

Accountability, Hezbollah, et al

Rabbi Basil Herring –

Basil Herring. the essential and defining distinction between Judaism and Christianity. I never realized this point fully until a few years ago when I happened to see a bumper sticker that read "Christians are not perfect. Just forgiven." What that line taught me was that it is Judaism that insists that it is just not good enough to do what is wrong, or to be less than "perfect," in the expectation that somehow you will be forgiven because there is a so-called suffering savior who cleanses you or takes on your case. Selichah u-mechilah, forgiveness and amnesty are always available to us. But that is only if we are fully ready to go through a genuine process of teshuvah, or repentance, leading to profound moral and spiritual self-betterment.

Bravo, Mr. President. Over the last several days you, and through you the United States, have unambiguously and forthrightly reaffirmed the principal that all of us, without exception, be we individuals, associations, communities, or nations, whether we act in concert with others or entirely on our own, as social animals or as creatures of God, are all of us accountable for our actions, be they deeds of commission or omission, properly called to account for what we have wrought, for the harm we may have caused, the injustices we may have brought about, the moral failures which our actions, if not our words, might bespeak. By swiftly, and apparently effectively, launching U.S. missiles to destroy or at least damage those who planned and carried out murderous bombings at United States Embassies and the killings of American and allied lives, be they at home or abroad, over the days and years past, the United States, represented by yourself, has unambiguously, proudly and as far as I am concerned, entirely correctly, made it clear just where this country stands. Specifically, that it takes its place on the side not just of the rule of domestic and international law, but also of the fundamental importance of ensuring justice and equity. As Cicero put it in that celebrated Latin phrase coined just about 1900 years ago, "Noxiae puena par esto," "let the punishment fit the crime!" In a word, the actions of the United States over these days past, under you, Mr. President, has unmistakably underlined the central significance of "accountability."

What kind of world would it be, after all, if amoral terrorists such as the Hizbullah or Islamic Holy War were free to kill and maim and destroy innocent life in Jerusalem, or Northern Ireland or New York, with impunity? Where despicable religious fanatics such as those in Teheran and the Sudan might feel empowered to wreak mayhem with weapons of biological or nuclear mass destruction, so as to impose their creed or catechism on the infidels of their definition and choice? Where impoverished scientists of imploded superpowers such as Russia were unhindered and unfettered in their schemes to sell missile technology to rogue States allowing them to then blackmail and undermine neighboring and even distant States? Clearly such a world would not be one in which any of us would be able to sleep soundly and unafraid in our beds every night. And while few, if any, in this country would happily welcome its role as policeman to the world, none of sound conscience can deny that history has in this century thrust upon the United States a historic responsibility to lead the world in defense of liberty and freedom, in defiance of tyranny and evil. And God knows that in this bloody century such commodities have not been in short supply. We applaud you, therefore, Mr. President, for upholding before all the world the rule of law, and of accountability.

For such is human nature, not just for some far-away terrorist in a God-forsaken bomb factory, but in our own thinking so much closer to home. How easily we can delude ourselves into thinking that we can do what we desire, and somehow get away with it. That somehow we can erect a wall in our lives between truth and consequences, action and reaction, crime and punishment. That we can indulge our desires or our fantasies, and not have to pay the piper. How many of us, after all, harbor the illusion deep down that in spite of what conscience tells us, we can get away with what law or morality forbid because, as the rabbinic tradition puts it, we can safely subscribe to the delusion that ultimately leit din veleit dayyan, "there is neither judgment nor judge," so "what the heck."

Interestingly enough, this very issue is to my mind perhaps the essential and defining distinction between Judaism and Christianity. I never realized this point fully until a few years ago when I happened to see a bumper sticker that read "Christians are not perfect. Just forgiven." What that line taught me was that it is Judaism that insists that it is just not good enough to do what is wrong, or to be less than "perfect," in the expectation that somehow you will be forgiven because there is a so-called suffering savior who cleanses you or takes on your case. What our Torah and tradition teach us instead, as the familiar expression of the Berich Shmeih, coined in medieval Catholic Spain puts it, lo al bar elahin samichna, Awe Jews do put our trust of salvation in a so-called "son of God." For us, a person can't so lightly dismiss the consequences of our actions, for there can be no avoiding accountability for our decisions. As the cliché would have it, "you pays your money and you takes your chances!" A Jew cannot allow the spurious luxury of throwing the moral burden of one's life on anyone else; there are no excuses by which we deflect personal responsibility for our moral or spiritual failings. And that is so, because we do not seek to shift moral blame to a notion of so-called "original sin" which is supposedly beyond our control. Judaism and Torah teach us that, after all is said and done, we stand before God, after 120 years, without intermediary or excuse, bereft of spin or facade, ready to receive reward or punishment, as the case may be.

