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Jimmy Carter's Al Het

A lot of things took place while I was away that are worthy of discussion; important things like the two earthquakes: last week's in Haiti, and this week's in Massachusetts. But that will wait until next week. Today I want to discuss an issue that came up when going through my mail and I am going to let you help me decide. We all have choices to make every day of our lives. One of those choices is: who should we give money to ... what organizations are worthy of our support? I know that because I am a rabbi, I am on more of these mailing lists than others but all of you get requests to support one organization or another, one cause or another. And we want to help, but it's really impossible to help them all. It used to be that mail requests came twice a year; once for the March of Dimes to fight polio and the other for Easter Seals to fight tuberculosis. Now those two ailments are basically under control, but now there is hardly a day that one doesn't get requests from organizations working on our kidneys, our colons, our livers, our blood, our bones and parts of our bodies we didn't even know we had! Now they come from organizations from Save the World to Save the Whales, from liberals and conservatives ... and then there is the onslaught of the Jewish organizations – those fighting anti-Semitism, those fighting ignorance. It is hard to know who to support and who to help. So I have certain guidelines that I follow. First I look at whom the envelope is addressed to. If I get it here at the synagogue and the request is addressed to Rabbi Rosenblatt, I generally don't respond. I also don't respond to solicitation on behalf of animals ... that's just not my thing! If it is an organization I never heard of, I usually keep it that way! But while I was away, I got this envelope and I wasn't sure how to respond, so I decided that I would ask you. It is a request from Jimmy Carter for the Jimmy Carter Center. Should I write them a check, or not? You tell me ... how many say I should send a check? How many say no? That's what I thought!

Jimmy Carter is one person that we Jews love to hate ... and with good reason. He has been one of Israel's most severe critics. There is nothing about him worth supporting. That's what I would have said last month, but now it's not as simple as that! Recently Jimmy Carter issued a statement that was absolutely incredible. It was a statement in which he said: "We must recognize Israel's achievements under difficult circumstances, even as we strive in a positive way to help Israel continue to improve its relations with its Arab populations. But we must not permit criticisms for improvement to stigmatize Israel." And then Carter went on to say, "As I would have noted at Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, but which is appropriate at any time of the year, I offer an Al Het for any words or deeds of mine that may have done so." I must say, that is one of the most unbelievable statements I have heard from a political figure. Jimmy Carter, former President of the United States and an on-going critic of Israel, offers an Al Het to the Jewish people? Is that really possible? Even more, how are we supposed to react? Should we forgive him? From the initial reaction it doesn't seem that we Jews are prepared or willing to do that. The Zionist Organization of America has twice issued statements rejecting his appeal. One statement wasn't enough! The more mainstream Anti-Defamation League issued a lukewarm

statement recognizing Carter's Al Het as being a "beginning" and the Wiesenthal Center said it had to be "looked at seriously." But is that all there is to say? Aren't we a compassionate people? Wouldn't forgiving Carter be the "Christian" thing to do?

For centuries now there has been an ugly stereotype regarding Judaism and Christianity. Christianity, we are told, is a religion of love ... ours a religion of justice. Christianity is a religion of compassion ... ours is a religion of vengeance. Is that really so? Well, two other recent events would seem to indicate that it is very possible. First, we had Brit Hume, the anchor on Fox News, appeal to Tiger Woods – who has enough *tzores* – to convert from Buddhism to Christianity. Mr. Hume said, "I don't think that Buddhism offers the kind of forgiveness and redemption that is offered by the Christian faith." Is it true that only Christianity offers forgiveness and redemption and not Judaism? One would have reason to believe that when informed that last week Pope Benedict met with – and forgave – the woman who knocked him to the ground at Christmas Eve Mass. According to the Vatican statement, the Pope "wanted to show his forgiveness and his cordial interest and wishes for her health." So here is the Pope, the head of the Roman Catholic Church, forgiving a woman who sought to harm him, and she hadn't even asked for forgiveness!

When I read this about the Pope I thought of a book entitled, "The Sunflower" written by Simon Wiesenthal. The book is written in novel form but it is obvious, and Wiesenthal later confirmed, that the incident he wrote of had actually happened to him. The story is as follows: a Jewish inmate in a concentration camp is called to the bedside of a Nazi S.S. officer who is dying. The Nazi says to him, "I did something very terrible which I must get off my chest before I die." The Nazi goes on to describe how one day, as part of a group of S.S. soldiers, he had herded a group of Jews into a synagogue, then doused the synagogue with gasoline and set it on fire. When a Jewish mother, father and child tried in desperation to escape, the Nazi shot them dead on the spot. And now the Nazi, about to die, turned to this Jewish inmate and said, "I ask your forgiveness." Wiesenthal goes on to write that later on in life, he asked many prominent Jews and Christians what they would have done had they been placed in the position that Wiesenthal had found himself in. 95% of the Christians who replied responded that they would have forgiven the Nazi, and 95% of the Jews who replied responded that they would NOT have forgiven the Nazi. What had Wiesenthal done? He writes that to this very day he does not know if he did the right thing, but standing there under such trying circumstances, he could not decide what to do. And so, when the Nazi asked for forgiveness, he walked out of the room!

