

Negativity

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Looking back at my posts over recent weeks, I am reminded of how easy it is to fall into the trap of feeling a victim. And inevitably, this feeling of being under attack distorts one's perspective. Of course I respond to attacks on Jews. I defend our religion and I defend Israel when I feel the attacks are dishonest or unfair. I have this obligation, duty, and mission that I feel very good about. And yet I know full well there is a lot to criticize in the religion I love and in the country that commands my devotion.

Years ago I participated in a British television religious documentary series in which a Jew, a Christian, and a Muslim were invited to discuss some important issues together and separately. The encounter was civilized and interesting, but in the end merely anodyne and, I suspect, rather boring. You see every speaker airbrushed his own religion; as a result it was simply an exercise in grandstanding.

I had initially intended to be honest and in addition to all the positive and wonderful things I love about Judaism, I was going to mention its lacunae: the areas where its followers failed to live up to its standards, contemplated their own navels and dismissed others, put power and money over ideals, self-preservation over truth, and conformity and blind obedience to dogma over intellectual honesty. I had wanted to confess that I thought the treatment of women in Orthodox circles still left a lot to be desired; that rabbinic authority was too often corrupt and self-serving, that observance of details had superseded spiritual ecstasy, that materialism had distorted and devalued almost every area of Jewish life, that social control and manipulation had become the be all and end all of huge swathes of Jewish life.

Of course I knew the reasons for all this. I knew that anyone under attack becomes defensive, that thousands of years of anti-Semitism inevitably had left us with huge chips on both our shoulders, that, as with any family, loyalty distorts vision and objectivity. Yes, I was going to admit our faults and paint an honest picture rather than pretend that everything was rosy in our garden.

But then I listened to the lovely, gentle Muslim Imam, toward whom I had felt so warmly in the meetings planning the series, who spoke before me. The subject of our first program was the treatment of women in our respective religions. He declared to the cameras how wonderful Islam was for women, how free they were, treated as complete equals, and living in a veritable state of perfect bliss. He declared there was nothing amiss at all with life for women anywhere in the Muslim world and all good Muslim women would tell me how happy they were with their lot.

As I listened with incredulity, knowing something of the lives of women stoned to death for suspected adultery, victims of rape or of honor killings,

unable to act without a husband's approval, or vote or drive or pursue an education or work. Not everywhere in the Muslim world, admittedly, but in plenty of places. At that moment I thought, "Well blow me down; if that's what he is saying about Islam, when I know the reality is nothing like that, why should I wash our dirty linen in public if everyone else is claiming he has none?"

And so it was. I did the same as he did. I lied and I argued that Judaism, too, did not discriminate in any way. But I thought to myself that I was doing it for the right reason. But I have felt guilty about it ever since. Actually, not guilty. Guilt, other than the recognition of having done wrong, is not at all a healthy emotion if it lingers; it is destructive. But I do regret that I was not honest.

So now, as I look back at my polemics, I can see how easily I have fallen into the trap of anger with Islam and with Muslims who preach hatred, and to extrapolate from their sick minds when I should have been more sensitive to the fact that there are abusers of every religion within their own ranks and at the same time many fine upright and spiritual practitioners who must not be tarred with the same brush.

I have heard plenty of horrible ideas come out of the mouths of rabbis and all kinds of Jews, no less disturbing in their way than things I hear from Islamofascists. If our extremists do not slit innocent throats, still, I have seen enough religious aggression in sectors of Judaism, directed at insiders and outsiders, to know that it's a fine line, and given the circumstances and opportunities, the disease of religious fascism is contagious.

I know wonderful Muslims who are exceptional human beings and, in my opinion, beloved of God and closer to God than many Jews I know. But I feel how easy it is to fall into the trap of condemning whole peoples and religions. Others do it of course but I think we need to try even harder not to.

We are all in pain for one reason or another; we must not let this pain obscure our shared humanity and respect for individuals who respect us. I know I have so often repeated this but I must do so again. We are commanded in the Torah to remember, but never to hate. We can realize that we have enemies, but to assume all humans are like that, or to hate indiscriminately, or to think we are the only ones suffering, is a betrayal of our Jewish values. We have celebrated the joys of life on Purim. We are heading towards the delights of Pesach. Our culture is one in which joy trumps pain every time, so let us be happy, revel in what we have, and "not let the bastards get us down."