October 27th

THE NEW SHOFAR

John 14:27 ~ Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.

We need to understand our biblical history

I confess to smiling when I read of politicians from outside of the Middle East demanding a ceasefire from the hostilities initiated by Hamas on October 7 last year. What they fail to understand is that the conflict is not primarily political, at least not to those engage in warfare. It is a religious battle going back to the time the Hebrew people were led out of slavery in Egypt and made their way to Canaan under divine guidance. It is against this background we need to understand our first reading from the prophet Jeremiah. There he encourages the Jewish people suffering at the hands of the Babylonians, particularly those taken away as slaves to exile in Babylon. This text suggests parallels with the situation in Gaza. It does in Israel at least.

One of the earliest references to Gaza in the Bible is in the prophet Amos. In the opening verses of his prophecy, he declares '*for three sins of Gaza, even for four, I will not forgive them: they took captive an entire group… so I will send a fire against Gaza's wall. It will consume her fortresses…*'(**Amos1:6**). Whatever their other two or three sins, they pale into insignificance, next to the evil act of kidnapping of a large group of people. It is important for us to understand that for the Hebrew people, these Canaanites were but a continuation of the evil coming into their lives since the first attacks of Amalek. Amos is understood to be warning the Hebrews that as God's children they will always be the target of evil peoples and nations.

The Jews never escape the evil of Amalek

The Amalekites, descendants of Amalek, were an ancient biblical nation living near the land of Canaan. They were the first nation to attack the Jewish people after the Exodus from Egypt, and they are seen as the archetypal enemy of the Jews. The nation of Amalek is long gone, but they live on spiritually as the internal enemies that Jews battle daily. They are the personification of evil in all its manifestations, representing all that God detests. It can be evil attacking from outside or sin welling up from inside our hearts. Amalek stands for evil and it must be destroyed wherever it raises it head. That is a religious duty.

After the Jewish people crossed the Red Sea, they encamped in Rephidim, a barren location in the Sinai Desert. The people thirsted for water, and God provided a miraculous well of water to accompany them on their journeys. While the Jews were still at Rephidim, recuperating from their escape from Egypt, the nation of Amalek launched a vicious surprise attack on them—This took place even though the Jews had no designs on Amalekite territory and were not even headed in that direction. The Jews defeated Amalek in battle, killing their strongest warriors while allowing the others to return home.

Following the battle, God commanded Moses to record the story of Amalek's treacherous attack for posterity, and to enjoin Moses' future successor, Joshua, to remember the attack as well. God promised to completely wipe out the memory of Amalek from the earth, and to wage an eternal war with Amalek in every generation. God swore that His name and throne would not be complete until Amalek was destroyed. Remember, this is not just the physical enemies of Israel, it was announcing a "war" against evil in all of its manifestations.

The King of Arad

In the fortieth year of the Jews' wandering in the desert, Aaron, the high priest died. The divine protective clouds of glory that surrounded the Jewish camp disappeared, as it was present only as a part of the journey to Canaan. Presuming that now the Hebrews no longer had the blessing of Yahweh their God, the Canaanite king of Arad attacked the Jews.

The sages of Israel explain that the king of Arad and his army were Amalekites who had merely disguised themselves as Canaanites before entering battle. They wanted to confuse the Jews about their attackers' identity. The plan backfired. The Jews were victorious and went on to enter the Land of Israel unimpeded by the Amalekites.

To Remember and Destroy

The Jewish Torah lists two mitzvahs (commandments) regarding Amalek: The first is to *obliterate the nation of Amalek*. The second is *… never forget the evil deeds Amalek did*.

The mitzvah to destroy Amalek implies that no trace of Amalek's existence could be left. "Nothing," explain the sages, "could serve as a reminder of Amalek's name—not even an animal about which it could be said, 'This animal belonged to Amalek.'"

