



## *Patriotism and Piety ... and Morality*

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I started writing this 'meditation' on the eve of July 4<sup>th</sup>. Quite unabashedly, I am an American patriot. Furthermore I am a Christian with universalist predilections, a passionate ecumenist, and in that context, a world citizen. What I was taught and what I still believe is that patriotism, spirituality and morality have to coincide.

Is this relevant today? Well ... I'm not quite sure. America has gone on such a different tack in world affairs since the days of my childish innocence. First, it became Europe's 'sugar daddy' with the Marshal Plan. Then, as Eisenhower succeeded Truman, it became the world's muscle man. On Eisenhower's watch America emerged as the western superpower poised over against the Soviet Union, replacing the British Empire as the world's policeman. And subtly at first then quite overtly, in 1967 Israel stepped into the front ranks among the new empire's guides. Like a crooked keel on a ship, it has skewed the course of the new super-power in its relations with the world at large.

Yet patriotism and piety keep intersecting not least of all on the moral level. And the question remains: What has *this* to do with *that*? In history's record, whenever they have occupied the same space only disaster ensues, and the spirituality of us ordinary people is corrupted.

So best keep them apart. That is good and sage advice.

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Iraq is spiraling down into endemic sectarian conflict. Patriotism and piety intersect explosively. It is becoming a byword for religiously justified violence. Those who aren't really part of the Sunnî-Shî'ah face-off (like Iraq's important though declining Christian population) try to keep their heads down. But they get caught in the crossfire. Under the circumstances, there's no hiding place down there. And the whole of Iraq seems trapped in the maw of a gigantic whirlpool whose centrifugal force is driven by pious mouthings.

Iraq is not the only instance these days and in this region. The Israeli war machine is now on full and unfettered rampage against the Palestinian people. What I noted in an earlier meditation (#19) is now proving itself out: Israel has taken the Hamas-led Palestinian government as a pretext for what is to all intents and purposes a pogrom. Over against one Israeli soldier held by splinter Palestinian factions, the Israelis have abducted and now hold in detention most of the Palestinian government. Gaza's infrastructure has been demolished. The Palestinian prime minister's offices have been bombed to smithereens, and many innocents (far more than non-innocents) have died. The whole population of Gaza is now plunged into abject misery. And the Israeli government keeps

saying that they are being gentle, killing softly-softly.

Now comes Lebanon and the Hizb-Allâh capture of two Israeli soldiers. The upshot has been a full-scale and carefully planned Israeli offensive against Lebanon as a whole. Thousands have been affected and hundreds have died. The bomb craters are being filled in only to have them excavated again by American-made 'smart bombs' dropped by American-made F-16s. Whole communities have been targeted. But again the Israelis, weeping crocodile tears, claim this is only their right and they're trying so hard to avoid civilian casualties.

Hey, guys, almost *all* the casualties have been civilian!

What says the American administration? Virtually nothing. The flow of American dollars into Israel continues at flood level and we keep repeating the mantra that Israel is America's main ally in the Middle East. It is, to say the least, incongruous. It is, to say the truth, unconscionable.

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Two of my favorite cousins have forwarded on to me an editorial by Gideon Levy writing in Israel's prestige English and Hebrew newspaper, *Haaretz*. The opening lines are these: "A black flag hangs over the 'rolling' operation in Gaza. The more the operation 'rolls,' the darker the flag becomes. The 'summer rains' we are showering on Gaza are not only pointless, but are first and foremost blatantly illegitimate. ... A state that takes such steps is no longer distinguishable from a terror organization. The harsher the steps, the more monstrous and stupid they become, the more the moral underpinnings for them are removed ..." Could he say anything less about what Israel is doing in Lebanon?

This is an Israeli speaking in a very public manner. I am assuming that Mr. Levy is a patriot. Were he less, his words would have no value. In the highest tradition of journalism he is speaking both his mind and the truth as he perceives it. Gutsy guy!

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In the first days of Israel's brutal punishment of Lebanon, a friend wrote to me incredulously, "I wonder how the Israelis think they will ever be able to live in peace with their neighbors when they systematically ratchet up violence everywhere." That kicked off something in me, so forgive me if I quote myself in response:

You have to remember that Israel was not established to live at peace with its Arab neighbors. It was established as a national home for (the primarily European Ashkenazi) Jewish people. Arab Jews and those of the broader Sephardi community certainly weren't asking for it.

Its Kibbutz 'mythology' has a lot in common with the mythology of the American frontier. Its attitude toward 'Arabs' has much in common with the 19<sup>th</sup> century American stereotype of the 'Indian'. The notion that Israel would ever integrate into the larger Middle East comes as a novel and really quite preposterous (if not downright repugnant) notion to many Israelis. It is why Golda Meir was able to declare so blandly in 1969 that

there are no such things as Palestinians. And since the heresy of Itzhac Rabin of recognizing the Palestinians the successor regimes have been working to undo the damage he inflicted upon the state's ideological base.

