

Death & Responsibility on the Streets of Paris and Jerusalem

- Basil Herring.

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The body was not yet cold, and already the world wanted to know who was responsible for the Princess' death. And as the week went on, the accusatory fingers successively pointed in every direction: the photographers, the photo agencies who commission them, the newspaper editors who buy the pictures, the tabloid readership who devour them, the TV networks and audiences who are titillated by them, the drunken limousine driver who drove them, the male friend who escorted her, the royal house of Windsor which mistreated her in a way that drove her to distraction and self-destructive behavior, and on and on. And so in the public mind, everyone, it seems, shares in the guilt, everyone that is, except the Princess, who was used and abused, exploited and manipulated, a pitied and passive victim of so many uncaring people and of such cruel circumstance. But if the truth be told, while all of those parties surely had a hand in her death in one degree or another, and hence bear responsibility in varying degrees, we should not avoid the recognition that she too made certain choices, set off on particular paths, and utilized the not inconsiderable means at her disposal, to be where she was at the time of her tragic and senseless death. Hence, one might say, just as she deserved to be admired for the many accomplishments of her life, which she undertook with courage and panache, so ought she similarly, in some significant measure, be held responsible for her denouement on the streets of Paris.

But we live in a time where it is not fashionable to take responsibility for oneself and one's fate. It seems that everywhere one looks, one finds people who blame others for their problems. Some blame their parents for their personal problems; some accuse their employers of insensitivity, others point the finger at the government for its lack of support. Then there is no shortage of those who assign responsibility for their unhappy lives to an uncaring social system, to defective genes, or to a callous God, or to a blind fate. The recurring refrain, the leitmotiv that echoes all around? "They made me do it, I had no choice, I am a victim of others' evil or insensitivity, what could I do?"

No it is doubtless true that circumstances do play a large role in the outcome of our lives. We are indeed the product of powerful forces and influences, both seen and invisible. No man is an island. We are in that sense cogs in a larger series of wheels and spheres. But unlike the mechanistic working of a machine, those forces do not determine our responses to the choices before us. At each step of the way we are free to make a choice between at least two paths that our lives will follow, a choice that will determine which choices we get to make after that, and after that, and after that. As the Torah said last week, u-bacharta be-chayim, "choose life," i.e., at every step of the way it is for us to choose the path of life or death, success or failure, fame or misfortune, acclaim or ignominy. In that sense our lives are an amalgam of fate and freedom, a mix of destiny and determination, for which we ourselves are at least partially responsible.

It for this reason that the Torah in our Parshah says “When you will come into the land, do not learn from those nations to do their abominations, divinations, omens, astrology, or sorcery—ve’ata lo chen—you should not be like them!” (Devarim 18:9-14.) For such people, everything is written in the stars, foretold in some strange configuration of fate, beyond our control, or our ability to change. For the Jewish people, there is no doctrine, as some would have it, of Original Sin, which dooms us to eternal perdition in some imagined fires of Hell, unless we hang our hat on some imagined divinely sent savior. What the Torah teaches, instead, is that we can and must take charge of, and responsibility for, our lives, at each step of the way, with courage and strength, unflinching honesty and unflagging stamina, to take credit where it is ours, and bear the onus when it comes due.

And it is not just so on the personal level, but on the national level as well. Here I refer not to the tragic royal death with which this week began, but to the incomparably greater tragedy, as far as we are concerned, with which the week ended, not in Paris but in Jerusalem, not in a drunken midnight chase, but on a sunny day at the plaza. Here too our parshah must serve as our instructor.

At the end of the Parshah, we encounter the law of the eglah arufah, the sacrificial heifer, that is offered by the leaders of the community, including the kohanim, the leviyim, and the elders, when a person is found murdered in the vicinity of the town, and it is known who committed the homicide. And in making that offering, the Torah tells us, those leaders, the aristocracy in whom is vested political and moral authority, must publicly declare: “Our hands have not shed this blood, our eyes have not seen. Forgive your people Israel whom you have redeemed, and do not place innocent blood in the midst of your people Israel.” (Devarim 21:7-8)