The first Jewish king, Saul, was commanded by the prophet Samuel to finally wipe out Amalek. Saul was victorious against the Amalekites, but he sinfully spared the choicest of their flocks and the Amalekite king, Agag. When Samuel found out about Saul's disobedience, Saul lost his right to kingship. Samuel then killed Agag himself. However, before he was killed, Agag sired a child who would keep Amalek's lineage alive. Some 500 years later, one of this child's descendants was Haman the Agagite, of Purim fame.

The Torah commands Jews to always remember what Amalek did. The sages understand from this that once-a-year Jews must read the verses of the Torah where Moses reminds the Jews of Amalek's actions. Each year on the Shabbat before the holiday of Purim they read the section of the Torah in Deuteronomy recounting Amalek's action. On the feast of Purim, (celebrating the victory over evil recounted in the book of Esther) the Jews were saved from the evil designs of the wicked Haman (king of Persia – modern day Iran), a descendant of the Amalekite king Agag—a perfect time to celebrate the destruction of Amalek.

Amalek Today

The command to destroy Amalek cannot be fulfilled today, since the identity of Amalek has been lost over the millennia. However, the command to "remember Amalek" still holds true in the spiritual realms. Hassidic philosophy explains that Amalek represents the pinnacle of evil, the ability to "know God and yet to intentionally rebel." Most evil can be combated by arguments of reason, not so Amalek. That Evil One cynically scoffs at every reason to do good, sowing doubt and confusion and encouraging violent sin of all kinds.

Amalek is the constant ***doubter***, rejecting any sign of yearning for holiness and doing his best to cool down any spiritual aspirations people might have. The more people strive to follow the commandments of God, the more Amalek tempts them to move to the dark side of life, to sin.

For this reason, the only response to Amalek is commitment to a pursuit of holiness, acknowledging our connection to God, our existence as children created in the divine image and likeness. This is what defines Jews and animates them from within, through their spiritual quests. Being a Jew is rooted in the essence of God. While the Jewish faithful maintain and

strengthen their relationship with God, Amalek loses his brazen power. God always wins in the end.

Thus it is that the battle for dominance in the Holy Land remains a battle between good and evil, an aspect of the not-yet-completed struggle against Amalek in all his disguises. When the pursuit of holiness on a spiritual level is pushed to its limits, the Jewish people once more follow on the witness of Esther and engage in what they would see as a Holy War.

Islam too has a religious war going on in Palestine

The Hamas charter asserts that *the Islamic Resistance Movement [i.e. Hamas] regards Palestine as an Islamic **Waqf** consecrated for future generations until Judgment Day*. A ***waqf*** is a religious gift bestowed by God. Consequently, "neither it, nor any part of it, can be surrendered to other. They must fight to keep it for themselves.

Conversion or Submission of Jews

One clear principle of Islam is that Muslims must not give the Jews security unless they convert to Islam or pay the jizya (tax). The idea that "good Jews" are those who convert to Islam and bad Jews are those who hold onto their Jewish faith is deeply rooted in Islamic tradition. Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi, the grand sheikh of Cairo's Al-Azhar University and the leading authority for Sunni Muslims today, wrote a treatise on Jews in the Qur'an and the Traditions concluding:

[The] Qur'an describes the Jews with their own particular degenerate characteristics, i.e. killing the prophets of Allah, corrupting His words by putting them in the wrong places, consuming the people's wealth frivolously, refusing to distance themselves from the evil they do, and other ugly characteristics caused by their deep- rooted lasciviousness…only a minority of the Jews keep their word…All Jew are not the same. The good ones become Muslims, the bad ones do not.

Furthermore, those Jews and Christians who do not believe in Muhammad as a prophet will find that *shame is pitched over them (like a tent) wherever they are found.* The Qur'an maintains that the Jewish people broke the covenant they held with God and are now cursed. Thus, it is a good, holy and reasonable thing to destroy them.

