

The Jericho Syndrome

- Basil Herring.

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When Chairman Arafat went to Johannesburg a week or two ago for the inauguration of the much-heralded new era in South Africa, no one anticipated what he was about to say in a local mosque, filled with Mohammed's faithful. But now that the fateful speech has been recorded and broadcast, including the incendiary announcement that "the jihad, or holy war, will continue," few can deny what it means. As Prime Minister Rabin put it, "This is a grave violation of Arafat's commitment to renounce terrorism...We cannot accept this. If he said these things, it puts the whole agreement in question." Even Shimon Peres moved himself to say this week "Arafat's words are shocking, unthinkable." If this is how these two have reacted, the very men who have urged the people of Israel and the Jewish nation to accept the peace plan negotiated with this same Arafat, how ought we to react? Better yet, when in the same speech, Arafat indicated that he had a previously undisclosed letter from Rabin that promises to negotiate the fate of Jerusalem at some point in the future, what should we conclude, regarding the trustworthiness, and credibility, of Rabin himself, let alone Arafat? The question is not an idle one, in light of the just-released nationwide poll that indicates, if it is reliable, that 73% of American Jews strongly support the current peace process, while only 3% strongly oppose it. Is it possible that Arafat has indeed succeeded in fooling most of the Jewish people most of the time? Has the Jewish penchant for peace bamboozled almost three quarters of the Jews in this country?

Let me begin where I left off last Shabbas, in speaking of Samson. You may recall that in one of his exploits against the Philistines of Gaza, Samson tied the tails of 300 foxes in pairs, and thereby torched the whole harvest of the enemy. Why foxes? The midrash answered that foxes in their slyness, typically move around in circles, and go back on their tracks, never pursuing a straight line. Samson had entered into an understanding with a Philistine man for his daughter's hand. But when he came to claim her, the bride had been given to another. The promise was not a promise, the commitment a worthless gesture. As a result Samson chose to inflict a punishment that fit the crime. Hence the Philistines suffered literally a "scorched earth" punishment at the hands of the wily, devious fox.

These thousands of years later, as Israel withdraws from those same fields and valleys of Gaza, peopled not by Philistines, but by Palestinians, nothing seems to have changed. Still, the issue is one of promises betrayed, of solemn commitments eviscerated. Again, it would appear, Jews are dealing with an enemy whose actions give the lie to his words. Would that it would have been otherwise. But alas that is not so. Now, in the piercing light of the Southern African sun, it is clear that Israel is dealing with unconscionable liars, men who do not know the significance of one's solemn word or signature given in trust, whose commitments are worthless, whose handshake is a charade, whose promises are, like pies, made to be broken. How many times can

you be caught in a blatant lie before you are recognized as a cheat and prevaricator, with whom no further business is to be conducted? Sadly, I believe that, with his latest pronouncements, Arafat has finally passed that point.

The consequences therefore, are clear. I speak as one who last September, and since, have spoken in support of the White House handshake and Oslo peace accords. I have done so because I have identified with the yearning for peace after 27 years of occupation; the hope that somehow an accommodation could be arrived at, to stop the suffering and hardship on both sides. I hoped that this agreement represented the beginning of such a process. But now I have come to believe that the entire agreement should be rethought; its further implementations frozen, forthwith, now that the troops are out of Gaza and Jericho, and the Palestinians in those areas largely autonomous. The PLO, from Arafat on and down, must be made to understand that the free ride is over; it is enough of empty words and the familiar posturing for the TV cameras. As for Israel, the government must realize that through its actions, the settlers left behind in the rest of the territories are in clear and present danger. They must be protected at all cost, and the army of Israel deployed accordingly, world opinion be damned.

