

Women and Children in War

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I have been invited to speak at a forum to be held at the United Nations on the suffering and abuse of women and children in war zones, specifically but not exclusively, in Africa. When I tried to find out why I had been invited to speak altogether, and particularly on a subject I have no expertise on, I was told that they needed someone who would actually speak his mind in the face of diplomats and United Nations professionals who either spout hot air or press personal agendas. I was flattered by the realization that my tendency to say what I thought regardless of the consequences might not be the self-destructive handicap people have often warned me it was.

So I was beginning to feel a little bit smug, even fancied myself as following in the footsteps of the illustrious Biblical prophets who got into trouble all the time for saying the unpopular thing and criticizing establishments. But then an awesome, heavy, and very depressing burden, close to despair, descended upon me. For I started to recall the cases and situations in recent years of women raped as a tool of war, of children recruited to maim and kill other children and adults. I thought of countries where as we speak children are being tortured and mutilated and murdered simply for belonging to families that oppose the regime or the local Mullahs; Syria, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Mali, Myanmar, Zimbabwe, The Central African Republic, Sudan and Congo. I saw again in my mind the images from the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Congo, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Darfur. I came to feel that humanity was so overwhelmingly evil that it was simply pointless to speak out against the enormity of the crimes.

There are indeed Just Wars. But there is no such thing as good war. No fighting without mutilation or death. No bombing without collateral or incidental mayhem. Yet we have become so inured to suffering. We see it every day on our screens of every sort, size, and dimension. We just look and carry on munching our snacks or drinking our tea, very much as T.S. Eliot (no mean hater himself) said in *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, "Do I dare disturb the universe?" But "in the room the women come and go, talking about Michelangelo."

Forget war zones, children are abducted off the streets of apparently civilized, law-abiding states and disappear. Many are kidnapped and many more have run away from abusive homes. Who knows how many survive? Children are raped in front of cameras for the pornography industry. More than we care to acknowledge are sexually abused by close relatives. Drug gangs torture and kill. Teenage toughs shoot randomly at innocent city dwellers. The violence and crude sex that flood homes with televisions and computers simply beggars imagination, and is exponentially greater than anything one could see fifty years ago. What could I say that had not been said? What was the point, if not empty self-congratulation?

Perhaps the Catholics are right. It is original sin. Ever since humanity

"fell" in the Garden of Eden, we are all basically evil. Except that as a Jew I believe the Biblical narrative merely tells us that humans are capable of making the wrong choices with disastrous results. With guidance and self-discipline we can overcome that part of us that inclines to evil. It is not that we humans are essentially evil.

In a recent book *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, Steven Pinker has argued that we are indeed getting better. He points to tremendous advances in health, agriculture, and technology. It is true many of the war zones of Africa have been calmed. But new ones sprout all the time. Rape is endemic in South Africa and female mutilation widespread. Pinker is not persuasive. It is his most disappointing book to date. The essential human mentality still seems stuck in the Neanderthal period. I often hear it said that the Law of Moses is out of date, but I think it is even more relevant than it ever was.

It has infected religions too. The very forces that we expected to offer an antidote now show all the signs of moral decay. Every religion is guilty of sexual abuse. Power, it seems, corrupts religions every bit as much as politics. You cannot compare humiliation to torture, but I cannot begin to tell you how many times I have encountered good Jewish women humiliated by religious courts of males who have no sensitivity whatsoever and wash their hands of responsibility by falling back on the law. Men and would be converts too. Yet, as the Bible says in Exodus 21:21, "You shall not afflict any widow, or orphaned child. If you afflict them in any way and they cry to Me, I will surely hear their cry."

I wonder if we Jews are not so preoccupied with our own survival that we do not pay enough attention to what evil is being done elsewhere. What are we doing about it? What can we do about it all?

Shall we protest to our religious leaders? Like Kremlin dictators, they hide behind their walls and their bureaucracies. Pass UN motions? Hundreds have been passed and not one has done anything. Press our governments to act? They cannot even solve their own administrative problems or see beyond their own self-interest. And we watch it all placidly in front of our screens and tut-tut as we return to our popcorn and coke. This surely must be the times the Mishna referred to "the generation is like a dog". It defecates in public; it returns to its own sick; and is led by whoever offers a bigger bone.

What can we do? The one thing we cannot do is to remain silent. You surely know Edmund Burke's famous phrase: "All it takes for evil to triumph is for a few good men to do nothing."

The mystics amongst us know that no breath, no word is uttered in vain. How or where it all helps I do not know but I believe it must. I, we, need to find and take whatever opportunities we can to cry out, to howl into the wind, even if the wind blows our tears back in our faces. Do not be silent good men and women. "For the sake of Zion, I cannot remain silent." And neither should you.