Being accursed, the Jews are not the legitimate heirs of the promise made in Qur'an 5:21. The true heirs are those who have remained faithful to God (i.e., the Muslims), not those whom he has cursed (i.e., the Jews). The Muslim holy book also contains many passages that form the foundation for hatred of Jews that exists independently of the actions of contemporary Jews or the State of Israel. The Qur'an portrays the Jews as the craftiest, most persistent, and most implacable enemies of the Muslims.

The Qur'an is supplemented by the Hadith, which are claimed to be the records of the Prophet Muhammad's actions and sayings. Some hadith predict that at the end of the world, *the Jews will support the Dajjal (false messiah), and the Muslims, along with 'Isa [Jesus], son of Mary, will kill the Jews*. The idea that the end times will be marked by Muslims killing Jews comes from Muhammad himself, and that text is used by groups like Hamas and Iran as justification for their antisemitic words and deeds. That text says: *the Hour (the End of creation) will not be established until you fight with the Jews, and the stone behind which a Jew will be hiding will say: 'O Muslim! There is a Jew hiding behind me, so kill him*.'"

This hadith is a favourite motif among contemporary jihadists. On March 30, 2007, Hamas spokesman Ismail Radwan, when speaking on the role of the Palestinian Authority quoted it during a prime-time television interview.

Continuation of Qur'anic Anti-Semitism

The Islam Online website posted an article entitled, "Jews as Depicted in the Qur'an," in which Sheikh 'Atiyah Saqr, former head of the Fatwa Committee at Al-Azhar University in Cairo, depicts Jews in a chillingly negative light, illustrated with quotations from the Qur'an. He says that Jews *fabricate things and falsely ascribe them to God*; they *love to listen to lies*; they *disobey God and ignore his commands*; they wish *evil for people* and try to *mislead them*; and they *feel pain to see others in happiness and are gleeful when others are afflicted with a calamity*.

Saqr at least uses self-discipline and stops short of mentioning the more notorious Qur'anic passages that depict an angry God transforming Jews into apes and pigs. The first of these depicts God telling the Jews who *transgressed the Sabbath ….be you apes, miserably slinking* and goes on to insist that the *accursed ones serve as a punishment exemplary for all the former times and for the latter*.

The implication is that today's Jews are bestial in character and are the enemies of God. That is an essential step towards dehumanising an enemy and thus enabling all kinds of actions to be unleashed against them. Tantawi has called Jews *the enemies of Allah, descendants of apes and pigs*. Saudi sheikh Abd al-Rahman al-Sudayyis, imam of the principal mosque in the holiest city in Islam, Mecca, has said in a sermon that Jews are *the scum of the human race, the rats of the world, the violators of pacts and agreements, the murderers of the prophets, and the offspring of apes and pigs*.

Here is the challenge: Muslims can get beyond anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism only by acknowledging that the Qur'an and Sunna do, indeed, teach that the Jews are accursed and are to be warred against. It cannot be ignored. They have alternative but to deal with it. Muslims must explicitly put together a theological framework that reject literalism in the interpreting of those texts that promote violence against the Jewish people, just as the Jews have had to offer non-fundamentalist readings of their own scriptures. To deny that the Qur'anic texts are not antisemitic is only to allow the endemic and pandemic problem of Islamic anti-Semitism to continue unchallenged.

Thus, as we ponder the reading from Jeremiah and do so in the light of the healing of Bartimaeus recorded by Mark in today's gospel, the need for daily prayers for the peoples struggling to live with each other in the Holy Land becomes even more pressing: *O Lord, our hearts are weary, our prospects are narrow, and our dreams are shattered, but we trust in you. Forever we will put our trust in you. We believe that only through you and with you can we make our way towards peace. Although it may seem impossible and unachievable in our eyes, yet, we know that you alone can give us true and enduring peace. A just and final peace. O Lord, do not delay, make haste and answer us.* **The Jerusalem Prayer of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem.**