



Myth ... God Help Us!

Lewis R. Scudder, Jr.
Apaisia Village, Cyprus
January sub. 3, 2009

There are times when you want to change something but feel so powerless. Myths especially don't change easily least of all when they merge with other myths and set up a resonating system that yields new ones. And they're such nimbostratus things — so up there in the air, all gray and light-occluding, so pregnant with the threat of downpour. It takes a real myth-master to deal with them. When they shake, thunder and cascade, most of us just hunker down under shelter and wait them out.

In this global age there's a cacophony of myths. Perhaps that's what Samuel Huntington should have talked about — it's not so much a clash of civilizations as a free-for-all of mythologies. Religion, politics, culture and just plain gut-level fury get twisted up in a humid and grunting tangle. And, watching on the ropes, we all can get quite 'het-up' championing our own myths.

The confusing factor, of course, is reality itself. Events just rise up and smack us in the face. In an empirical age that's what's happening. Myths ... *our* myths! ... are definitely under threat. Even the Founding Fathers aren't immune. Feet of clay and toppled images litter the landscape, and tatter away under the gales of global weathering. Muslims along with everybody else have to deal with this. By his own admission, the Prophet Muhammad was far from being an angel; he only claimed to be an agent, a messenger, a very *human* being. The message and the messenger are not to be confused. We're in a new age of stress, threat and promise. Myths are going to the cleaners. Pretty soon we've got to start folding the laundry.

*

So, where's this all going?

Well, a short time ago my friend John Kleinheksel sent me an article written by Walter Russell Mead in the journal, *Foreign Affairs* (July-August, 2008). It shook me. It's entitled, "The Old Israel and the New: Why Gentile Americans Back the Jewish State." For decades now, we who've been puzzled and challenged by America's quite illogical and self-defeating policy toward Palestine-Israel, have known about the correlation between the romantic American myth of its 'unoccupied' frontier and Israel's equally false myth about Palestine being a 'land without a people for a people without a land'. But Mead has taken us to a new level.

He shows us that American gentiles in the 18th century (well before there was any such thing as 'Zionism') thought that the Jews should have their own state in Palestine. One of its advocates was John Adams. The otherwise despicable Jews, Adams argued, would recover their human dignity and become nice Unitarian Christians if only they'd return to where they came from ... to Palestine. Besides this would leave America *Judenfrei*, a solution devoutly to be desired.

American presidents, captains of industry, heads of churches, military leaders, Supreme Court justices and many prominent personalities have held the same view

right up to the present day, not omitting Adams' anti-Semitic subtext. And millions of Americans have bought into it. Why? Well ... there's that correlation between the American obliteration (or nearly so) of Native Americans and Israel's projected obliteration (or nearly so) of the Palestinians. One threatening guilt assuages the other. The myths augment each other. And Americans seem to be held in thrall by that. We live in our myths, and Obama has yet to prove that he's above that sup-rational correlation ... even in the face of the very real Gaza slaughterhouse.

*

What other myths are there in this context?

Well ... one of them has to do with the notion that the Jewish experience is monochromatic. And it ain't! Between the historical experience of the Oriental-Sephardi Jews and the Ashkenazis there's a sharp contrast.

The Orientals are truly indigenous to the Middle East. Since the 7th century, with occasional and regrettable blips, they have had close relationships with Muslims in particular and occasionally even with Middle East Christians. The Jewish Diaspora in the East included the marvelously sophisticated Jews of Alexandria and Egypt as a whole, the intellectually and artistically fecund Jews of Spain, the creative Jewish craftsmen of Yemen, the magnificent Jewish artisans of greater Syria (including the backwater of Palestine), and even the Jews of India's Malabar coast. In Iraq the Jews of 'Babylon' flourished under Muslim governance, and throughout the Middle East the Diaspora Jews — from Morocco to Iran — were very much alive.

