

Responding to Violent Palestinian Attacks on Jews in Israel

Temple B'nai Shalom
Braintree, Massachusetts
Rabbi Van Lanckton

October 17, 2015

Palestinians are stabbing and shooting Israeli Jews. At least eight of these violent attacks have resulted in deaths. Many more have caused critical injuries.

On Monday in Jerusalem two Palestinian teenagers, ages 13 and 17, stabbed a 13-year-old Israeli boy nearly a dozen times while the boy was riding his bicycle.

The next day in Ra'anana, a Palestinian stabbed an Israeli as the Israeli was waiting for a bus and another Palestinian stabbed three civilians in front of a café.

Also on Tuesday, Palestinians killed three Israelis in Jerusalem. A Palestinian driver rammed into a crowd on Malchei Street, killing Rabbi Yeshayahu Krishevsky and wounding two others. The attacker terrorist then left his car carrying a meat cleaver and attacked the wounded until he was subdued by police.

In a separate incident, two Arab assailants on a bus in Jerusalem killed two Israelis, Chaviv Chaim and Alon Guverg, and wounded 18 others in a combined shooting and stabbing attack.

These attacks make me angry. They make me sad. They make me want to do something. But what to do? How to respond?

I first researched how Israel, the Palestinian Authority, and the United States have responded.

The police and IDF in Israel are protecting Israeli citizens, both Jewish and Arab. They have had to shoot and sometimes kill some of the attackers. When an attacker is wounded, the authorities arrest the attacker and then provide medical care.

The Israeli government has pleaded for calm, called on the Palestinian Authority to do the same, and increased security in ways that I applaud, including the following:

- * The Security Cabinet authorized the police to impose a closure on, or to surround, centers of friction and incitement in Jerusalem.
- * In addition to demolishing terrorists' homes, Israel will not permit any new construction where a terrorist's home has been demolished and will confiscate property of these terrorists and revoke their permanent residency rights.

* Israel will enlarge and expand the police's operational force and recruit 300 additional security guards for public transportation in Jerusalem.

In strong contrast, the Palestinian Authority and some of the Muslim clerics are doing nothing to discourage these violent attacks. On the contrary, they encourage and incite the attacks.

Mahmoud Abbas, President of the Palestinian Authority, gave a speech on October 14 that told lies. He claimed that Israel executed 13-year-old Ahmed Mansara, a Palestinian boy, and further said that police in Israel were "executing" Palestinian children. He held up the picture of the boy, on the ground after having been shot, he said, by Israelis

That boy, Mansara, and his older cousin had, moments before that picture was taken, stabbed two Israeli boys. This is one of the violent attacks I mentioned earlier.

Abbas not only failed to mention that previous attack by the Palestinian teenagers. He lied about the result. Mansara was NOT killed. Rather, the police merely subdued him with reasonable force. He is being treated at Hadassah Medical Center in Jerusalem.

Abbas is not alone in Palestinian incitement to violence. One Muslim cleric, Sheikh Muhammad Sallah, speaking at his mosque in Gaza, praised all attackers. He waved a dagger, made stabbing motions with it, and called on his listeners to attack. He demanded that Palestinians band together to attack Jews "in threes and fours" and use "axes and butcher knives" to "cut them into body parts."

The American government response has been a huge disappointment. Secretary Kerry said he called both Netanyahu and Abbas with identical messages: that they should take actions to stop the violence. America thus makes no distinction between the Israelis and the Palestinians, blaming them both equally.

Kerry compounded this problem by saying that he understands the frustration of the Palestinians. He claimed that massive increases in settlements have exacerbated that frustration.

That's first of all just plain false. There has not been any massive increase in settlements.

Beyond that, when Kerry speaks that way he is offering a justification for terrorist attacks. But there is no justification for terrorist attacks. Kerry is acting in violation of the 2003 United Nations Security Council declaration against terrorism. The declaration said,

Any acts of terrorism are criminal and unjustifiable, regardless of their motivation, whenever and by whomsoever committed and are to be

unequivocally condemned, especially when they indiscriminately target or injure civilians.

After considering the responses by Israel, the Palestinian Authority and America, I also wanted to know how the media responded to these attacks.

In a word: shamefully.

Most of the media have again revealed their anti-Semitism in their biased presentation of these events. For example, a headline in the Los Angeles Times outrageously stated, "Four Palestinian Teens Are Killed in Israeli Violence." Only after the Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting, CAMERA, objected, did the Times correct that headline to make clear that Palestinians were attacking Israelis and then dying as a result of police response to those attacks.

There's more. NPR the other day reported that Secretary Kerry intends to visit the area to try to reduce the violence that has killed 38 Palestinians and eight Israelis. The story omitted the circumstances of those deaths: deliberate Palestinian attacks on Israelis, followed by police responses against the attackers.