But these verses make no sense. First the elders avoid responsibility by saying that their hands did not shed the blood in question, or see the crime committed. But if there is no guilt or responsibility, and therefore no punishment due, why do they then plead with God to forgive the people Israel? An answer is provided by Rabbi Ben Zion Firer: The leaders are not in fact pleading their innocence — they are admitting their guilt! A leader must recognize the potential for violence and criminal behavior that exists within the people at large. And as a leader, he is responsible for the prevention of bloodshed and aggression, by effectively channeling or sublimating such destructive urges and instincts into more noble constructive behavior. For instance, a potential murderer must be trained to shed blood in acceptable ways, such as by sacrificing animals in the Temple. Here, the leaders are saying, “we failed by not redirecting, or elevating, such homicidal instincts into positive behavior.” We are guilty for failing to create a society wherein murder is unthinkable, and instead have allowed a society to emerge in which a person can carry out such a heinous act no matter its justification. We are guilty, remorseful, and responsible. Therefore, dear God, forgive us and all Israel your people.

In the wake of the murderous Palestinian terrorism of these days and weeks past, aided and abetted, encouraged and winked at, by the elected leadership of the Palestinian people, leaders who gleefully hug and kiss the masters of terror before the tv cameras of the world, these words of the Torah ring forth with piercing and damning clarity. Having encouraged the suicide bombers in advance, having crowned them with the crown of martyrdom, it will avail such

leaders nothing to disavow the murderers in their midst. How dare they say that their hands do not drip with the blood of the children of Ben Yehudah Street! What gall to declare that their eyes have not seen those who sent them forth with pride and joy to kill and maim the innocent and the defenseless! Of course the bombers are responsible, and should burn in Hell forever. But so are their handlers, their apologists, their network of suppliers, bomb-builders, transporters, and rejoicers. And responsible too are the likes of an Anthony Lewis on the pages of the NY Times, this Jewish columnist whose own hands, that love so much to pin blame on the victims, are no less covered with Jewish blood and guts, the result in part of his ongoing apologetics and justifications of Palestinian murder and mayhem.

What a shame that people such as these cannot look in the mirror and for once in their lives take responsibility for their actions, rather than blame their own miseries and problems on the Jews. How sad that the one people that stands for personal accountability before God and man, and which as a result has succeeded in building a country and a society into a model of justice and fairness, success and productivity, should bear the brunt of blame for the woes of a neighboring people that to this day wallows in self-pity, and in its self-image of victimhood. What a perversion of justice that the Jews, of all people, should be held liable for the sufferings of the Palestinians, after all that the Arab nations have done to exploit and manipulate, expel and abuse their stateless cousins whom they secretly despise. No wonder that, as it has been reliably reported, so many ordinary Palestinians these days quietly long for the good old days when they were under Israeli rule, before they were subject to the kleptocracy and assorted excesses of the so-called security services of the new Palestinian authority run by Yasir Arafat. But such people, unlike the Elders and the Kohanim of our Parshah, do not know the meaning of personal responsibility and culpability—it is far easier to pass the buck and blame the Jews, and the Americans, and the stars for their plight.

And so it is that for so many, both private and public, in the individual as well as the national realms, responsibility, like a bullet, is something before which you duck and avoid. Be it in London or Paris, New York or Washington, Ramallah or the Gaza Strip, the purveyors of guilt and liability look everywhere but where it, like charity, begins: namely at home, and within ourselves.

Allow me to conclude with a related thought, in the context of the month of Ellul, in these pregnant days that precede Asseret Yemei Teshuvah. For it is in these days that we too are presented by God with a gift, and an opportunity, that challenges us to overcome the self-indulgent, and self-excusing impulse, and to rise instead to the challenge of taking responsibility for our lives and our spiritual condition before God. In these weeks that lead up to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we too have the opportunity to take charge of our lives, to grab the buck, and stand before God renewed and reborn, freed of pretext and excuse in accounting for ourselves. In these days of sadness and mourning for so many, may we find the strength, and the courage, to improve our own selves, spiritually as well as materially, so as to make this world a better place for all of mankind, be they princes or paupers, Jews or Gentiles, Muslims or Christians alike, in a world redeemed, the eternal city of Jerusalem and its Holy Temple, finally rebuilt, under the rule of God Almighty, forever.