

GATHER THE PEOPLE

Community and Faith-Based Organizing and Development Resources

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IMPATIENCE OF THE SOUL *

By Rabbi Moshe ben Asher, Ph.D. & Magidah Khulda bat Sarah

Young people under the age of 18 commit nearly 25 percent of all crimes in which weapons are used—and these offenses are increasing faster than all other crimes committed by young people. Whites make up more than half of all such arrests (70 whites out of every 100,000), although the arrest rate for blacks is five times that for whites (362 blacks out of every 100,000).

Contrary to popular opinion, the problem is not limited to urban, inner-city neighborhoods. In small-town Sonoma County, California, where we lived several years ago, much of which is rural and dotted with world-famous vineyards, the numbers of young people wounded and killed by guns climbed into the double digits in the late 1990s. Drive-by shootings became commonplace. During the same period in the town of Clearlake, in adjacent rural Lake County, known for its “bucolic splendor,” four teenage defendants were arraigned for the murder of a 14-year-old.

Living in close proximity to this violence—at home, in and near school, and in their neighborhoods—about three-quarters of all American children ages 7 to 10, not surprisingly, fear being shot or stabbed at home or in school, more than 60 percent worry about dying young, and 70 percent are afraid of being hit by an adult. By the time they reach their teen years, nearly 40 percent of the boys ages 14 to 17 say they or a friend had been assaulted or threatened with a weapon, and quarter of them said that they or a friend had been a victim of gang violence.

What is their future?

The number of violent crimes has been rising among younger and younger adolescents. As one Princeton University professor put it, many of them are “fatherless, godless, and jobless.” The FBI has forecast “future crime and violence at

nearly unprecedented levels.” Similarly the Council on Crime in America, a nonpartisan organization of prosecutors and law enforcement officials, called the situation a “ticking time bomb.”

Pressures & Pain

How are we to understand what’s happening?

On the face of it, huge numbers of people in this country—not only the poor and minorities, although they suffer in the extreme—are experiencing extraordinary pressures in their day-to-day lives. Many can no longer tolerate the pressures, which exceed their emotional and psychological thresholds of pain and control, and for which they have few spiritual or religious resources in the form of hope and faith with which to recover. The underlying causes are, of course, comprised of a complex web of economic, political, and social forces. But we also need to understand the experience of the individual—both the pain and the hopelessness.

Solomon Yitzhak ben Isaac (1040-1105), one of the great rabbinic commentators on the Bible, described what he called an “impatience of the soul.” It is the situation in which “everything is difficult for a person . . . upon whom trouble has come and his mind is not at ease (i.e., not sufficiently large) to receive that thing, and he has no place within his heart where that grief should remain.” (Numbers 21:4)

We Americans, all of us, experience some of those pressures. Our aging parents and spouses are mistreated in nursing and convalescent homes. Our children attend schools in which the authorities are confiscating deadly weapons. Our relatives and friends are dying from AIDS. We are overwhelmed by the incessant demands of our work, although many of us are under-employed and some of us are unemployed. And millions have

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lost hope for a better life, free of the pressures that devastate families. So we see ourselves acting out, sometimes violently—against our parents, against our spouses, against our children, against our neighbors, against our co-workers, against strangers, and, not surprisingly, often against ourselves.

Too many Americans—our own family members and friends included—do not see alternatives; they do not see options through which they can change the circumstances of their lives. Too many of them feel stuck and enervated, even those who may be educated and “successful.” When we cannot eliminate the vulnerabilities in our lives, when we cannot protect our families and ourselves from forces beyond our control, we go “crazy”—our senses become clouded, our reasoning becomes confused, and we begin to react out of our pain. Virtually all of us have done that, although most of us have stopped far short of violence—but not always.

The country has been experiencing a plague of domestic violence—against children, spouses, and the elderly—which knows no class boundaries. In one Reform Jewish congregation, a husband shot his wife to death. We asked the rabbi whether he thought this deadly domestic violence was an isolated event. He thought about it carefully and then answered that the same pressures leading to the violence in that one family were common among other families in the congregation. Later this rabbi conveyed the reach of those pressures when he recalled the epilogue to that domestic violence: a four-year old daughter at the gravesite saying “bye-bye mommy” and waving as her mother’s casket was lowered into the earth.

