

Rosh Hashanah, 2nd day

September 18, 2012

Jews in our world have more blessings than at almost any other time in Jewish history. There are today only a handful of Jews living under regimes that persecute them and deny them the ability to practice their faith. The majority of Jews in the world live in the United States, where we have unprecedented freedom and respect, and the State of Israel, enjoying the indescribable blessing to Jews everywhere of having a Jewish country. Certainly there have been savage anti-Semitic attacks in France and other places, and we worry about the threat of Iran and Gaza to Israel, but Jews for the most part live in security. However, we have witnessed over the past year and before a wave of attacks on central Jewish observances, notably Milah (circumcision) and Shechitah (kosher slaughter.) In San Francisco, petitioners got a measure on the ballot to completely ban circumcision, a measure thrown out by the courts. In Cologne, Germany, a court ruled that all circumcision on infants was illegal because it denied their right to bodily integrity. A

mohel was actually arrested but the state declined to prosecute. In Denmark a furious debate over permitting circumcision developed in the press, spurred on by a doctor who insists it causes major sexual dysfunction in men. In both these countries the national leadership however committed itself to Jewish religious freedom. In Holland, a bill which would have effectively outlawed Shechitah was pulled after a last-minute compromise.

Now, these efforts are not on the surface based in hatred of Jews and Muslims, whom they also affect. Their talking points are rooted in the effort to spare both humans and animals pain and suffering. Politically their anti-Islam element probably has more resonance with the populace than anti-Judaism, though in any case that is hardly better. But they show gross lack of concern with our ability to practice Judaism. They also come from a loud and growing militant secularist tendency. As The Forward newspaper said, they “reflect a deep-seated secularism in Northern Europe that is becoming increasingly hostile

toward Jewish and Muslim practices.” What can we learn about this from the themes of Rosh Hashanah?

Yesterday and today we read of incidents in the life of Abraham and Sarah. Machzor Lev Shalem points out that the Rabbis could have established as the reading for Rosh Hashanah the creation of the world. Rosh Hashanah is after all the world’s birthday. Instead we read about the beginning of the Jewish people. And the Jewish people begins with a family. After 20 generations of seeing the whole world not live up to His standards, God decides to take an individual family and try to shape it to set an example for the world. Lest this sound overly self-congratulatory for us Jews, I can immediately point out that it is a dysfunctional family. Throughout the life of Abraham and Sarah and those attached to them, they suffer from infertility, extreme domestic discord, tension with and between their children, and highly questionable judgment in their treatment of each other. In short, the Jewish people begins with a family like yours and mine. I feel comfortable saying that almost everybody here has these kinds of stories

in their extended mishpoche. Families are also semi-closed to outsiders. No one can understand your family like you. When someone marries into a family, there is almost always some tension between the old ways of doing things and the newcomer. But families also have stories, traditions, and joyous memories that nobody else can really get. The fact that with Abraham the Torah now begins to focus on a single family, a single people, demonstrates the care society needs to take when imposing its will on others. Secularism is not anti-Semitism, but in its arrogance about the “right” path for modern people to take it can easily morph into it.

Milah is the central rite of the Jewish people. Though technically it is performed on men, Judaism says it represents a brit which includes both men and women. In our Torah reading yesterday it is the very symbol of the continuation of the covenant of Judaism beyond Abraham and Sarah. Isaac is the first child born to a circumcised Abraham, and the first to have a brit milah at 8 days old. Those who are not Jewish can simply not understand or identify with

how important it is to Jews, at least the vast majority of the ones who are serious about their religion. Both the Maccabean revolt and the Bar Kokhba revolt against Rome are said to have begun because of the prohibition of circumcision. Jews have died for this. Families have things that are meaningful to them that outsiders cannot understand. In this case, the counter-argument is that modern people cannot countenance something that hurts children. Indeed, there is new attention to the question of pain during circumcision, and more and more mohalim are considering use of some sort of anesthetic. In addition, I am all for the recent New York State decision to require parental consent for metsitsah b'peh -- oral suction to get rid of blood during a bris -- which should certainly be banned in Jewish law. But there is ingenuousness to many of the arguments. Often the issue that babies have a right to "bodily integrity" is quoted. That is a Greco-Roman idea which is simply a matter of opinion depending on one's cultural point of view, and the use of it in some court decisions is simply cultural imperialism. Furthermore, the damage that circumcision supposedly causes to men's sexual health ignores all the generations of circumcised

men who have done just fine. It is certainly not female circumcision, which causes clear health problems and is much more invasive, and is generally something imposed in male-dominated cultures. And American pediatricians now says that circumcision actually causes clear health benefits! But the truth is Jews do not do it for the health benefits. The attitude of those who would ban circumcision -- in Europe or San Francisco or wherever -- is patronizing. While certainly the problem of religious fanaticism is found throughout the world, there is a growing amount of secular fundamentalism that confidently proclaims there is no God and ignores all the good religion accomplishes in society. The attitude that science is completely objective and is the new God is a dangerous one. There is also a tendency towards anti-Semitism even in current European society, which masks itself in these kinds of measures. One can see that in items from the San Francisco ballot initiative, which included some extremely graphic anti-Semitic images.

With Shechitah the issue is a little more complicated, since the controversial measures require stunning the animal before slaughter for

humanitarian reasons. Although the things you read say that stunning is forbidden in Shechitah, that is not necessarily true. However, since Orthodox opinions reject stunning an animal before slaughter, these laws effectively make life much harder for observant Jews and Muslims in Europe, who have to import their meat from elsewhere.

European liberals and secularists make a big mistake when they think that laws passed for “humanitarian” or rational secular reasons do not reflect old prejudices. When modern Biblical study started, the great German scholar Julius Wellhausen – who claimed he was doing objective historical analysis – came out with theories that considered the ritualistic priestly parts of the Old Testament must be older and more primitive than the ethical concerns of the great Hebrew prophets. That is not completely clear on a historical level, but it does reflect the traditional prejudice of Christian theologians. Those Europeans and Americans who claim to be enlightened and “secular” often give voice to prejudices whose religious origins they scarcely understand. The fact that secular Jews sometimes fight on the same side does not mean these

ideas cannot have anti-Semitic roots. Jews are sometimes more susceptible to prejudice, subconscious or not, against Judaism than non-Jews.

When Angels come to tell Abraham of the impending birth of Isaac, Abraham is recovering from his own brit milah at 99 years of age. It is certainly true that circumcision is practiced in many ways in diverse cultures – so that it is not unique to us, but the meaning we give it as a sign of the brit between God and Abraham’s descendents makes it significant to our Jewish family in ways outsiders cannot understand. This is also true of Shechitah, the special way we slaughter animals both to avoid cruelty and to fulfill Jewish law. May the Jewish people redouble our observance of brit milah and kashrut. Let all of us protest attempts in our country and others to impose prejudiced measures upon us and upon our Muslim neighbors, in the name of a misguided secularist zealotry. It is up to us and our friends throughout the world to fight anti-Semitism even when disguised, so that we have the freedom to worship God she-lo asanu k’goye ha-aratzot v’lo samanu k’mishpchoth

ha-adamah, who made us different from the peoples of other lands and the other families of the earth.

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