When Wickedness Parades as Justice: Thoughts for Parashat Vayishlah

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Vayishlah

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U.S. Supreme Court Justice Robert Jackson took leave from the Court to serve as the U.S's chief prosecutor at the Nuremberg trials of Nazi war criminals. He wrote that "the most odious of all oppressions are those which mask as justice." He sharply criticized the role of judges and legal systems which legitimized tyranny and oppression.

Judge Jackson understood that the atrocities of the Nazis were all purported to be "legal". Laws were passed depriving Jews of all rights. Laws were passed to round up, imprison, and murder Jews. All those who participated in these heinous actions were following the law of the land! The problem, though, was that the law itself was starkly immoral; the government that promulgated murderous laws was itself evil; the "legal system" which allowed such "laws" to be passed and implemented was the epitome of injustice, cruelty, and wickedness.

Moral people should have denounced such "laws" and should have resisted the "legal system." If enough good people had risen against the tyrannical laws and the murderous Nazi regime, millions of lives would have been saved. In our times, we also witness tendencies to legitimize immoral behavior by means of declaring such evil to be "legal".

The United Nations is perhaps the world's most nefarious example of this tendency. The UN routinely passes resolutions condemning Israel--not because these condemnations relate to moral and sound judgment, but because a malicious cabal of Israel-hating nations muster the majority to pass anti-Israel resolutions. There isn't even the faintest element of fairness to these resolutions, not the slightest effort to understand Israel's position, not a word of

condemnation of groups and nations who attack Israel in every way they can. The UN espouses resolutions and policies that are dressed in the garb of "international law" when in fact these resolutions and policies are classic examples of immorality, injustice and corruption of the value of law.

It's not just the UN that tends to cloak immorality in the dress of justice. There are groups of anti-Israel and anti-Semitic people who seek to undermine Israel; they insidiously pose as being interested in human rights, as guardians of international law. Yet, they operate with malice toward Israel and perpetrate the vilest propaganda against her; they support boycotts of Israel; they constantly rebuke Israel for any real or imagined shortcoming. For these people, justice is not just at all; rather they pervert justice to further their own unjust and immoral goals.

Many seemingly good-hearted people get swept up in the "politically correct" anti-Israel bashing. They are gullible in the extreme, and don't have the time or moral courage to try to find out actual facts. These people will condemn Israel for causing pain to Arabs in Gaza, but will never raise a word of protest when thousands of missiles are fired into Israel from Gaza. They will condemn Israel's intransigence, but will never call to account Arab and Muslim leaders who unashamedly call for the destruction of Israel. Thinking that they are standing for "human rights" and for "international law", these people are in fact accomplices in immorally seeking to deprive Jews of their rights. They foster "laws" and "resolutions" and "policies" that are in essence criminal, unjust, immoral.

This week's Torah portion tells of Jacob's fight with a mysterious stranger/angel. A Midrash identifies Jacob's antagonist as the angel of Esav dressed in the garb of a rabbinic scholar. This Midrash is alluding to the dangers caused by those who are wicked but who dress in pious attire. These hypocritical individuals put on the external features of righteousness in order to disarm their opponents. They feign to be nice friendly people, concerned for law and decency; but this is simply a ruse to lull the opponents into complacency. Once they have seized their prey, they are mercilessly destructive.

We must always beware of enemies who declare their hateful intentions. But we must also be wary—very wary—of those who pretend to be upright citizens, loyal friends, and models of piety—who are in fact devising nefarious plots to undermine their victims. Justice Jackson believed that "the most odious of all oppressions are those which mask as justice." We might add that among the most odious of human beings are those who have the wickedness of Esav but who hypocritically wear the mask of piety and innocence.

Angel for Shabbat