When we find that we have lost control of the things on which our realities and resources in life depend, we lose control of ourselves—literally. For those who become violent, all the things on which their identity and their understanding of the world are pegged, which are the underpinnings of their sanity, begin to dissolve.

Why is this happening in America? Why is this happening to innocent people, to “decent” people, to honest, hardworking people?

Arguably, the issue is not why this has been happening—there are endless reasons—but why so many Americans have not responded better. We have had an epidemic of violence that has taken thousands of young lives and maimed tens of thousands of others.

Why have we not stopped it in the last decade? Why does the violence continue its destructive cycle?

Shared Faith

Perhaps because most Americans have come to believe that if “they” win, *we* lose, and if *we* win, “they” lose. We do not have a shared faith that Americans—all of us together—can uplift ourselves. That faith has been destroyed by the spirit-poisoning conditions of American life.

America is in a crisis of faith—and “religious” Americans are not exempt from that crisis. Many of us, like our fellow citizens, no longer believe that through our personal faith, through our congregations (for those who are affiliated), through our religion, and through our God, we have the power to save our youth and reverse the tide of violence in our cities and towns. Because too many Americans, whatever their religion, have lost that faith, and the religiosity in which it was seeded, we no longer share a vision that we can act together for our common good. We have turned over our religious and civic responsibilities to a handful of dedicated and overworked clergy, denominational officials and judicatories, religious educators, politicians, bureaucrats, teachers, police, and social workers.

How can we find our way out of this crisis? What must happen for us to have faith as Americans that, together, with our own initiatives and God’s help, we can help change our country’s deadly heading?

Commonwealth of Faith

The way out, of course, cannot be simple, quick, or easy. As far-fetched as it may sound in our present circumstances, we must imagine that at the end of the maze in which we find ourselves, large numbers of us have begun to publicly affirm and act on our common religious faith and responsibilities as citizens of a democracy. That public expression and exercise of shared faith and civic responsibility may become possible when we can persuade ourselves that we have values and self-interests in common. But do we?

Most of us would agree that it is possible to increase goodness in the world, that we can build just, free, and peaceful communities that allow every individual and people to develop in the image of God. We find in ourselves a frequently stifled but often irrepressible urge to act for the common good, despite our reason and our experience, which tell us there is no hope. Although we may never agree on the nature of God, might we see the possibility for good to grow by our actions with others who are different from ourselves?

Most of us believe that we must maintain the integrity of families, including the moral and cultural education of children, as the fountainhead of community and nation. Although we may never agree on what makes the ideal family, can we

acknowledge that we all benefit from protecting and enhancing life in every family, and that each and every child must be treasured?

Most of us acknowledge that we cannot indefinitely avoid our own responsibility and that of our communities, religious and secular, for the perversion and corruption of American politics and economy. Each of us individually, and every organization that is founded on principles of democratic and religious faith, has an obligation and self-interest in shoring up the foundations of our political and economic life.

That we identify ourselves as believers in God and democracy bespeaks a self-imposed obligation as Americans to share fully in the responsibility not only for our sectarian interests but larger American interests too. If we ignore that obligation, we do so at our peril from the threat of violence against our families, our communities, and ourselves.

Examining Our Traditions

Along with all other Americans, we must look to the religious traditions in which we have descend-

ed. We must each look to our own tradition for the vision and the wisdom it can offer us in this time of violence; we must examine the moral and ethical teachings that have inspired, guided, and sustained our people for millennia.

And we must begin the difficult and awkward effort to talk with one another—first within our own circles and congregations, then across social, economic, cultural, religious, ethnic, and racial boundaries—about our moral and ethical teachings and how they relate to the common pressures we face as Americans. The goal of such talk must be to encourage a thoughtful citizenry that is organized for action and committed to the creation of a commonwealth in the image of God.

For those who are willing to make this effort, the words of Rabbi Israel Salanter (1810-1883) may be instructive: “A person who works for the community must have three virtues: he [or she] must not get tired, must not get angry, and must not be eager to see a project completed.”

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