Shoftim

What happens when the defeated become the conquerors. The question that doesn’t cease to haunt me, when we debate how we should be treating the Palestinians.

Some of my good friends still tell me whatever has happened to them, and is happening to them, no matter how bad, is basically their fault. Their fault for choosing to oppose Israel, and when they lost the war, for fleeing to other arab lands; or for listening to their leaders who urged them to fight the jews.

We blame those who lost, which is like blaming the victims. But who is not a victim, sooner or later. For Simone Weil, who chose to live, in exile during the war, on the same regime as those in the camps; she had TB, and died. Here is the wiki summation: “Yet there is now evidence that Weil was recruited by the Special Operations Executive, with a view to sending her back to France as a clandestine wireless operator. In May 1943, plans were underway to send her for training, but were cancelled soon after, as her failing health became known.The punishing work-régime she assumed soon took a heavy toll; in 1943, she was diagnosed with tuberculosis and instructed to rest and eat well. However, she refused special treatment because of her long-standing political idealism and her detachment from material things. Instead, she limited her food intake to what she believed residents of German-occupied France ate. She most likely ate even less, as she refused food on most occasions. Her condition quickly deteriorated, after a lifetime of battling illness and frailty, Weil died in August 1943 from cardiac failure at the age of 34. The coroner's report said that "the deceased did kill and slay herself by refusing to eat whilst the balance of her mind was disturbed.

The exact cause of her death remains a subject of debate. Some claim that her refusal to eat came from her desire to express some form of solidarity toward the victims of the war.”

In a famous essay on the Iliad, which I read more than 50 years ago, she argued that the victors are blinded by their victory, and cannot imagine themselves as being in the position of the victims. The greeks never imagined themselves in the place of the trojans, but yet they all become like the victims, sooner or later. Even the greatest of all the warriors, Achilles, loses his best friend Patroclus, and weeps. After capturing his enemy hector’s father, king priam, he still drags hector’s body around the city to punish him. The ruler fell, and his executioner never dreams he too will fall another day.

This is the arrogance of America that cannot imagine apologizing for Vietnam. Imperial monuments still stand in brussels, paris, London. We mourn for our dead, our 54,000 who died, while millions of Vietnamese were killed, and mourning for their death remains confined to their national borders.

Our parshah, the torah reading and the haftorah, position us, as always, between the mentality of the victor and of the victim. How can we put these two together? I will point out some of the key passages on both sides, and suggest that it is only in the tension between the two that Judaism can find, not a balance, but a location where we should seek some of the humility of Simone Weil, or of our own Walter Kron, for whom victory over the Nazis never resulted

In blind exaltation. Walter’s stories about returning to a broken Germany, with the victorious troops, were anything but jubilant. He recounted returning to his small school where he grew up with a class of ten boys, and learning of all those in his class, the others, german Christians, all had died. And at the same time learned of the death of his own parents. What mattered about this was the way Walter told us. It was in the spirit of his recounting, as I remember it, that I want to evoke the place of tension between the torah and haftorah portions.

For the torah, the entry into the conquered lands, was to be marked by destruction of the enemies.

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| 20:12But if it does not make peace with you, and it wages war against you, you shall besiege it, |
| 13and the Lord, your God, will deliver it into your hands, and you shall strike all its males with the edge of the sword. |
| 14However, the women, the children, and the livestock, and all that is in the city, all its spoils you shall take for yourself, and you shall eat the spoils of your enemies, which the Lord, your God, has given you. |
| 15Thus you shall do to all the cities that are very far from you, which are not of the cities of these nations. |

Those are the fates of those who were conquered. But if they were not merely conquered, but inhabitants of the lands to be possessed and inhabited by us, by the conquering forces—well then, the trail of tears becomes complete:

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| 16 However, of these peoples' cities, which the Lord, your God, gives you as an inheritance, you shall not allow any soul to live. |
| 17Rather, you shall utterly destroy them: The Hittites, and the Amorites, the Canaanites, and the Perizzites, the Hivvites, and the Jebusites, as the Lord, your God, has commanded you. |
| 18So that they should not teach you to act according to all their abominations that they have done for their gods, whereby you would sin against the Lord, your God. |

At this point the conquered become like not simply conquered germans, or trojans, but Nazis, Amalek, enemies we understand as in competition for our lands, our lives. For many of the increasing rightwing among jews in Israel and Brooklyn, this means Palestinians, or Israeli arabs, whose claims to eretz Israel should be expunged, and they themselves expelled or removed. Gradually east Jerusalem would be transferred into jewish hands; gradually, as the settlements increased, arab west bank lands would become jewish, the west bank would become ours, and they would have to go to Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt.

