it wasn't just the passengers of those four planes who were kidnapped. The "face of Hashem" in our world was kidnapped by those terrorists and continues to be disfigured by Islamic

fundamentalists who murder in His name. Jews must protect the face of a kind and compassionate Hashem in our world. He has mercy on all His creatures and takes no delight in human suffering. He takes great pride when humans employ their God-given creativity to improve their own condition. He is a God of mercy to all His creatures.