

Opposing torture

by Rabbi Mordechai Liebling, Jewish Funds for Justice • December 14th, 2006

The main focus of this week's pasha, Vayeishev, is the beginning of the well known stories of Joseph and his brothers. We read how the brothers experience Joseph as arrogant and their father as favoring him. When he encounters them far from home they conspire to kill him, some wiser heads prevail and they instead sell him to a passing caravan. They tell their father, Jacob, that Joseph was murdered by wild animals and show him Joseph's bloody coat as proof. Joseph is taken to Egypt and sold to Potiphar, an Egyptian official. Joseph becomes head of the household until Potiphar's wife (typically, her name is not given) successfully convinces her husband that Joseph made sexual advances- when in fact the exact opposite was true. Joseph is put into prison, which he, also, ends up managing. In prison he correctly interprets the dreams of two of Pharaoh's servants.

This week I attended a ground breaking event, a rabbi's conference on human rights sponsored by Rabbis for Human Rights-North America (RHR-NA). There were more than 200 rabbis and rabbinical students from a wide spectrum of denominations and eight seminaries. It was perhaps the largest rabbinic gathering ever in the U.S, to focus solely on issues of justice. The main programmatic focus of RHR-NA is its campaign to end U.S. sponsored torture. This will explain why I found the following midrash on this week's parsha so striking.

Midrash Rabbah records a dialogue between Potiphar's wife and Joseph whom she has had thrown in prison: "See how I have already made you suffer, she said, I will also persecute you in other ways too!" And Joseph replied, '[God] executes justice for the persecuted' (Ps. 147:7).

She said: "I will have your food rations cut down" and Joseph replied: "God gives bread to the hungry." "I will have you put in chains – "God loosens the chains on those who are bound." "I will make you bent and bowed" — "God raises up those that are bowed down" "I will blind you — God opens the eyes of the blind."

How far did she go? Said R. Huna in Rabbi Acha's name: She went as far as to place an iron fork under his neck so that he should have to lift up his eyes and look at her.

Torture and the threat of torture have been part of civilization for millennia, and over the centuries many students of justice have said that we can measure the level of justice in a society by how it treats prisoners. Unfortunately, the evidence of government memos and of testimony shows that the U. S. government sanctions and uses torture.

Rabbi Melissa Weintraub has written extensively about Jewish values related to torture and this can be accessed at www.RHR-NA.org. The core Jewish teaching is that human beings are created in the image of God, *b'tselem Elohim*. The rabbis derived from this the principle of *kvod ha-briot* (the dignity of created beings), violating the dignity of a person is violating the sanctity of God. The tradition is clear: dishonoring a person is dishonoring God. The rabbis make this a corollary of the central principle of Torah, "Love your fellow as yourself." The logical next step

the rabbis make is: “Anyone who shames his fellow in public, it is as if he spilled blood.”—Baba Metzia 58b.

R. Weintraub writes, “Halakhic sources, meanwhile, concur that kvod ha-briot is one of the overarching values of Jewish tradition; marginal disagreement consists only in the scope of its trumping priority where it clashes with other commandments and values.”

Rabbi Weintraub then presents us with the following:

In February 2005, the Pentagon confirmed leaked accounts that female interrogators repeatedly tried to “break” devout Muslim detainees at the U.S. prison camp in Guantánamo Bay through provocative sexual touching and suggestion—wearing skimpy clothing like miniskirts and lacy, thong underwear, making sexually explicit comments, and rubbing their bodies up against them.⁶ In July 2005, the Army released Lt. Gen. Randall M. Schmidt’s report of his investigation into abuses at Guantánamo, which concludes that “stripping detainees, forcing one to wear women’s lingerie and wiping red ink on a detainee and telling him it was menstrual blood” are all “authorized approaches called ‘ego down’ or ‘futility,’ which are used to make the interrogation subject question his sense of personal worth or the value of resisting.”

... Leaked memos, however, reveal that high-level government officials—including President Bush and Secretary Rumsfeld, on the advisories of their legal counsel—paved the way for the abuses outlined above, and knew about, tolerated, and even encouraged such treatment. There is also evidence that the highest levels of the Pentagon authorized techniques including forced nudity, beatings, sensory bombardment and deprivation, and “stress positions,” as evidenced by numerous documents now available to the public.

Just as torture violates the fundamental tenets of Judaism, it threatens the fundamental basis of democracy. Government sponsored torture means that the government has asserted total control over a person. It is chilling to any notion of free speech or dissenting political action. To protect our democracy and to stand up for fundamental Jewish principles we need to bring maximum pressure to end this policy, everyone needs to speak out against it.