There should be no further negotiation with the PLO or any of its allied organizations, until Arafat and company have proven beyond any reasonable doubt that their word means something more than just empty air. That the agreements thus far concluded are not merely in the minds of the Palestinian leadership a prelude to war. Their outrageous words cannot simply be dismissed as merely intended for the consumption of radical Palestinian rejectionists. Specifically: they must, as the agreement stipulates, alter the Palestinian Covenant that calls for the destruction of Israel; they must condemn terrorism and the notion of a holy war intended to take over Israel or any part thereof, both in general, as well as in particular when such outrages occur; making every effort at apprehending the terrorists who continue to attack Israeli soldiers and civilians to this day. The time for talk is past; the year-long effort to whitewash and rehabilitate the PLO should come to an end. Now is the time for Israel to demand concrete proof of Arafat's true intentions; and for Rabin and company to be honest with Israel and the Jewish people as to any secret understandings or commitments that may have been made.

I spoke a few moments ago of an incident relative to Gaza in the time of the Judges. In today's parshah, however, there is also an allusion to the other area under discussion, and that is the ancient town of Jericho. Here I would digress for a moment. When the Israelites are about to march forward to do battle and conquer the land of Israel, Moses approaches his father-in-law Yitro, who was visiting them from Midian, and implores him to join them on the great march over the Jordan River. But, curiously, Yitro refuses, says "I shall not go, but rather I shall go to my land and birthplace, Midian." (Nu. 10:30) But Moses still does not give up, and says "if you will go with us, we will benefit you with whatever benefit God grants us." What is Moses talking about, what kind of incentive is he offering Yitro? The Sifri states as follows:

"Said Moses to Yitro: 'I decree that you must accept as a gift the lush territory of Jericho. Because if you do not, the people of Israel will say that the only reason you converted to Judaism at Mt. Sinai was in expectation of receiving great swathes of the land of Israel, but that when only small Jericho was offered to you, you scorned it, and went back to where you came from.'" Apparently Yitro did not take the gift, however, and he went back to Midian. Yet, as Rashi points out, when the Israelites did enter the land and divide it up among the tribes, Jericho was not appropriated, until in the end it was given to Yitro's grandchildren, who lived there for 440

years till they came to Jerusalem to build King Solomon's Temple. As it says in Judges 1:16 "and the children of the Kenite, Moses' father-in-law, went up out of the city of palm-trees with the children of Judah into the wilderness of Judah."

Moses was determined to prove to his people that Yitro was a genuine convert who had overcome his past and embraced the people and faith of Israel. He knew very well that there were doubters and skeptics who wanted, and deserved, proof that Yitro was genuinely motivated and committed to this joint venture, and not motivated by some dark desire to take over the land of Israel. Said Moses to his father-in-law: "I beg you, take Jericho with its palm-trees and pastures, a fine area where in time, and over the years, you will be able to flourish, even as you prove to the people that you are an honorable and trustworthy partner and gentleman." It was a reasonable offer, but it would appear (following Rashi, not Ramban) that Yitro did not take up Moses' offer, but instead returned to Midian. Jericho, even then, it would appear, was to serve as a litmus test for the true intentions of its rulers and inhabitants, demonstrating their readiness to live peacefully and respectfully, side by side with the children of Israel in the promised land.

Today, I would submit, Israel and the Jewish people are no less entitled to be reassured, to be convinced through concrete action, that the man who lays claim to be a convert from faith in terror and destruction, now genuinely embraces a credo of statesmanship and nation-building. If the saintly Yitro was called upon to do that—a blood-soaked PLO should do no less, demonstrating through its actions that it indeed is committed to the norms of civilized discourse, respect for life and limb, and the readiness to recognize the rights of everyone, Jews included, to pursue their own dreams and aspirations, be they personal or communal, religious or political, conventional or millennial.

Let the word, therefore, go out from the palm-trees of Jericho and fox-holes of Gaza. Let the Palestinians prove themselves on the ground, before Israel makes one more concession, one more sign of weakness. Let them know that the game is up, the deceptions and prevarications a thing of the past. Only in that way will there come a time when they too, in spite of everything that has passed, will have earned the right, as did those citizens of Jericho of old, to be privileged to participate in the rebuilding of Solomon's Temple, that harbinger of true and universal peace, in a world free of war and jihad forever, where it will stand in Yerushalayim Ir ha-Kodesh, eternal and undivided capital of Israel, and the Jewish people.