

A WAKE UP CALL

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"Judges and officers shall you appoint for yourselves in all your gates which HaShem your G-d will give you..." [16:18]

Here we find one of the most obvious building blocks of a civilized society: the need for a system of justice. "Justice, Justice shall you pursue," says the Torah [16:20]. But if the principal seems obvious, its details may not be.

The Ohr HaChaim asks: why do we need officers? Is it not possible for a justice system to be self-policing? He finds the answer in the P'sikta, where Rebbe Elazar ben Shamo'a says, "if there are officers, there are judges; if there are no officers, there are no judges." In fact, he says, if it is known that the people will not listen to the judges, and the judges have no ability to enforce their rulings, then there is no obligation to appoint them. And if the opposite is true -- that the words of the judges are so powerful that they will be followed without separate officers, then the people are obligated to appoint the judges, but we call this sort of judge both judge and officer. There is no justice without enforcement.

This applies not only to the system overall, but to its details as well. The posted speed limit is almost never enforced -- in fact, it is usually much safer to travel between five and seven mph faster than the number posted. A law which is declared but never enforced is, pragmatically speaking, not a "law" in the sense of something which must be obeyed.

While a speed limit example may seem trivial, sometimes the failure to enforce a law says a great deal about a society. What would it have said about American society, for example, if Jeffrey Dahmer (a notorious mass murderer) had been permitted to remain free, although we knew that he would use his freedom to kill again?

The answer is obvious -- to allow murderers to roam the streets means that we have either anarchy or barbarism. Either there is no government at all, or it is a barbaric one that allows the evil to prey upon the innocent.

The distinction between barbarism and anarchy would be more clear if Mr. Dahmer were permitted to remain free as long as he left his fellow Americans alone, and wandered over the Canadian border when looking for his next victims. There would not be anarchy, but nonetheless a barbaric society that harbored such a person.

This is, unfortunately, not merely a theoretical discussion -- because if there is any difference between Jeffrey Dahmer and Raed Mesk, who boarded the Number 2 bus back from the Western Wall last week in order to see how many women and babies he could kill, I think the comparison is kinder to Dahmer. At least he viewed murder as something bad he "had" to do to satisfy his desires, whereas Mesk believed that killing as many Jews as possible was a positive good.

Please do not fear. This is not a talk about politics, at least not directly. But it is a reality check. In order to realize the extent of G-d's Hand in current events, we need to understand how these events defy any attempt at logic or rational explanations.

Hamas and Islamic Jihad fell over themselves attempting to claim credit for Mesk's atrocity. Both of them are organizations dedicated to evil, dedicated to murder, dedicated to barbarism. These are the "militants" that our brethren in Israel must deal with every day.

But it is the reaction of the so-called "moderates" that is most telling.

For months, the Palestinian Authority claimed that it could not confront these terrorists. What, then was the official reaction when Israel took action against a leading Hamas mastermind, who was reported to be planning yet more barbarism of this nature? PA Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas, who had quietly expressed his opinion that the bus bombing "did not serve the national interests" of the Palestinians, referred to the killing of arch-terrorist Ismail Abu Shanab as "a heinous crime."

And Abbas, we are told, is a "moderate." Abbas is the one trying to make peace, we are told, as if Hamas and the Israelis were equally bad. No comparison could be more obscene.

Again, it is not my goal to get involved in the politics of the situation, but to point out that we live in a world gone entirely mad. Even after all that has transpired, the Europeans still cannot decide if Hamas is actually a terrorist organization. Meanwhile, a leading sponsor of terrorism, Syria, recently took the chair of the United Nations Security Council -- a body supposedly dedicated to quelling terrorism and violence, and a body to which every nation on earth is invited to take a two-year seat every so often. Every nation, that is, except Israel.

"Mi k'amcha Yisrael, goy echad ba'Aretz." "Who is like Your nation, Israel, a unique nation on the earth." If we forget this, the world reminds us.

What we see around us follows no logic or reason. It would be a joke, were there anything even remotely humorous about it. And the solution is neither political *nor* military -- it's religious. We are receiving a wake-up call. A very loud, very penetrating call for change.

The month of Elul has arrived, a month for introspection and self-improvement leading up to the holy days of judgement, repentance, and forgiveness -- Rosh HaShanah, the Ten Days of Repentance, and Yom Kippur. Let us wake up. Let us change our behavior, especially in ways that will unify us and bring us together, rather than splitting us apart.

For when we are truly united before G-d, we will be untouchable, and we will have peace.

Good Shabbos,

Rabbi Yaakov Menken