



A View of the Absurd

❖ JACK ENGELHARD

Why Was This Night of Massacre Different?

Last Wednesday -- going back a week -- was a night for Passover and a night for a Passover massacre. It was a night to sit at the Seder table and it was a night to sin by keeping the TV going. We did this -- well, I did this -- to keep tabs on how many of my fellow Jews had been murdered in Netanya. The number kept climbing, even as the Seder progressed. So I sinned for leaving the table in favor of a frequent glimpse at the TV, and I sinned for being so angry.

This was a difficult Seder. I explained this to the assembled, which included my children. The matzoh was not tough to swallow, but this was, from the Haggadah: "Blessed art Thou, Eternal our God, ruler of the universe, who has given us life and sustenance and brought us to this happy season."

Bad timing for such praise, as more and more dead were being recovered from the ruins of another Arab suicide bombing (with more to come). But this was a difficult time to speak of a happy season, so difficult that when I first sat down to conduct the Seder, I forgot the pillow. Years (perhaps centuries) past, we placed a pillow on the chair, and reclined, to symbolize our ease now that we were out of bondage.

But I did not feel at ease, and I felt very much in bondage, and I explained this to the assembled. My people in Israel were suffering under the bondage of terrorism. The Haggadah instructs us to refer to the Exodus Israelites as not **THEY**, but as **US** -- all of us were delivered, you and me. Likewise, then, it is **US**, here in America, who suffer along with Israel.

Then we came to the passage in the Haggadah that spoke of how the Almighty delivered us out of Egypt with a strong hand, with signs and wonders.

This, I said, had always given me trouble. Where was this strong hand when we needed it in Auschwitz? Where are these signs and wonders today in Netanya, Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Haifa?

Like I said, I was having a rough Seder, and I sinned for speaking such heresy. My children asked me about this, as though this were a Fifth Question.

I said that we have to take it the same way Moses took it, when Moses, up in Mount Sinai to receive the Torah, was shown the future, and was stricken when he saw Rabbi Akiva tortured by the Romans, along with thousands of his Yeshiva students. Moses asked God, what's this? Rabbi Akiva knows more Torah than even I do. How can you make him suffer so?

"Never mind," said God. "This is none of your business. I know what I'm doing."

I said that's how it must be for us as well. We must believe in God and We must love God -- but there are mysteries beyond our comprehension.

We cannot explain suffering. This is God's secret. So even in the face of pain and dismay, He is (as it says) -- He is my God and I will worship Him.

This does not mean that we cannot protest. We can. We must. We refer to Yom Kippur as Yom Ha'Kipurim. This is plural. This means that we ask God to forgive us, and it also means that God asks us to forgive Him. Protest against Providence was virtually the entire career of one of our greatest rabbis, Levi-Yitzchak of Berditchev. Each day he opened the Holy Ark and lamented -- "Ha-shem, Ha-shem, I have a petition. What are you doing to Your

children Israel? The nations pray to others, only we pray to You, and this is our reward?"

This was several centuries ago, in Poland's Galicia, and then too, of course, there were massacres. After one such pogrom, this great rabbi was moved to declare: "If that's how it is, let Ivan blow shofar for you."

But he spoke as a son speaks to a father. So irreverence is permitted, but within bounds.

But there were moments during this Seder when I was out of bounds. The TV was showing the paramedics picking up the pieces, pieces of Jews. Then the news shifted to American reaction. This was something I was waiting for, the Jewish spine, the Jewish outrage, the American Jewish sympathy for their brothers and sisters in Israel. For the Israelis are not **THEM**, they are **US**.

A Jewish woman in New York was being interviewed. She was so kosher that her Passover dishes were wrapped in plastic. She explained how religious and how Jewish she was.

What was her reaction to the massacre in Netanya on this Passover night? "We must extend ourselves to the Palestinians," she said.

This was when I sinned most terribly. Just like the Holocaust, I told the assembled. While their fellow Jews go up in smoke a continent away, American Jews fall silent. Or worse.

This was a highly educated woman who spoke thus. I pleaded with my children to never become so highly educated.

"You're angry," said my wife. She said that each time I returned from the TV.

Why is this night different from any other night? Because it's worse. That's why I'm angry, I said.

Nearing the end of the Seder we opened the door for Elijah and we said: "Pour out Thy wrath upon the nations that know Thee not, and upon the kingdoms that call not upon Thy name; for they have consumed Jacob and laid waste his habitation. Pour out Thy rage upon them and let Thy fury overtake them. Pursue them in anger and destroy them from under the heavens of the Eternal."

So let it be done!

Then, in conclusion, we repeated the ancient entreaty: "Next year in Jerusalem."

This, I reminded the assembled, is supposed to be **OUR** dream. Not Yasir Arafat's.

Yes, it was a very rough Seder.

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