A terrible crime recently made the headlines in Israel. A well-known rabbi, reputed to be a wonder-worker, had a large following of supporters who sought his prayers and blessings. One such follower came to him to seek a prayer/blessing so that a certain result would ensue. The rabbi offered his prayer/blessing and assured the man that the requested miracle would occur.

The miracle did not occur.

The man became enraged that the rabbi had misled him and had not delivered on his promise of a miracle. Apparently the man had made a contribution to the rabbi to ensure the effectiveness of the prayer. In a fit of fury, the man went to the rabbi and stabbed him to death!

Faced with such a tragedy, one would have hoped and expected rabbinic leadership to offer proper guidance to the horrified public. They might have reminded people of the importance of personal prayer and piety; of the advisability of not going to wonder-workers in expectation of miracles; of the fact that murder and violence are the wrong ways to deal with frustration.

In the press, though, rabbinic statements were reported that pointed in a very different direction. One leading rabbi, very close to the murder victim, assured the public that the rabbi had been murdered to save the people of Israel from evil decrees. "Harsh punishments were decreed on the people of Israel and he wanted to nullify them." That is, this rabbi died for our sins, as an atonement that would deflect an evil decree against us. The Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel made comments to Arutz Sheva: "Who knows what kind of decree God's people was under? And [this rabbi] was strong for us and he bore the atonement for our generation."

These rabbinic proclamations are highly distressing. They reflect a simplistic religious worldview that degrades and impoverishes true religion, that plays into the hands of the most primitive and gullible approaches to religion. Such statements push thinking people away from Torah, and re-enforce stereotypes of religion as an opiate for the ignorant masses.

How do these rabbis--who are not prophets--know that God had intended an evil decree against us? How do they dare take it upon themselves to speak as though they have a direct line to God's intentions? How can they be so sure that the murdered rabbi died for our sins (a concept with Christian, rather than Jewish, overtones)? Why did they ignore the obvious fact that the rabbi was murdered because he let on that he could pray for miracles, and that the miracle didn't happen; that a foolish and violent man murdered the rabbi in cold blood? Why try to offer theological explanations when these explanations are not warranted, and when there is no way that such explanations can be verified?
It is of utmost importance for all thinking religious people to stand up against this unsophisticated and spiritually warped view of Judaism. We need to work together to foster an intellectually vibrant, compassionate and inclusive Judaism that stresses the need for individual spiritual exertion. We each must take responsibility for our relationship with the Almighty. We must encourage a dignified and intelligent religiosity which eschews going to supposed wonder workers and shamans. We each have direct access to God.

The Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals was founded to give voice to an intellectually sound, spiritually meaningful Judaism. Thank you for being part of our growing community. Together we can accomplish great things.

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