Those who contemplate such an outcome, or even who campaign for it, who seek to accomplish this, are not imagining that some day we might pay a price. The link between Auschwitz and the west bank, for them, is understood by an interpretation of the words, Never Again, to mean, we must make ourselves strong enough to insure that we will never suffer such a defeat again—not to mean that no one must suffer such a defeat.

But when we were defeated, and lived in a dream of mystical redemption, we might have sung our songs about Egypt in another key, one where our blood on the lintel did not mean that that blood was paid in the lives of Egyptian children. It is not in the torah’s account that we should look, but in Isaiah. Who begins with consolation:

51: 12 yea I am He Who consoles you.

His consolation is always marked by hope of a reversal of our miserable state, but never so as to lead us to forget—never again—the total debasement of defeat. And in the reversal, less jubilation over victory than relief over being consoled, being remembered. And in the memory, not to attribute our defeat to the greatness of our enemies, but to the workings of divine fate that doesn’t place blame on an evil Amalek.

17Awaken, awaken, arise, Jerusalem, for you have drunk from the hand o’f the Lord the cup of His wrath; the dregs of the cup of weakness you have drained.

19These two things have befallen you; who will lament for you? Plunder and destruction, and famine and sword. [With] whom will I console you?

The redemption, images of overcoming defeat, are cast in the opposite of triumphant notes: the state of internment weighs over the words that attempt to make survival bearable:

2Shake yourselves from the dust, arise, sit down, O Jerusalem; free yourself of the bands of your neck, O captive daughter of Zion.

3For so said the Lord, "You were sold for nought, and you shall not be redeemed for money."

The redemption he voices is in the images of mystical overcoming, not male militancy and the crushing of others. We can imagine his words of joyfulness in the music we would want to sing, especially at our high holidays. They are ethereal:

7How beautiful are the feet of the herald on the mountains, announcing peace, heralding good tidings, announcing salvation, saying to Zion, "Your God has manifested His kingdom."

8The voice of your watchmen- they raised a voice, together they shall sing, for eye to eye they shall see when the Lord returns to Zion.

9Burst out in song, sing together, O ruins of Jerusalem, for the Lord has consoled his people; He has redeemed Jerusalem.

In light of this play between the two positions, let us return to the end of Euripides Trojan Women, his play of the defeated women, the rulers and people of troy now reduced to being the slaves of the conquering greeks. Hecate was priam’s wife, queen over troy, and she speaks the final words:

Hekabe Priam! My Priam, my poor husband!

You are gone, my dear husband!

No grave for you Priam! No friend beside you either!

If only you knew of my misery!

Chorus A black death has covered his eyes.

Chorus A holy man, butchered by the unholy.

They get up. Hekabe looks around her for the last time

Hekabe All the temples of the gods, all my beloved city!

Chorus Ruined!

Hekabe Ruined by the murderous fire and the spear.

Chorus Beloved Troy!

Chorus Soon you will crash down upon our beloved earth and lose your glory.

Hekabe Points at the smoke raising behind the walls 1320

Just like smoke, the dust will raise to the sky and I will lose sight of my home.

Chorus Our city’s name will be gone!

Chorus Every single thing vanishes in its own way.

Chorus There will be no Troy for us any more.

A loud crash from behind the walls

Hekabe Oh! Did you hear that?

Chorus Yes, yes! All the towers are falling!

More loud crashing

Hekabe The whole earth is trembling!

The whole city!

Ah! Help me! I’m shaking. I cannot walk.

Help me, my friends! Help me walk!

Come, my friends, let us enter our days of slavery!

Chorus Runs to help her

Ah! Our poor city!

Chorus Poor Troy!

Chorus Come then, let us all go to the ships of the Greeks!

<https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/TrojanWomen.php>

Shabbat shalom