95% of the Christians would have forgiven and 95% of the Jews would not have forgiven? Are Christians more forgiving than Jews are? Should we forgive Jimmy Carter? Is Britt Hume right, that forgiveness is a "Christian" thing? Is the Pope's recent act of forgiveness further proof of the fact that theirs is a religion of love and forgiveness, while ours is a religion of justice and vengeance? How are we to understand this?

It would seem to me that a major philosophic question found in the Torah readings of recent weeks provides us with an understanding of what forgiveness really means from a Jewish perspective; why is it understandable that 95% of Jews would not have forgiven the Nazi, and why, the Jewish tradition – a tradition based on compassion and forgiveness – would not agree

with the Pope's act of forgiveness, and why Jimmy Carter will have to do a lot more breast-beating before I would send him any money.

Our Torah reading these past few weeks have all dealt with the story of the Jewish enslavement in the land of Egypt. 210 years after being enslaved, God brings a series of ten plagues on the Egyptian people meant to force Pharaoh to allow the Jews to leave. But there is one statement that God makes right at the beginning of these series of plagues which has confounded commentators and religious thinkers. Before the plagues, God tells Moses: "I warn you now, these plagues are not going to help, they are not going to change Pharaoh's mind, because I will harden the heart of Pharaoh." How can we understand this? Our tradition preaches the concept of a free will, a freedom of choice. If God is going to harden Pharaoh's heart, where is Pharaoh's free will? How can he be held responsible for his actions? And what about forgiveness? Biblical commentators offer many explanations for the meaning of God having hardened the heart of Pharaoh, but there are three explanations, in particular, which are most relevant for our discussion. One commentary, the Sifsei Chachomim, explains that it was known to God that, if because of the plagues, Pharaoh changed his wicked ways and would have allowed the Jews to leave, this act of repentance on his part would not have been done "with a full heart." He really would not have meant it! Basically, he was an evil man; he would have allowed the Jews to leave because of the plagues, not because he himself had changed. His act of repentance would have been half-hearted at best, and a hypocritical act to say the least. In hardening Pharaoh's heart, God, so to speak, sought to avoid a hypocritical forgiveness.

Was Mr. Carter's apology sincere? There is no way of knowing for sure. It came from out of nowhere! Well, not really. Some claim that it came from somewhere ... not from events in the Middle East, but from events that are taking place in Georgia, where Mr. Carter's grandson is running for a seat in the State assembly. And there are many who can't help but feel that Mr. Carter's apology did not come from his heart, but from political expediency. He didn't want it to be that his grandson would lose an election because Jews might vote against him because his name is Carter. If that is the reason for the apology then certainly Carter is a hypocrite and should remain unforgiven. But is that the reason? One cannot know for sure.

Which brings us to a second explanation of the concept of God "hardening the heart of Pharaoh" which sheds further light on the Jewish concept of forgiveness. The Torah tells us that during the seventh plague – the plague of hail – Pharaoh called Moses and Aaron and said to them, "I have sinned. The Lord is righteous and I and my people are wicked." Here Pharaoh is clearly proclaiming his regret and his understanding that all that he has done was wrong, that God is right, and yet here too, his heart is hardened. Why? From a Christian perspective, he has now performed one of the key so-called "mitzvots" of Christianity: he has confessed his sin. And yet, from a Jewish perspective, and the Bible tells us that from the perspective of God, this was not – in and of itself – enough reason for Pharaoh to have been forgiven. Why not? Simply put, the commentators explain confessing one's sin is not a sufficient reason to forgive a person. Much more is required. Sure, Pharaoh said, "I'm sorry, I was wrong for what I did." But how are we to know that, given the opportunity he would not perform his acts of cruelty once again in the future? While hail and thunder and lightning is hitting him, he says he's sorry for what he had done, but lo and behold, as soon as the hail stopped, the Torah tells us, "He did not let the children of Israel go and he continued to afflict them." Sure, a Nazi on his death bed, a would-be

murderer in jail, a Pharaoh being hit by hail, naturally have a tendency to say “I’m sorry ... I’m was wrong.” But that only tell us that they are now sorry under these circumstances for what they did in the past ... it tells us nothing about whether they are sincere about not committing the same crimes in the future. Sure, Judaism believes in repentance and forgiveness, but what kind of repentance and forgiveness? Only when given the opportunity the person doesn’t commit the same sin again!

