Pious Cruelty: Thoughts for Matot-Mas'ei, July 18, 2015

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By
Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Religion has two faces. One face is that of saintliness, idealism, holiness and selflessness. But the other face is one of hatred, cruelty, selfishness and egotism. Within the world of religion, one can find the most exemplary human beings; but one can also find inquisitors and terrorists.

In his play, "The Father," August Strindberg has one of his characters state: "It is strange that as soon as you begin to talk about God and love, your voice becomes hard and your eyes full of hate." It's not that there are two types of people, pious and wicked. Rather, saintliness and ugliness are intermixed within individuals. The righteous struggle to keep the ugliness out; the wicked strive to promote their own evil agendas. Often, the wicked camouflage themselves in the cloak of piety. Niccolo Machiavelli, in his notorious advice on leadership, wrote of the value of "pious cruelty." Machiavelli recommended that the prince (or other leader) should perpetrate whatever he needs to do to enhance his power, but should give the appearance to be acting piously.

As an example, he cites King Ferdinand who purged his kingdom of non-Catholics in a cruel and inhumane manner; and yet, he perpetrated his evil in the name of purifying Catholicism in his realms. Pious cruelty was a useful tool for consolidating his power. In Parashat Mas'ei, we learn of the commandment to establish cities of refuge for those who committed murder unintentionally. Such individuals were to reside safely in these cities of refuge, and not to be harmed by relatives of the victims of their murders.

The Israelites were instructed to designate six cities of refuge, three on either side of the Jordan river. The Me'am Lo'ez, the classic Ladino Torah commentary, observes the oddity of this arrangement. After all, once the Israelites were settled in the Promised Land, 9 ½ tribes would be west of the Jordan and only 2 ½ tribes would be on the eastern side. Why then were there to be the same number of cities of refuge on each side of the Jordan? The Me'am Lo'ez suggests that there were a lot more murderers living east of the Jordan. But since cities of refuge

were only available to those who murdered by accident, willful murderers were not eligible to reside in them.

The Me’am Lo’ez posits: “There were deceivers who murdered intentionally but passed themselves off as having murdered by accident. A court could not prosecute them, because it would be impossible to prove that they murdered intentionally.” In other words, people would commit the horrendous crime of murder but present themselves as being innocent of willful homicide. They would say: it was an accident, I didn’t mean any harm, I am not guilty of murder. I am a fine person who was accidentally involved in a crime.

The Talmud (Sotah 22b) records the opinion of King Alexander Yannai who said to his wife Salome Alexandra: “Do not be afraid of the Pharisees or the non-Pharisees [the Sadducees], but of the wildcats who mimic the Pharisees; for their deeds are like the deeds of [the wicked] Zimri but they seek the reward of [the righteous] Pinchas." The King was suggesting that those who posed as being righteous, but were actually malicious, were a great danger; they were guilty of “pious cruelty.” They lulled the public into thinking they were acting from noble motives, but they were in fact engaged in perfidious behavior.

The subtle, insidious and seemingly pious person attempts to achieve immoral goals under the cloak of religion. Such an individual is not only ruthless and hypocritical; but highly dangerous. While these thoughts apply to many contexts, they are especially relevant to the newly fashionable anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism. The haters and maligners pretend to be moral individuals acting in the name of human rights; but their goal isn’t the advancement of human rights: it is the destruction of Israel and the undermining of the Jewish people. They focus their wrath obsessively on Israel/Jews, because their real intention is to harm Israel/Jews. But instead of blatantly identifying themselves as the anti-Semites that they are, they try to pass themselves off as moral agents who are acting with humanitarian motives. For them, everyone has rights—except for the Jews; every nation may defend itself—except Israel. “Pious cruelty” is not piety. It is cruelty masking as piety. Wise people are not deceived. Those who allow themselves to be deceived are accomplices.

Angel for Shabbat