

I Accuse

J'Accuse! was the title of Emile Zola's condemnation of French anti-Semitism in the Dreyfus affair. I accuse human beings who ought to know better of abrogating their responsibility to other human beings. From Cain's story we learn that humans are capable of gratuitous violence. And here we are thousands of years later and still almost every day brings another story from around the world, from every culture, from every religion and anti-religion of brutal, pointless crimes in which innocent lives are destroyed.

We live in a culture where we seek blame more than explanation, condemnation rather than understanding. It's always someone else's fault. Thus we try to turn the blame away from ourselves, onto others. It is one thing when the scapegoat is an animal, quite another when it is a human or humans.

Religious leaders of all kinds have always used disasters to blame the other. A tragedy in Israel? It's the fault of the secular. A catastrophe? Blame the Crusaders if you are Muslim and Muslims if you are Christian. The Middle East? It is all his or her fault. The British singer Amy Winehouse, who died recently, was a sad example of the dangers of certain popular lifestyles and values. Sadder still that some sick Irish blogger blamed her death on her being Jewish/Israeli (it's all the same to some). In a new variation of the Blood Libel, he argued that she was typical of Israel—arrogant, brutal, and ultimately self-destructive, and she had to go.

Last month a mystical rabbi in Israel (another worker of miracles and investment guru to the superstitious) was stabbed to death by an outwardly pious Jew. Was he mad or sick? Did the miracle worker promise him something he couldn't fulfill? Maybe. But there are millions of disappointed humans who do not resort to murder. We must blame someone. So let's blame secular values, perverted religious values.

An innocent Jewish child was abducted and murdered in Brooklyn by another Jew. It must be the fault of television, of sexual corruption, of Gay Marriage. I don't need to rehash the catalogue of gratuitous death on a massive scale, in both the civilized and uncivilized world. But what disturbs me most of all is that too many religious leaders who ought to know better are to blame for not doing more to prevent violence and on the contrary, see the cause everywhere except at their own doorstep.

The Biblical law of the eglah arufa says (Deuteronomy 21) that when one finds a dead body and no evidence of who committed the crime, the nearest city symbolically "accepts the blame". The ancient custom has a very modern application. Even when we know who the murderer is, I suggest we also symbolically should share in the blame, not by blaming others but by asking ourselves what we might have done to avoid it and whether there might not be something wrong with our society that enabled it to happen. It may well be that the act was one of a deranged, unbalanced personality. Were we at fault for not seeing the problem? Perhaps we missed the signs. Perhaps we made weapons too accessible. I am not suggesting a specific issue, a specific

cause, or even that there was one.

I can't claim to have answers. Indeed seeking answers is often futile. It is behavior that counts. But all tragedies have lessons. I can recognize when leadership has failed and it failed as horribly in Charedi Brooklyn as it has elsewhere. We can all always benefit from a little introspection but the very leaders who tell us important it is are often the ones who do least of it.

I have it on very, very good authority that religious Jews, even well known rabbis knew about the molester. That he had tried to lure kids into his car before and even at one stage was given a job out of town in order to keep him away. But still rabbinic leadership prevaricated, turned blind eyes in precisely the same way as the Catholic Church has to its sexual abuse problems. This is not what I call religious leadership. It is abdication. And proof, if proof were necessary, that neither learning nor authority guarantee ethical or responsible leadership. Just because a person is religious it doesn't necessarily mean he is ethical. It should. But it doesn't.

Wherever we look we see a troubled world, a troubled society, a troubled people. My father often quoted a witticism he heard from his childhood friend Abba Eban, "We Jews are just the same as everyone else, only more so." We often think we have no murderers, no child molesters, no drunks, or hookers. But it's not true. We have all the vices. And one of the worst is standing by while others are abused.

I will fast and feel sad on the Ninth of Av, not because God abandoned us, but because too many of us have abandoned ourselves. It needn't be that way.