

**PARSHAT TZAV
SHABBAT ZACHOR
MARCH 19, 2011
RABBI VERNON KURTZ**

I didn't realize that my activities and my behavior could make me a terrorist. I don't seem to feel that I fill the role. However, others may not be so sure.

This past Monday, CNN reported on-line that passengers on Alaska Airlines flight 241 became alarmed when three men begin to pray out loud. "Shortly after take-off three passengers were praying out loud in a language other than Spanish," according to an airline spokeswoman. "They had something that appeared to the flight attendants to be strapped under their clothing. The flight attendants alerted the flight deck, who in-turn alerted the tower at LAX. Law enforcement met the plane upon arrival."

The report goes on to state that "during weekday prayers, some Orthodox Jewish men wear teffilin, black leather straps wrapped around the left arm and around the forehead. The straps are connected to small boxes with tiny scrolls containing Jewish scripture. Many Orthodox Jewish men also wear a prayer shawl called a Tallit under their clothes, with knotted fringes at each of the four corners." The airline spokeswoman said she was unaware if the men were wearing either of these traditional items.

When the plane landed at LAX it was greeted by members of the airport police, the FBI and Customs and Border Protection. The men were questioned and their baggage was searched before they were cleared to go.

A few weeks ago I left Israel on a Lufthansa flight to Frankfurt, there to catch another flight to Chicago. We left at 5:30 a.m., too early for me to put on my Tallit and Tefillin and daven, to offer the morning prayers. So like I have done on many planes, while the flight was in the air, I put on my Tallit and Tefillin and participated in the private Shacharit service. Luckily for me, no one seemed to complain and I was able to recite my daily prayers while making my way to Chicago.

While one may understand the trepidation involved in seeing something that may be unusual, it smacks somewhat of xenophobia, the fear of the stranger. I gather that to the flight attendants, and maybe even the passengers, these Orthodox men seemed somewhat strange in their behavior and, therefore, were immediately suspect. It is rather sad that this is the case, but that is the world in which we live. People are frightened of that which is foreign to them. Sometimes that fear and trepidation may be appropriate, many times it is not.

Tonight and tomorrow morning we will celebrate Purim and read Megillat Esther, the story of Mordecai and Esther and the salvation of our people in the ancient land of Persia. The scene is set by Haman coming before King Ahasuerus and stating: "There is a certain people, scattered and dispersed among the other peoples in all the provinces of

your realm, whose laws are different from those of any other people and do not obey the King's laws; and it is not in Your Majesty's interests to tolerate them."

M.V. Fox in his commentary on the Book of Esther points out that there is a rhetorical strategy behind the structure of Haman's statements: "Haman starts with the truth, the Jews are scattered and dispersed; goes on to a half-truth that the Jews have different laws and customs; and ends with a lie that the Jews do not observe imperial law."

Adele Berlin in her commentary on the book states that "although it is clear that Haman's accusation is pure fabrication, it rings so true in terms of later Anti-Semitic claims that we are forced to consider if it has a basis in history." She contends that in some Greek and Egyptian writings there is a description of Jews as having a different way of life from all the other nations and of being opposed to the customs and culture of the majority. She believes that what we have in Haman's statement is what was later to grow into the classic Anti-Semitic argument that Jews are xenophobic and misanthropic.

While it is true that the Jews were scattered throughout Ahasuerus' kingdom, the laws of the Jewish people, other than some of the ritual laws, are not that different from the majority culture. Rabbinic exegesis held up as a standard of positive demeanor that Jews were different in their eating of kosher food, observing the festivals and the like. However, the attitude of the Persian government to distinctive practices of different people was usually tolerant. Haman's accusation should be understood as the exaggeration that it is.

As to the fact that the Jewish people did not obey the King's laws this probably has to do with the fact that Mordecai refused to obey the royal command to bow down to Haman. For Haman that was enough to demonize not only Mordecai, but his entire people. Thus, since according to Haman the Jewish people were a threat to the King's sovereignty, the solution is to destroy them.