We must remember that while Zionism speaks loudly about Anti-Semitism you don't hear many of those same voices speaking out against racism as a global problem. Anti-Semitism, in this understanding, isn't strictly racial prejudice. It is more cosmic ... it is 'anti-Jewish'. And that it why it isn't really a problem to note that, like Japan and Turkey and other national groups with whom we've had personal experience (including significant segments of American society), the current elite of Israel are highly racially conscious. Anyone who says differently has his/her head in the sand. Israel, in its official ideology, has a deeply rooted animus toward Arab and Islamic culture (and its peoples) that is nourished at the roots of what became (since the days of Napoleon's occupation of Egypt) the pseudo-science of Orientalism. That remains one of the most persistent themes in our western culture of which Israel (as a colonial implant) is an extreme caricature.

So if Israel is bombing, strafing and bombarding Lebanon ... who cares? They reduce Gaza to stone-age existence ... who cares? **THREE ISRAELI SOLDIERS ARE NOW BEING HELD HOSTAGE**, for God's sake! Hundreds of Palestinians and mounting casualties in Lebanon don't even register on the political Richter scale. They're not really 'people' in the strict sense of the word, are they? How can you compare those to the 'suffering' of the Israeli people? Massive violence on Israel's part cannot be compared to the penny-ante stuff the Lebanese and the Palestinians are mounting ... unless, of course, you're Anti-Semitic.

But don't be misled. Founded as a garrison state, Israel has never had a plan for co-existence with its neighbors that doesn't require their abject submission to Israel's own agenda. And that agenda has never had much to do with the region as a whole. It has only had relevance within Israel's vocation as an outpost of westernism in the Middle East ... our only 'true democratic ally in the Middle East'.

So don't be surprised that the Israelis have been able to commit outright aggression against their Lebanese neighbor. Israel has invaded southern Lebanon before, and can do so again with impunity. The most harsh censure that has been forthcoming from western powers (including Russia) is that Israel has used 'excessive force'. I am growing nostalgic for a Dwight D. Eisenhower who had the gall to tell the British, French *and Israelis* categorically to get the hell out of Sinai and the Canal Zone in 1956. And they did! Bush could do that now with respect to Lebanon, but he won't. Times have changed. The one truly unrestrained renegade state in the world can do whatever it damned well pleases. In its lexicon, the 'P' word has no currency.

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Israel is not the first state in the world to be established upon questionable grounds. The American Republic also dispossessed thousands of native Americans and the momentum proved unstoppable. You can't say that history didn't happen. The Mohawks do not own New York State; the Sioux and the Cherokee don't own the Great Plains; and the Navahos cannot claim the South West. Like it or not, they're now part of

the system that exists. They now own the 4<sup>th</sup> of July along with the rest of us. We Americans hate tyranny and love liberty, and that's what the American constitution is all about. Everyone has access to that ... at least in theory.

Tell me what a Palestinian has to look forward to in a system that defines him or her as a non-person. The media report 'one Palestinian died' or two or ten or hundreds without any sense of outrage or humanitarian scandal. Palestinians too have pride in their homeland, their place in the broader scheme of things. So do the Lebanese. Then it should come as no surprise when that sense of patriotism finally melds with a fanatical piety to raise the ante and make of their struggle ... their legitimate daily life aspiration ... a cosmic thing. Their enemy is their model and their mentor.

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As Mr. Levy pointed out, there's a self-destructive stupidity involved in all this. And, mind you, Britain and all Europe, the United States, all North America and even Oceania (Australia and New Zealand) are inextricably implicated. Somewhere along the line, for the sake of the species' survival, patriotism and piety have got to come into harmony with morality, and self-interest must begin to balance out and accommodate the interests of *all*. This is *humanity* we're talking about. We are not just Jews, Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, Shintos, Confucians and God knows what else. We're not just any number of ethnic and national groupings. *We're all human beings, for God's sake!* Somewhere along the line, those who exercise power have got to be made aware that, beyond patriotism and piety ... beyond self-interest ... *they must also be moral.*

It is then that we may begin to gain a handle upon the affairs of our world.

And I greet you from the lands of the morning.

### **A Postscript:**

It has now been a full two years since John Hubers cajoled me into taking up this task. But as of July 1<sup>st</sup>, John Hubers is no longer our 'supervisor'. He has plunged, neck deep, into pursuing a PhD degree in Chicago, something I never quite achieved. The old saying is, 'Close, but no cigar!' I am, as a sign we once saw on a car in India declared, a 'PhD-Attempt'. The French have a nicer phrase; they call what I achieved a '*Diplome Superieur*'. I wish John better luck than I had, and, given both his talent and his persistence, I've no doubt he will achieve his goal. But were it not for him I would never have had to the effrontery to take up this task. He has sustained me, he has encouraged me, and occasionally has exercised his editorial right to raise questions concerning what I have written. That has never been either vain or off-target. So I ask you all, with me, to bid him God speed and great success. Although, unlike other topics I have picked up, he has not asked for this one, I dedicate this anniversary meditation to him as well as to Deb Meendering, his magnificent administrative assistant (who also moves on to things more glorious).