The Pope forgave his attacker, but does he know if given the opportunity, she wouldn’t attack him again? Even more: she never even said she was sorry ... she never asked for forgiveness. At least Jimmy Carter has asked, but still, how do we know if it is sincere? It’s too soon to tell. We have to wait ... we have to wait until after his grandson’s election. We have to wait and see how events unfold in the Middle East, and what Mr. Carter has to say about that. Then we’ll know if it is the “new” Carter or “same old, same old.”

And I have to tell you that even if it is a “new” Carter, I’m not sure how far we should go with our forgiveness. Which brings us to the third explanation of why God hardened the heart of Pharaoh; an explanation that is quite radical ... radical and difficult for many to accept, but I have no problem in accepting it. The great Jewish philosopher, Maimonides, explains that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart because there are some people who perform some sins which are indeed unforgivable. Pharaoh was the first who sought to destroy the Jewish people, and in so doing, he made it acceptable for others to follow suit. Similarly, here in America, before Carter’s criticism of Israel, it came for the most part from the Pat Buchanan’s of the extreme right and the Noam Chomsky’s of the extreme left. Jimmy Carter came along and he was the first to viciously criticize from the American mainstream. And he did it in the ugliest sort of way ... he chose to title his book about Israel as “Peace or Apartheid.” The fact that a former President of the United State – a Nobel Peace Prize laureate – was accusing Israel of Apartheid caused undo – and perhaps irreversible – damage to the Jewish people. Of course, there have always been – and always will be – critics of Israel, Christians, Muslims and Jews alike, and of course some of Israel’s policies are worthy of criticism. But in using this word “apartheid”, in making the world think of Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians people – 20% of whom are citizens of Israel – as being no different than the way South Africans had treated blacks, this coming from a former President of the U.S. and Nobel Peace Prize winner ... that made it acceptable for anybody and everybody to become a critic of Israel and to say anything and everything about the Jewish state; even reaching the point where many have started questioning Israel’s right to exist. A case can be made that this is unforgivable.

When it comes to Israel, there certainly is an important aspect of Christian forgiveness that should be kept in mind. All of Israel’s critics – the Jimmy Carters of this world – would do well to take to heart the words of the highly esteemed Rector of St. Bartholomew’s Episcopal Church in New York City, who when asked to comment about criticism of Israel, wrote in the *Washington Post*:

“If there is another place on this planet where we are required to be more spiritually sensitive and achingly careful than Israel and Palestine, I don’t know where it is ...

One fact seems to me determinative: persistent persecution of the Jews, culminating in the Holocaust of the 1930s and 1940s, forced the world powers to guarantee a secure homeland. Since my faith community has been a great offender in that persecution, one reason I embrace Israel is to contribute to a kind of repentance ...

All of these realities make legitimate criticism of Israel's policies and politics a very, very delicate matter. Israel's own leaders and citizens often eloquently criticize its ways and have advocated for Palestinian statehood and rights. They should take the lead in such criticism.

The rest of us should be very wary. I choose to err on the side of forbearance whenever possible. That's a bias—not a total bias but a bias nevertheless. And for me it's a bias rooted both in faith and in fact.”

Yes, living in a world where millions of radical Islamists are sworn to the murder of every Jew, a world in which Hamas and Hezbollah refuse to recognize Israel's right to exist, a world in which there is an Iran pursuing nuclear weapons which it threatens to use to annihilate Israel ... living in such a world, a world which allowed 1/3 of the Jewish people to be annihilated just one generation ago right smack in the heart of Christian Europe ... living in such a world, Israel and the Jewish people have earned and deserve the benefit of the doubt. If you're going to be biased after 2000 years of exile and ghettos and persecutions and pogroms and gas chambers, the people of Israel deserve a break. That would be the real “Christian” thing to do.

Jimmy Carter was not willing to do it, but perhaps now he is. We'll have to wait and see. For now I will continue to live by my mother's words: When it comes to family, always forgive and forget. When it comes to others, forgive but don't forget. Someday, I may forgive Jimmy Carter but I'll never forget what he did and I'll never send him a check! And I hope that no one else will as well!

Instead let's all send a check for Haitian relief. Next week I'll talk about it. But it has often been said that Judaism is a religion of “deed” not of “creed.” Talk can wait for next week, but actions speak louder than words. We will judge Jimmy Carter in the future by his actions. In the meantime, let our actions speak well of us. Amen.

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