This xenophobic attitude has been used against the Jews in many different locales during many different eras of human history. We have been seen as different, separate, unlike others and, thus, deserve to be scorned, hated, and even destroyed. It is an irrational hatred, one that cannot be explained in a simple manner. Jews, on the other hand, are instructed many times in the Torah not to have this type of attitude, not to demonize others, but to welcome the stranger and to extend to him or her hospitality. Thirty-six times in the Torah we are told to treat the stranger properly "for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."

This is not an easy task; sometimes events in history create great challenges. In the State of Israel today there are grave issues having to do with foreign workers, refugees who have escaped from the slaughter in the Sudan and surreptitiously crossed the border from Egypt into Israel. There have been many heated discussions in the political arena and in the civic arena concerning the attitude of Israel to these foreigners. On the one hand, we should extend our welcome to the strangers in our midst and

recognize our past history of being outsiders. The first country, after all, that extended hospitality to the Vietnamese boat people was the State of Israel led by then Prime Minister Menachem Begin. On the other hand, Israel feels threatened that it may be overwhelmed by refugees from black Africa who are fleeing for their lives and are refused refuge in other countries. There are some who are concerned about the future effect upon the Jewish character of the State. This is not an easy challenge to modern Israeli society.

Last Friday night in the Israeli settlement of Itamer in the West Bank or Judea and Samaria, the five members of the Fogel family were brutally murdered in cold blood. Two parents and three young children were sadistically killed. It is believed that Palestinian terrorists perpetrated this horrible crime. What should our reaction be to this event? It is clear that those who did this dastardly deed must be caught and immediately brought to justice. The question is, are there more people culpable for this action?

Some have blamed the leadership of the Palestinian Authority which has allowed incitement against Israel to take place in educational institutions, in text books and in the media. This must stop and it is up to the PA to do so. Others have claimed that these were individuals who didn't look for permission from others, but acted on their own and it is improper to blame the act upon the leadership of the PA or, most assuredly, on all the Palestinians in that area.

I believe that we cannot demonize everyone because they are different than us. Those who carried out these deeds must pay the price for their actions, but it is improper to suggest, as Haman did when Mordecai refused to bow down to him, that the entire people is now responsible for collective punishment. This, I believe, is not an appropriate Jewish attitude. This is a moment filled with great emotion and, yet, we must take a step back and uphold the proper values of our tradition.

In an article on the effects of the deaths of the Fogel family upon Israeli society Rabbi Dr. Donniel Hartman wrote that: "While in every family there are differences, ours are very deep. In such an instance, the family structure can be preserved only if we both find some shared values on which to build our lives and to erect boundaries which we all agree should not be crossed." If this is necessary within our own family, how much the more so, when we deal with others outside our mishpacha, outside our cultural norms, outside our comfort zone.

This is a challenge where we may live, wherever we may abide – to see the other not as a stranger who should be loathed and demonized, but one who is created like us in the image of G-d and who stems from the one proverbial Adam who was created by that G-d. Haman's activities could have led to the possible destruction of our people. According to the Megillah, if it had not been for Mordecai and Esther our people would not have survived in the 127 provinces of King Ahasuerus. Haman was a perpetrator of hatred, of xenophobia, of mass hysteria and used his cunning to convince Ahasuerus that the Jewish people should be feared because they were different than others.

We must learn how to disagree, we must learn how to differ from others, we must learn the guidelines of civil debate, we must learn to reach out to the stranger in a time of need and we must learn, even under the most extraordinary of circumstances, not to demonize the other, but to somehow build bridges across chasms and personal links across gulfs of misunderstanding.

The tragedy of the Fogel family is real and we grieve with the family members and with their friends. But we dare not use their deaths and desecrate their memories by creating hatred of the other and condemnation of those who we see as different from us. The lessons of the Megillah teach us that Haman's mass hysteria threatened our people with utter destruction. No good can come from hatred of a stranger and suspicion of the other.

The Torah reminds us over and over again that we are to be sensitive to the stranger, for we were strangers in the land of Egypt. As difficult as it may be, as complex as it is in the world in which we live where there are no easy answers, we must live up to that dictate for only by doing so can understanding and appreciation be established and bridges built among peoples.