

Stop denying it: Fanaticism is derived from the Torah

The events that took place over the last few days are a display of religious fanaticism. It is a sharp shift towards an abyss, against which the Jewish sages have warned us. They knew we have a strong pull towards this kind of behavior, that our Torah is capable of transforming into a deadly poison, and that those who act on its behalf can become murderous terrorists. At first, they turn against other peoples, but then, they turn against their own.

"The Torah of Israel has nothing to do with these murderous acts".

How many times have we heard this sentence over the past few days? Rabbis, public representatives and ordinary men and women have said that they are shocked by the Chilul Hashem (desecration of God's name) of murdering and burning people in the name of the Torah, and they continue to emphasize it. This is not the Torah. But it is the Torah. In other words, it is also the Torah. In part.

Let us be honest. In both the Torah of Israel and Jewish history there is a deep flirtation with the idea of fanaticism, with the notion of going all out, with no reserves, remaining true to your convictions no matter what the consequences. There is a pull to become God's vengeful and punishing messenger - to be judge and jury. It begins with Pinchas, and continues with the Maccabees, the civil war they led, and all the way through the Second Temple period and the Bar Kochba rebellion. It is there. Absolutely.

Most of us grew up with a different Torah, and not by chance. The Jewish sages who witnessed the horrifying destruction that fanatics brought upon Jerusalem, and the rivers of blood with which the Bar Kochba rebellion drowned the remainder of Jewish settlement, declared war against fanaticism. Like a gardener that uproots weeds in order to allow flowers to blossom, they eliminated all memory of romantic fanaticism and even the mere legitimacy of fanaticism.

They declared Pinchas anti-Halachic, and all they left of the Maccabees was a remotely mentioned small jug. They wiped clean all memory of the heroic war of independence. They built an entire ethos around the destruction of the Temple, emphasizing the dangers of fanaticism, and even more so the dangers of remaining silent moderates.

Stories, descriptions, and explicit statements repeat the message of the Jewish sages time and time again. It was not the Romans, not readiness for battle, nor hidden sins that led to the destruction of the Temple and the loss of Jewish sovereignty. It was the internal controversies, the vehement hatred of their brothers who held different beliefs, and a murderous fanaticism. These, accompanied by a silent leadership. Silence that was disguised as humility, but was in fact a lack of responsibility or even a sign of consensus, along with near-sightedness. This ethos has lasted many years. Almost two thousand. In recent years it has appeared to be waning, or at least weakening.

13 years ago I heard a lecture given by Rabbi Israel Ariel from Yitzhar in Samaria, a student of Rabbi Ginsburg. He spoke explicitly of the need to nurture fanaticism and how tolerance is foreign to "true" Judaism.

He is not alone. There are those among us who have become weary of the Torah as interpreted by the Jewish sages. They consider "an eye for an eye" as a call for vengeance. It is no longer a matter to be converted into money; in their eyes, Samson's cry for violent vengeance "and let me with one blow get revenge on the Philistines for my two eyes" has almost become an anthem. And even the commandment "You shall not murder" is perceived as some kind of twisted and narrow version of "A Jew does not stab another Jew" - a quote with a similar message was made on Thursday by the

head of the right-wing anti-assimilation organization "Lahava".

This is a sharp and dangerous shift towards an abyss, against which the Jewish sages repeatedly warned us. They warned us because they knew we have a strong pull towards this kind of behavior, that our Torah is capable of transforming into a deadly poison, and that those who act on its behalf can become murderous terrorists. At first, they turn against other peoples, but then – similar to what happened during the Second Temple period and as happens repeatedly with such groups – they turn against their own people. So far, the groups are small. But the groups always start out small.

During the last few days it seems it is a time to "reprimand for the sake of God", to reprimand and move on. I assume that Rabbi Zacharia son of Avkolus reprimanded, as did other sages. They surely thought they should increase the light and not get caught up with evil. And besides, these weren't their students, it wasn't their neighborhood.

That is not enough. Not enough to prevent the rush towards an abyss and not enough that Jewish history will forgive them for their silent cooperation. Because they may have reprimanded, but they did not fight. They did not excommunicate. They did not make full use of their power in order to make it perfectly clear what is immoral, what is dangerous and what will bring destruction upon us all. What words are forbidden to be uttered, not even in rage, and not even as a joke.

They did not remove problematic books from the Batei Midrash (houses of study). They did not cast out people from their community who made dangerous statements. They did not eject "good people with a fanatic side to them" from their neighborhoods, with the excuse that "they don't really mean it". They did not clarify that taking the law into your own hands endangers everyone around you, as well as the social fabric of mutual responsibility within the people of Israel, that it will be impossible to fight the Romans together in this way. They did not do enough. In our collective consciousness, they remain the ones who destroyed our Temple.

The Torah commands us to eradicate evil from our midst. The more evil is a part of us, the more obligated we are to follow this commandment. In Israeli society there is a tendency to always place the blame on someone else. I do not know who burned the Dawabsha family. All I know is that none of us will be surprised if it was done by religious people. Maybe not religious exactly like me, maybe from a nearby neighborhood, but still, it is our evil. It is among us. It is in the name of our Torah. The responsibility is ours. Not in humility and not in silence. Now is the time to avert destruction.

Byline:

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