

Fear and Trembling

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

They are called the Yamim Noraim, the Days of Awe, these ten days from Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kipur. But I would argue that the difference between the two holidays is often overlooked.

Yom Kipur is when each one of us, as an individual, is figuratively judged. Rosh Hashanah on the other hand is when the nation is assessed. It is true there is an overlap of ideas in our texts and liturgy. But if one goes back to the original Biblical commands, one sees a clear difference. Yom HaZikaron, Yom Zichron Teruah, these are the words used for what we now call Rosh Hashanah, the Day of Memory, the day of memory through the shofar. Later the association with creation, calendar, and national time added to the idea that this occasion is about us as a people and our place in the world.

The Torah talking about Rosh Hashanah tells to remember, but remember what? The Torah doesn't specify. Are we remembering God, or asking God to remember us? The shofar was used in the wilderness, and later in the Temple, to summon the people together, to warn of war or danger and catastrophe.

The shofar traditionally had three sounds. The Shevarim, three blasts, was like weeping, the sound of tragedy. It is not specified in the Torah. The six or nine pip Teruah was an alarm. Only the Teruah is mentioned in the Bible as a sound, as a noun. The Tekiah, is only used as verb. It is tradition that gave it the single blast sound of its own. Of all the sounds, the Teruah, the alarm, is the one that resonates with me this year more than any Rosh Hashanah I can recall. I am frightened. Not for me, but for my people.

I just do not have any confidence in our leadership. Frankly, this applies to all of our leadership, but specifically to our political leadership. Are they any worse than anyone else? Probably not, but politicians do not set a very high bar. I see the Prime Minister and Defense Minister of Israel argue forcefully and urgently for striking Iran's nuclear facilities. Do they really know what they are doing? Could they be making an arrogant, disastrous mistake?

In theory, they have every right to attack preemptively. Jewish law allows it. The Iranian leadership has been very publicly expressing its desire to wipe Israel off the map. If the rest of the world does not take Iran seriously, we know from our own experience that you cannot take that kind of risk with that kind of madman. It happened before. Whether it was Hitler's dream of a Thousand-Year Reich or the Shias' messianic desire to cause the apocalypse that will bring the Mahdi, the Twelfth Imam, back to earth. They both share an irrational maniacal determination to bring the whole world crashing down over their heads, regardless of any fallout, collateral damage or loss of life including their own. Remember how Iran sent untrained, unarmed youngsters into the minefields of Iraq.

The threat has been expressed. The missiles have been tested. The Iranian leadership has flaunted it to the so-called unaligned countries (who are aligned only in being aligned against Israel, with the dramatic and gutsy exception of Canada). President Obama has adopted the appeasement of a Chamberlain. Even if here is a change of president, and Romney is elected, I cannot see the State Department agreeing to a strike in Iran any more than it will ever accept Jerusalem as Israel's capital. Dogma is dogma, whether in Washington or Teheran.

So should Israel strike, the way it demolished Osirak in Iraq or Syria's nascent program? The strongest argument I have heard against is that it will destroy the Iranian opposition, which will unite against outside aggression. Even the Iranian opposition that so many in the West naively look to with such expectation is as anti-Israel as Ahmadinejad. And there is nothing like an assault on Iranian pride to ensure they will unite against the outsider. Practically, the facilities are buried deep and scattered; there is no guarantee the strike will succeed in anything but delaying the inevitable. It would certainly unite the world against Israel, for which it seems to need little excuse. If Israel does try to attack, this time Hezbollah and Hamas have both been primed to retaliate. We saw the damage Hezbollah caused in the last war, and the showers of rockets Gaza has unleashed on Netivot and Ashkelon. They have acquired much more destructive missiles since.

Once upon a time, one had absolute confidence in Israel's armed forces. Even today, they are trusted in Israel more than any other institution. But they are no longer as infallible as they once were. We have seen its limitations, even on the small scale and limited battlefields of Lebanon. Besides, many of Israel's top experts in the military and intelligence strongly disagree about the possibilities of success, or indeed the need to take the risk.

It is argued that Iran would not send over missiles that would probably kill thousands of Arabs, Muslims, or Palestinians. But when, throughout history and certainly this century, they ever held back from killing their own in vast numbers in pursuit of their own specific goals? Isn't Syria proof enough?

I don't know what Netanyahu and Barack are planning to do. They are ramping up the rhetoric, and lord only knows what the consequences will be. I am no expert. Perhaps they are right. Maybe it is a tactic to put pressure on the USA. Maybe it is all a game. I have no accurate firsthand information. What do I know? Is it just bellicose posturing, or does it mean a strike with all the frightening consequences? Are the consequences of not acting worse? I feel so helpless. I am so helpless.

That is why I will stand trembling before God, hoping that God will remember us and somehow either intervene or inspire our mediocre leadership with a new spirit, one that will reconcile and heal the conflict, both with the Palestinians and humanity in general. At the same time, in my helplessness, I will remember God and use our ancient prayers and sounds to give me strength while I pray that He "remembers" us too.

May we all have a sweet and peaceful year.