

Geulas Yisrael #99 - Emor

Blood Libels and the Perversion of Jewish Values

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Rabbi Jonathan Sacks likened antisemitism to a virus. Unlike bacteria which can survive independently, a virus is completely dependent upon its host. As with all parasites, a virus invades the host, takes control of its functions and siphons off its resources. Like a virus, antisemitism cannot exist on its own, but must be fueled by a cultural narrative. Without a storyline to justify hatred and discrimination, antisemitism cannot be sustained.

Antisemitism is like a virus in a different manner: it constantly mutates. As culture evolves the antisemitic narrative also changes. Ancient antisemitism was theological, the product of a religious battle between paganism and monotheism. By introducing the notion of a one G-d responsible for all reality, we challenged the pagan imagination and contested its freewheeling and hedonistic lifestyle. Paganism portrays a cavalcade of warring gods, none of whom hold human beings morally accountable. Without divine moral surveillance Man is free to pursue his own menial lusts or violent behavior. By asserting a one G-d with moral expectations we called humanity to higher moral ground, demanding a lifestyle of moral integrity and austerity.

A midrash describes the intrusion of pagan vandals into the first mikdash, as it was being dismembered by the Babylonians. They made a beeline for the gold keruvim which were shaped as cherubs. Publicly parading these gold figures, these trespassers mocked us as hypocrites: "evidently, despite Jewish opposition to idol worship, Jews, themselves were addicted to molten images." Of course, we never worshipped the keruvim, but this sorry spectacle highlights how abrasive our message of monotheism was to the ancient pagan imagination.

Enduring tensions with both Greece and Rome were also pivoted upon our severe demands for a life of mitzvot and of moral temperance.

The First Mutation

Gradually, as the world veered toward monotheism, a new antisemitic narrative was required. During the 4th century the Roman empire

converted to Christianity, and during the 7th century Islam began its meteoric rise. Within a few centuries the ancient pagan world of physical images and human-like gods was washed away by the currents of monotheism. We could no longer be hated for our bold theological revolution, since our ideas had pervaded humanity and captured its religious consciousness. Antisemitism, in order to survive, required an updated narrative.

Tragically, Christianity crafted a bogus and noxious story which would lead to thousands of years of violence and torture of Jews. Starting as early as the late 1st century, we were falsely accused of killing Jesus, despite incontrovertible evidence to the contrary. Tragically, this baleful lie, which was only formally repudiated by the church in 1965, would become the base narrative for institutionalized Christian antisemitism throughout the Middle Ages. In particular, beginning with the First Crusade of 1096, this false accusation was employed to rile mobs of angry thugs to murder defenseless Jews, believing that they were rectifying age-old religious crimes perpetrated by the Jews.

Blood Libels

Sadly, this false narrative generated a sub-narrative. Not only did we kill Jesus, but we continued to reenact this heinous crime. In the 12th century the first recorded blood libel was launched in England, as we were accused of killing a Christian child to employ its blood for Pesach matzot. This false accusation, unsubstantiated by any facts, quickly spread throughout Europe, ultimately infecting the Islamic world, where it is still parroted as part of anti-Israeli propaganda. Over the past millennia hundreds of blood libels have been responsible for the countless murder of innocent Jews. It is hard to imagine a lie in the history of Mankind which has been more toxic and murderous. It is a shameful invention which lives in infamy and, sadly, continues to infect those looking for reasons to hate.

Distorted narrative

Tragically the story isn't just baseless, but is also a complete distortion of Judaism. This horrific accusation clashes with our core values and our centuries-old religious culture. This sub-narrative is not just murderous, but insulting to Jewish belief.

The Dignity of Man

In His compassion, Hashem fashioned Man with unique, godlike qualities such as intelligence, cognitive speech, and creativity. These gifts separate us from the animal kingdom and demand that we protect human dignity. By preserving human dignity and by constructing civil societies to protect individual freedom and worthiness, we protect Hashem's divine installment. The Torah's emphasis upon chesed reflects its concern with human dignity. The depletion of human potential through suffering and misfortune is a divine tragedy which can only be rectified through acts of chesed, which restore and redeem this lost divine potential.

Furthermore, not only is the human spirit divine-like, but even the human body was carefully crafted with divine attention. Judaism avoids any bifurcation between body and soul, asserting, instead their unity. Hashem created us as one unified blend of body and soul, each possessing divine qualities and each possessing divine dignity.

Halacha and the Dignity of the Body

For this reason, Jewish respect for the human body was always paramount. Parshat Emor delineates prohibitions of disfiguring the human body during grieving. Though the Torah directly targets Cohanim, the gemara quickly extends this issur to every Jew. בנים אתם לה אלוקים - because we represent Hashem, we take extra precautions not to mutilate the human form. We are expected to live with greater nobility, greater hygiene, and greater dignity. We are ambassadors of Hashem, and, in us, the world must see Hashem and the dignity of צלם אלוקים.

For these reasons, we were strictly forbidden from consuming any blood-human or animal. Since Acharei Mot is so adamant about forbidding consumption of blood, kosher meat requires meticulous salting to drain even minute particles of animal blood. Likewise, the mitzvah of kisu hadam instructs that that many meats can't be processed or eaten until its blood has been covered.

Hashem doesn't want us to become entangled in a world of blood. Humanity has always sensed a mystic draw to the life force of blood, and blood lust has always fascinated the darker parts of the human imagination. Ancient voodoo customs and pagan black magic were pivoted upon blood rituals and blood consumption. Blood fascination

plunges us into a dark underworld of death and black magic. Distancing us from this degrading and disgraceful world, the Torah repeatedly cautions against any intake of blood. We are a nation of dignity and, as servants of Hashem, we respect the human body, avoiding disfiguration and blood obsession.

Additionally, though any pagan worship is unequivocally forbidden, human sacrifice, practiced by the Molech culture, is particularly grotesque and nefarious. The Torah announces that Hashem pays specific attention to punish those who engage in human sacrifice. The entire purpose of the akeidah was to debunk any divine interest in human sacrifice.

We do not sacrifice humans to Hashem, and we certainly don't drink any blood – human or animal. These concepts are anathema to Jewish belief.

Perverting our Narrative

Imagine the horror of medieval European Jews reading the spring-time parshiyot of Acharei Mot, Kedoshim and Emor, which prohibit human sacrifice, bodily defacement and the consumption of blood -all of which threaten the dignity of the human body. Imagine their horror as they faced ridiculous and insulting claims that led to their brutal torture and ruthless murder. If the consequences of these accusations weren't so hideous, they would be laughable. But such is the nature of antisemitism. Not only does hatred of a Jew generate false claims but, ironically, it perverts basic tenets of our religion and culture. Our values were perverted because history was perverted. We were to blame for the perversion of history.

The Perversion of History

Sadly, this perversion of our narrative was forecast in the tochachah, which describes Jewish gallus and the perversion of history. Parshat Ki Tavo describes us being transformed into poisonous "storylines" and into derisive cliches *ולשנינה למשל* . We became fables of describing uncommitted crimes and stereotypes of hatred. Angry mobs were brainwashed that Jews had murdered little children and having been fomented, it was now easy for them to view Jews a sub-human criminals deserving death and suffering.

The warping of Jewish belief and the weaponization of these perversions, was one of the harshest features of gallus. Not only were we dislocated from our homeland and discriminated against, but our own narrative was lifted, twisted, and wielded against us in the name of murder.

Part of our redemption is the dismantling of these propagandist lies and the restoration of an accurate Jewish narrative which inspires the world to higher moral ground. The restoration has begun but, sadly, it is incomplete.