

Religious Gangsters

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I am saddened but not surprised by the news that the son of the Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Israel, Shlomo Amar, has been arrested for beating up an Orthodox young man who offended by communicating with Amar's unmarried daughter "unofficially". Meir Amar, the son, is something of a suspect character altogether, but the Chief Rabbi's wife, Mazal, has also been indicted.

Sadly, this sort of thing has been going on for a very long time in both the Orthodox Sephardi and Ashkenazi world, but everyone has been turning a blind eye, partly because it is usually the rich who beat up the poor. And in the world at large there are "honor killings" virtually daily by Islamic extremists, so that a beating that leaves the kid alive hardly seems to matter.

But it's not only that. Going back to Pinchas in the Torah, there is a long tradition of religious zealotry and, indeed, lawlessness.

In Numbers Chapter 25, Zimri ben Salu, together with his Midianite princess, defy Moshe and Aharon by copulating publicly. Moshe and Aharon seem incapable of responding. They just stand there with tears running down their faces. A young priest, Pinchas, steps forward, grabs a spear, and runs the two offenders through their midriffs.

According to the Midrash, the heads of the tribes thought that Pinchas, as a priest and as a junior in the hierarchy, had no right to attack someone higher up the scale. He was not necessarily morally wrong, but just politically inept in going beyond his powers and status, and legally wrong in taking the law into his own hands without due process.

God then intervenes to give him His blessing and, by implication, to allow exceptional measures to deal with exceptional circumstances.

This is the basis of a long tradition mentioned in the Talmud that the hot-headed young priests acted as a sort of morality squad enforcing appropriate behavior with gang methods, to keep those who strayed in line. They would go around wreaking vengeance for inappropriate (not necessarily illegal) actions, smashing heads, even killing, just like Islamic enforcers of Shariah in more primitive societies do. And, I hate to have to admit it, so, too, do gangs of zealots, or so-called Guardians of Morality, in some very Orthodox communities.

There is a tradition of commentators counterbalancing this approach by implying that zealotry is not something that God approves of. One view has it that when Moses is commanded to attack the Midianites and destroy them, in Chapter 31, he sends the army in and Pinchas ben Elazar is sent to fight with them. The role of a priest was not to fight. The "Anointed Priest for War"

had various religious functions in preparation for battle. He represented the spirit rather than action. Was Pinchas sent to fight so that seeing war and its horrors would cool his lust for killing? Or was this the way of channeling his aggression by forcing him into a ceremonial role? Either way, he was forced to face the negative aspect of zealotry and the idea that his was an exceptional "deviation" is reinforced.

But people who are sick or corrupt do not listen either to their own rabbis or their own tradition. They are blinded by zealotry (if we give them the benefit of the doubt) or simply by gross criminal behavior, to call a spade a spade. Sadly, most religions have their criminals. But to sanction their brutality with spurious religious arguments or to think that this is the way to ensure religious continuity is just sick (or deluded).

It is a sign of our times that the violence around us has so corrupted our religion that so many now think that being violent, whether in the protection of a sister or in opposition to democratic rule, is religiously acceptable. It is not. It is an affront to everything God represents and our Torah teaches. This is, to my mind, the real heresy—not exactly how a person understands dead people coming back to earth, but how you treat the living!

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