I became so fed up by biased coverage like this that I canceled my subscription to the Boston Globe and to the daily New York Times.

Finally, I have considered the role of religion and violence. To get some help with that question I turned to the wisdom of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks.

Lord Sacks is the former chief rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth. He wrote a column for the Wall Street Journal earlier this month on confronting religious violence. Here are some of his views.

The creed of Islamic Jihadists is a creed that embodies evil in the name of a sacred cause. To defeat it, we must recover the values that can bring Jews, Christians and Muslims together.

In order to fulfill Isaiah's prophecy that nations "shall beat their swords into plowshares," we must understand the connection between religion and violence. Today we face the specific challenge of politicized religious extremism in the 21st century.

Each of us must ask and answer three questions about our lives: Who am I? Why am I here? How then shall I live?

Religion provides us the means to pose and answer those questions and to live our lives with meaning. That's why religion has begun to make a comeback.

Religion has returned because it is hard to live without meaning. No society has survived for long without either a religion or a substitute for it.

The religion that has returned, however, is not the gentle and ecumenical form that we in the West had come to expect. Instead it is religion at its most adversarial and aggressive. It is the greatest threat to freedom in the postmodern world. It is the face of what Lord Sacks calls “altruistic evil” in our time: evil committed in a sacred cause, in the name of high ideals.

The emergence of religions that include leaders who advocate violence compels us to re-examine the theology that leads to violent conflict.

As Jews, Christians and Muslims, we must ask the most uncomfortable questions. Does the God of Abraham want his disciples to kill for his sake? Does God want human sacrifice? Does God rejoice in holy war?

It appears that the West does not understand the power of the forces that oppose us. Passions are at play that run deeper and stronger than any calculation of interests. Reason alone will not win this battle. Nor will invocations of words like “freedom” and “democracy.” To some, they may sound like compelling ideals, but to others, they are the problem against which they are fighting, not the solution they embrace.

Jews, Christians and Muslims must stand together in defense of humanity, the sanctity of life and religious freedom. The real clash of the 21st century will not be between civilizations or religions but within them. It will be between those who accept and those who reject the separation of religion and power.

The failure to separate religion from power explains the toxic use of religion to inspire political followers to commit inhuman acts of atrocity by insisting that this is what God wants them to do.

The strategy of the radical Jihadists and those who quote the Quran and other Muslim teachings out of context has been an effective strategy, remarkable for its long time-horizon, precision, patience and dedication. In order for moderation and religious freedom to prevail, we must do no less. We must train a generation of religious leaders and educators who embrace the world in its diversity and sacred texts in their maximal generosity.

We need an international campaign against the teaching and preaching of hate. If children continue to be taught that nonbelievers are destined for hell and if politicians and both social media and radio and TV pour out a nonstop stream of paranoia and incitement, then a commitment to religious freedom will mean nothing. All the military interventions in the world will not stop the violence.

We need to recover the absolute values that make Abrahamic monotheism the humanizing force it has been at its best. These include the sanctity of life, the dignity of the individual, the twin imperatives of justice and compassion, the insistence on

peaceful modes of resolving conflicts, forgiveness for the injuries of the past and devotion to a future in which all the children of the world can live together in grace and peace. These are the ideals on which Jews, Christians and Muslims can converge.

We also need to insist on the simplest moral principle of all: the principle of reciprocal altruism, otherwise known as tit-for-tat. As we behave to others, so will others behave to us. If we seek respect, we must give respect. If we ask for tolerance, we must demonstrate tolerance.

Wars are won by weapons, but it takes ideas to win a peace. To be a child of Abraham is to learn to respect the other children of Abraham even if their way is not ours and their understanding of God differs from ours. Our common humanity must precede our religious differences.

Judaism, Christianity and Islam all include interpretive traditions that in the past have read our individual sacred texts in the larger context of coexistence, respect for difference and the pursuit of peace. We can do so today. Fundamentalism - text without context, and application without interpretation - is not faith but an aberration of faith.

We must raise a generation of young Jews, Christians, Muslims and others to know that it is not piety but sacrilege to kill in the name of the God of life, or to hate in the name of the God of love, or to practice cruelty in the name of the God of compassion.

Now is the time for us to say what we have failed to say in the past: We are all children of Abraham. We are precious in the sight of God. We are blessed.

To be blessed, no one has to be cursed. Our sacred texts are calling us to let go of hate and the preaching of hate, and to live as brothers and sisters, true to our faith and a blessing to others regardless of their faith, honoring God's name by honoring God's image, humankind.

May peace return soon to the streets of Jerusalem and mutual understanding to the land of Zion.

For this let us say, Amen.