Now that is not to say that we cannot receive forgiveness. Of course we can. Selichah u-mechilah, forgiveness and amnesty are always available to us. But that is only if we are fully ready to go through a genuine process of teshuvah, or repentance, leading to profound moral and spiritual self-betterment. No one else can assume that burden on our behalf, no power or force can substitute for genuine introspection, self-criticism, remorse, and resolution for the future. But failing that process, it is the glory, and the burden, of Judaism, and perhaps the ultimate reason that over the course of history so few people came to subscribe to Judaism out of choice, we each of us must face either the music that is the discordant cacophony of the wages of sin, or, on the other hand, the sublime symphony that is the reward of faithfulness to moral principle, spiritual self-transcendence, and a self-denying religious faith.

And that, the Rambam teaches, in chapter 5 of Hilchot Teshuvah, is the real and abiding peshat, or teaching, of the opening verse in today's parshah: Re'eh anochi noten lifneichem hayom berakhah u-kelalah. "See," declares God, "I place before you today both a blessing and a curse." And then He goes on: "the blessing will be result of your choices, your actions, to either heed the commandments of God; and conversely, the curse, to come, God forbid, in the wake of your decision to disregard, disobey, turn aside from, the way which God commands you." What the

Torah here teaches us, says Rambam, here more than anywhere else in the Torah, is that God has put our fate in our hands; whether we obey God's will, and the moral law, through our choices becoming the masters of our destiny; fully responsible for the consequences that flow from our choices, our decisions, and our actions. Indeed we might say, the blessing itself occurs when we take charge of our lives, when we fully appreciate that life's buck stops at our desk and at no other, and therefore act to realize our fullest potential before God and man, rather than succumb to the curse by which we see ourselves as essentially reactive and dependent, or victims of circumstance or situations largely beyond our control. Thus described, the Torah here challenges each of us to assume the blessing of moral freedom, flowing from the courage to take full responsibility before God for our lives, and for the consequences of our actions, rather than succumb to the curse of denial and dependency, that undermine human dignity.

That lesson of accountability, I believe, is what the President of the United States taught us and the rest of the world in the second half of this past week.

And that, I would submit, is the lesson that each of us ought to take under advisement starting today, Rosh Chodesh Ellul, in judging not just other nations, or other faiths, not just our political leaders in high places or for that matter the rest of the Jewish people, not even our neighbors, spouses, or children C but first and foremost in judging our own selves, and our own readiness to take responsibility and assume accountability for our lives, our actions, our words, and even our thoughts, before Almighty God. For that is what the month of Ellul signifies: the beginning of a 6 week process of introspection and self-judgment, culminating with Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. The readiness to look in the mirror, and face the music, without self-serving excuses or contorted rationalizations, without spurious self-pity, for once, without blaming others around us. Ready rather, however painful the experience, to see our own selves as we truly are, to judge, mercilessly if need be, our own choices past, ready to register remorse if indicated, prepared to think, and better yet to say, the three most difficult words in the English language, namely "I was wrong," and thereby to reach beyond ourselves, and aspire to true human greatness, and the real blessings that await the courageous and the brave. Thereby to raise ourselves far above the deserved fate of the moral cowards and the weak of character, be they merchants of death in some African or Middle Eastern backwater, or unfortunately closer to home in the persons of those who would go in the guise of some moral high ground.

If we will find the courage to make that our standard of personal, communal, and national accountability, then we too, as individuals, as communities, as faith-communities, and as nations, will come to merit the blessing of the haftorah we would have read had it not been Rosh chodesh, in the memorable words of Isaiah that proclaim
Kol kli yutzar alayich lo yutzlach, vekol lashon takum itach la-mishpat, tarshi'i; zot nachalat avdei Hashem, ve'tzidkatam mei-iti, ne'um Hashem
No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper, and every tongue that shall rise against thee in judgment thou shall condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord, and their due reward from me, says the Lord! (Isaiah 54:17)