

Blood Libels

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The 20th of Sivan, this week, is the anniversary of the Blood Libel at Blois in France in 1171, when the Jewish community of about 40 people (at a time when the total Jewish population of France was no more than a few thousand) was massacred. Half were burnt to death singing the Aleynu prayer as they perished. The great Rabbeynu Tam instituted a fast day to commemorate the tragedy that for many years was adhered to strictly by the Jews of Ashkenaz.

In 1144 at Norwich, Jews were first accused of killing Christian children because it was claimed they needed Christian blood for the Four Cups of Wine at the Passover seder. In Gloucester in 1168, in Bury St. Edmonds in 1181, Bristol in 1183, and most notoriously in Lincoln in 1255, Jews suffered as the result of this stupidly insane and illogical charge. A thirteenth century monk called Rhindfleish claimed that Jews stole communion wafers from churches to beat until the blood of Jesus flowed, and hundreds of Jews were killed to avenge this "crime".

One might think that unexceptional in an era of burning heretics, drowning witches, and torturing people to confess almost anything, but the Blood Libel persisted into the twentieth century. In Kiev in 1913, the unfortunate Baylis was charged with murdering a Christian child for Jewish religious purposes. Although at the trial he was acquitted, the Jewish religion was not! It will come as no surprise that the Blood Libel is making a giant comeback in the Muslim world and is repeated and exaggerated on state-sponsored television throughout that culturally benighted part of our planet.

You may remember the scandal that erupted earlier this year when Professor Toaff was accused of claiming that medieval Jews were guilty of the Blood Libel and he withdrew his book. On closer reading, all he said was that possibly Jews did use dried human blood in medieval cures and charms, and at most might have retaliated for acts of violence against them—and even this was based only on confessions under torture. But the idea that we ever used blood, something forbidden by our laws, is so malevolently false that only depraved minds could conceive it.

We are also a week away from the moment when six-year-old Edgar Mortara was kidnapped by the Catholic Church from his parents in Bologna, Italy in 1858, on the grounds that his Catholic nanny had secretly baptised him. He was never returned. He became a favorite of Pope Pius IX, who ordered and perpetuated the crime. Mortara eventually died in a Belgian monastery.

What I find amazing is that despite the continuous lies and brutalities, the kidnapping, rape, and murder of our men, women, and children by supposedly good Christians, although negative opinions are expressed, nowhere in any major rabbinic authority or source will you find any support for a halachic position that says you do not have to treat non-Jews correctly and morally and according to the law of the land and if necessary in contravention of

Jewish Law.

Throughout the periods of bloody chaos under both Christianity and Islam (accepting the differences) whether it was Rabbeynu Tam in the twelfth century, Rabbi Menahem Meiri in the fourteenth, Rabbi Lowe of Prague in the sixteenth, Rabbi Yechezkel Landau in the eighteenth or Rabbi Yisrael Lipshitz in the nineteenth, they all wrote and spoke out against any evidence of mistreatment, deception or amorality in dealing with non-Jews and our obligations to adhere to "The Law of the Land" (and that would include international law).

Sadly this is no longer the case. Our rabbis seem to get worse as the years roll on. Here is the latest scandal from last week's Jerusalem Post.

All civilians living in Gaza are collectively guilty for Kassam attacks on Sderot, former Sephardi Chief Rabbi Mordechai Eliyahu has written in a letter to Prime Minister Ehud Olmert.

Eliyahu ruled that there was absolutely no moral prohibition against the indiscriminate killing of civilians during a potential massive military offensive on Gaza aimed at stopping the rocket launchings.

The letter, published in Olam Katan [Small World], a weekly pamphlet to be distributed in synagogues nationwide this Friday, cited the Biblical story of the Shechem massacre (Genesis 34) and Maimonides' commentary (Laws of Kings 9, 14) on the story as proof texts for his legal decision.

According to Jewish war ethics, wrote Eliyahu, an entire city holds collective responsibility for the immoral behavior of individuals. In Gaza, the entire populace is responsible because they do nothing to stop the firing of Kassam rockets.

Eliyahu is simply wrong. Collective punishment is not halachically acceptable and Maimonides's position on Shechem has been well challenged. This is not the place to go into details. If Rabbi Eliyahu is going to take a highly contentious and controversial abstract law and apply it to modern conditions, then frankly it is in the same category as the Neturei Karta jokers who argue that all the suffering of the Jewish people in Israel and beyond is because they have dared to pre-empt the Messiah.

I had little respect for the Israeli Chief Rabbinate before this outburst. Even if I give him the benefit of the doubt that he was responding in pain to his suffering constituents in Sederot and the scandalous double standards of others, such abuse of Law and Lore demeans the person and the system. It is a blot on our tradition. No wonder we have stopped fasting over Blood Libels.

While we have a right and an obligation to self-preservation and while charity starts at home, we cannot isolate ourselves. We must meet our

obligations to society in general. And I can say categorically that no truly great rabbi has ever said anything to the contrary.

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