The Ashkenazi experience, on the other hand, is very different. It began in the Caucasus mountains, and the Turko-Iranian Khazar mercantile empire that arose in the 6th century. At its height it controlled the north coast of the Black Sea, the north-western coast of the Caspian Sea (until recently known in Arabic as the 'Khazar Sea', *bahr-ul-khazar*), and the northern Caucasus. In alliance with Magyar tribes, the Khazars controlled the choke point of the 'Silk Road' that fed into Byzantium (and thence to Europe) and into the Arab-Muslim Empire. In the 8th century the Khazar elite set aside tribal religion for a religion of more international sophistication. To maintain their autonomy from both Byzantium and the Arab Empire, they chose not Christianity or Islam but Judaism. To interlocutors from Spanish Jewry, they identified themselves as the descendants of Noah's son Japheth through Ashkenaz, Japheth's grandson (Genesis 10:3 and 1st Chronicles 1:6). It was their myth and hence their name.

The fall of the Khazars came in the 10th century at the hands of fellow Turks (the Pechenegs) and the emerging Slavo-Russian alliance. Along with their Magyar allies, the Khazars dispersed westward, and gave rise not only to the seeds of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (in which initially Jews were the military elite), but also to the Ashkenazi Jewish 'Diaspora' in eastern Europe and Europe generally.

*

The two 'myths' could not have been more different. The first worked out a *modus vivendi* with pluralism and flourished in a predominantly Muslim environment. The other, bearing all the marks of a convert culture, faced a quite different problem — the anti-Semitic bigotry of Christian Russia and Europe.

Ashkenazi Jews found themselves between a rock and a hard place. Moved by the sheer need to survive, as the 19th century dawned, they designed a new mythology. It seemed to work. That mythology was eventually dubbed 'Zionism'. The fact that Zionism fit in with Europe's notions of race and nation, that it meshed with Anglo-Saxon romantic notions about Zion's re-founding, and that it resonated with the American myth of the frontier (with its masked subtext of genocide) was not incidental. The myths conflated and Palestinians became the eggs broken for the Zionist omelet. Myths can be such awful ... shattering ... things!

Harnessing western power (sometimes precariously), the assertive Zionist myth came to dominate and occlude its somewhat passive Sephardic alternative. Initiated by pogroms in Russia and eastern Europe, it was powered over the top by the obscenity of the Nazi Holocaust and its attendant rage and urge for vengeance.

It's a strange thing, but the urge for vengeance can sometimes be parlayed into a blood thirst that's rather pagan. It spilled over in 1948 and thereafter, disrupting the elegant Saphardi accommodation. Arab Jews found their world falling apart in blood and violence. Offer parachutes to people and they're not going to ask why their aircraft got wounded; they're just going to jump. Now as second-class citizens in a so-called Jewish state not of their conceiving, many Sephardis from Iraq, Syria, Yemen and other countries may not even ask the obvious questions, and, three generations on, may not even wonder how they got into the fix they're in. They'll do their best to assimilate into the bloody-minded Ashkenazi norm. They may even become super-Zionists to prove their worthiness. Myths are mobile. They can also be very tragic.

As we watched the myths play out in the slaughter in Gaza, I can't do better than quote the German Jew, Heinrich Heine, in a poem entitled *To Edom*, written 170 years ago, long before his prophecy was to be fully realized:

*For a thousand years and more
We have had an understanding:
You allow me to breathe;
I accept your crazy raging.

Sometimes, when the days get darker,
Strange moods come upon you
Till you decorate your claws
With the lifeblood from my veins.

Now our friendship is firmer ...
Getting stronger by the day ...
Since the raging started in me
Daily more and more like you.*

Translation: Uri Avneiri

Myth has proved monstrous. I've little more to say but more ... *much* more to mourn.

And I greet you from the Lands of the Morning.

NOTE: The longer Reformed Church in America missionaries serve, the more they come to see the ethical implications of Christian faith with the eyes of the people among whom they serve. We treasure our missionaries and are glad to know what they think. However, RCA Global Mission does not, itself, have partisan political views.