

Heresy

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

This week, after the sad fast of the Ninth of Av, two things cheered me up.

The American women gymnasts won the team gold and the team captain Aly Raisman ended their performance with a flawless dance routine to the sound of Hava Nagilah. Yes, I know the tune has become a cliché, but where else in the world (outside Israel, of course) would a Jewish gymnast stand proud and insist on a manifestly Jewish piece of music?

And this past week hundreds of thousands of Orthodox Jews gathered in New York and in Yad Eliyahu in Israel to celebrate the end of the seven-year cycle of daily Talmud study known as Daf Yomi. There's no way you can really call it serious study—more speed reading than literary analysis. But whatever one's reservations, here is a religion that, for all its faults, glorifies and celebrates study, for its own sake and as a religious obligation, every day of the year, year in year out. The sad part of it is that most Jews have absolutely no idea of what wealth there is in their own religion.

So it is with mixed feelings that I raise an aspect of religious life I am not so proud about.

Way back in time, religious and civil authorities tried to cow their critics into silence by calling them heretics or traitors. Merely suggesting that a ruler or priest was wrong about anything would be enough to have a person tortured to death.

It has always struck me as amazingly enlightened that the Torah has no such notion. Cursing is about as far as the Torah goes towards condemning the use of words in a destructive way. Curses in those days were nothing like the commonplace swearing that everyone is familiar with now. Cursing someone was like a death sentence. Even today in parts of Africa, if the medicine man curses someone he or she apparently goes into a special hut and just dies. To curse God or a leader was an act of total rebellion and disassociation, undermining the foundation of the community. But there's nothing in the Torah against disagreeing civilly with an idea or theological position. Indeed, arguing with or challenging the Almighty seems to have been almost a requirement of the early leaders of our people.

It was the Greek, philosophical emphasis on “correct thought” rather than “correct action” that condemned poor Socrates to death and then spawned a whole culture of theological correctness that had Christian killing Christian over whether Jesus was of God or like God or simply an agent. Our battles, on the other hand, were over relatively mundane issues, such as when the New Year fell or whether rabbis invented rules that Moses knew nothing about.

As the world became more theological, life got more complicated. The Talmud in Sanhedrin gives a list of ideas that define someone as heterodox. To be

precise, holding certain views was, according to them, going to get you into trouble with God and you would forfeit your front row seat in Heaven. But no one was condemned to death for such opinions. What barred one from participating in religious society was public desecration of behavioral rules, not abstract ones or intangible ones like Life After Death, of which the rabbis themselves say, "No human has ever seen it (been there)."

The rabbis two thousand years ago fought hard to preserve a specific kind of Jewish identity against Samaritans, Sadducees, and then Christians. They defined the Jewish position as absolute loyalty to Torah and the rabbinic tradition that coexisted with it. They were fierce proponents of the idea of Life after Death even if they disagreed over definitions. They introduced such terms as Apikorus, derived from the Greek Epicurean, mainly to describe those materialists who opposed the spiritual concept of a higher spiritual world.

It was breaking Jewish Law that really got you into trouble, the Mumar, he who rebelled against living a Torah way of life, that was the worst term of exclusion. Indeed to this day, it is the Mumar who creates more halachic problems than the Kofer (the same word is used in Islam), one who ideologically rejects. It is one thing to doubt. It is another to completely discount. In the Passover Haggadah, for all the odium we heap on the Rasha, the bad son, for cutting himself off, I have yet to read an opinion that says we take him out and burn him at the stake. (He deserves some credit for at least being there.)

The Talmud also discusses the Zaken Mamre, the Rebellious Elder. If a halachic authority disagreed with the majority vote, that was his business, and indeed his minority opinion would be recorded for posterity. Only if he continued to preach and teach his minority opinion as the accepted law was he asked to leave the community and peddle his wares elsewhere. But expressing a view was not in itself a punishable offense. At least in this world, if not the next!

But sadly, over time we Jews adopted a witch hunting mentality. The philosophical books of Maimonides were burnt. In the aftermath of the Shabbtai Zvi and Frank rebellions against accepted practice, a whole wave of anti-Kabbalist heresy hunters scoured Europe for offenders. Great rabbis like Emden and Eybeschütz hurled insults at each other. Chasidim were officially banned, twice. Moshe Luzzato was slapped with a gag, and all of a sudden searching for heretics became a popular pastime amongst us too.

How sad. The very name calling, the unnecessary hatred, Sinat Chinam it is called, that caused the destruction of two Temples, two States, now became the common currency of Orthodoxy, battling to protect itself from the Enlightenment and Reform. Once the disease catches, it spreads. Anti-Zionist Orthodox Jews hurl insults at Zionist Orthodox Jews. The latest disgusting defacement of Yad VaShem, indeed the assassination of Rabin, came from Orthodox Jews. Different sects of Chasidim insult each other, and nowadays the inevitable splits within dynasties generate violence and hatred. Once you start dehumanizing your enemies, you end up dehumanizing your friends.

It is amusing that when I write something that is simply not the party line amongst the Orthodox, I get epithets such as Apikorus thrown at me. My shoulders are broad and insults, like curses, run off me like water off a duck's back. "Sticks and stones" and all that. But it is symptomatic of a mental pettiness that actually is itself a contradiction of Torah values. To scream "heretic" is not an argument. It is a sign of that person's own limitations.