Faith in Humanity?--Thoughts for Parashat Shofetim

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Shofetim

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

As a fifteen year old prisoner in the Auschwitz concentration camp, Elie Wiesel witnessed three Jewish scholars convene a Beth Din one night in the barracks. The defendant was: God! The men accused the Almighty of abandonment and cruelty, breaking the ancient covenant with the People of Israel. After due deliberations, they pronounced God chayav, guilty. God owes His people an apology. He must intervene on their behalf.

After this solemn verdict and tearful silence, the three men began to chant the evening prayers! They were upset with God, but they did not renounce their faith. They prayed.

Elie Wiesel saw this episode as characteristic of the anguished faith of the Jewish People. They expected so much more from God; and yet, they did not waiver in their faith. Somehow, Jews could still pray to their Heavenly Parent in spite of all the sufferings they endured.

But if we reflect a bit more, we will come to a different consideration. God, after all, was not rounding up Jews, torturing them, murdering them by the millions. These horrific acts were committed entirely by fellow human beings. Although God did not intervene miraculously to stop the suffering and carnage, God was not the primary guilty party: Nazis and their collaborators were the ruthless perpetrators. The Holocaust was not caused by God, but by people. If we were to call together a Beth Din today, the defendant should be Humanity, not God.

Strange as it may seem, it may be easier to have faith in God than faith in humanity. The Holocaust is a notorious example of how bad human beings can be. But if we look at humanity today, we still see hatred, violence, anti-Semitism/anti-Zionism, terrorism, vicious conspiracy theories, lies, crimes large and small. Although there are so many good people in the world, there are also so many who perpetrate evil; and there are so many “sheep” who either go along with the forces of evil or simply stay silent.

This week’s Torah portion calls for a righteous justice system—honest judges, proper enforcement, civic responsibility. It reminds us how the system is compromised when dishonesty creeps in. “Justice, justice you shall pursue.” The Torah’s admonition is included among the Noahide laws applicable to all the nations of the world. If hatred, lies and violence prevail, it is humanity that is on trial…not God.

Let us pray to God…for the sake of a troubled Humanity.