

Mumbai

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The tragic massacre by Muslim fanatics, of innocents in the Chabad/Lubavitch House in Mumbai, reminds us of two things. "Hatred," as the Talmud says, "distorts the mind," and spews evil out randomly. And who but Chabad would have a centre in a place like Mumbai, hardly a hotbed of Jewish religious life.

What more is there to be said about Islamic terror that has not already been said? That it has too many apologists in the so-called civilized world? The sort of facile pseudo-psychology that excused crime, because decadent capitalist societies caused it, has transmuted into the apologetic excuse that the perpetrators have been pushed into their crimes because of the errors of the west. The victims are to blame simply for the accident of being there.

I wonder if you noticed how it took two days before there was any mention in the Indian media of Jewish victims in Mumbai. Whenever local Indian commentators were asked about it they responded with a blank stare or simply moved on to another topic. There was something strange about their refusal to talk about Jews. Since Hindus are traditionally sympathetic to Jews, one is inclined to conclude that the combination of leftwing intellectual bias and rightwing religious primitivism were in their usual state of licentious cohabitation.

Chabad House was described as an outreach organization, which is not correct. It is an inreach organization, one that reaches to other Jews, who are technically part of the same ethnic/religious grouping. Chabad's presence around the world is precisely to cater to the needs of Jews who are either on the move or who have moved out altogether. If one hears that there is a rabbi in Timbuktu, or along the banks of the Orinoco, or halfway up the Himalayas, you can be sure he will be Chabad, rather than Satmar or Belz, or even one of the other "inreach/outreach" organizations. They are hardly a proselytizing organization like, say, the Mormons, though their general inclusive atmosphere means that converts find them a more than unusually conducive and welcoming group within Judaism.

After a summer of bad press over Chabad Rubashkin abattoirs in Postville, this tragedy brings back to the foreground the altogether different and praiseworthy aspect of Chabad, which like any people, religion, or movement, has its saints and its sinners. I can think of no other organization in Judaism that consistently finds hundreds of willing young men and women so utterly devoted and dedicated to saving Jewish souls, willing to travel with their families to the strangest and often remotest of black holes. The late Lubavitcher Rebbe always used to speak of his followers as foot soldiers ready to obey his superior orders and go where they were sent. No other group succeeds in reproducing such good humored, smiling dedication in so many of its members.

I have always been fascinated by the fact that no matter how ludicrous one's ideology, if one presents it with dedication and passion, the most offensive of ideas can sound appealing. Virtually all Jewish Orthodox inreach (baal teshuva) organizations fall into this category. They are essentially absolutist and fundamentalist. They have a well-defined religious framework of disciplined behavior and thought that acts as a safeguard and protective structure for the ordinary, moderately educated foot soldiers.

So I wonder if, in fact, the issue is really one of ideology at all. Religion is often a matter of comfort, of feeling secure, loved, and belonging. We are tribal creatures. It is true each tribe has its own characteristics, but it is this sense of belonging and loyalty that can persuade many of us to believe in almost anything. As society becomes larger and more impersonal, people turn to smaller groups for security and identity.

Perhaps it is this that meets the needs of so many, rather than any doctrine or belief system. Perhaps this explains why sometimes religion leads to evil behavior. Men and women are not in it for truths or morals, but to be part of a tribe, a like-minded group with its own uniform and outward signs of belonging. That is what counts, and Chabad is brilliant at doing just that.

Although Chabad may appear to be selling ideology, they are marketing it with this sense of acceptance and belonging. This is what gives them the security that enables Chabad foot soldiers to go beyond the religious comfort zone. And that is what they were doing in Mumbai.

Very often they are the only visible Jews around, and sometimes they pay the price. In Mumbai we saw once again the two faces of religion and it seems obvious to me which is superior in every way.