

Running Late for Prayers The Sufi Parable of Hazrati Ali

By

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In an episode of *The Twilight Zone*, “Death-Heads Revisited,” a Nazi commander finds himself being tried by the ghosts of those he murdered at the Dachau Death Camp during World War II. His only defense is that he was “just following orders.” At the end of the episode, he goes mad and is escorted off to an asylum as someone asks, “Dachau. Why does it still stand? *Why* do we keep it standing?” Then, during this unusually solemn episode’s closing monologue, Rod Serling, the show’s enigmatic host, responds:

The Dachaus, the Belsens, the Buchenwalds, the Auschwitzes—all of them. They must remain standing because they are a monument to a moment in time when some men decided to turn the Earth into a graveyard. Into it they shoveled all of their reason, their logic, their knowledge, but worst of all their conscience. And the moment we forget this, the moment we cease to be haunted by its remembrance, then we become the gravediggers.

Then, for the first and only time in the show’s 156 episodes, Serling didn’t conclude with his famous signature phrase, “in the Twilight Zone.” He ended by saying, “Something to dwell on and to remember, not only in the Twilight Zone, but wherever men walk God’s Earth.” Serling was right to go off script in this case, for these monuments of madness must continue to stand as reminders to help prevent such evils from ever happening again, in the real world.

Unfortunately, we don’t always need monuments or ghosts to haunt our memories or to remind us of the grave injustices our species sometimes engages in. Just this week we witnessed the devastating end of a twenty-year war in Afghanistan that should have never happened—a war in reaction against the terrorist attacks on 9/11. And that event was the result of the hostility many in the Muslim world harbor toward America, hostility rooted, at least partly, in our country’s support of Israel and the resulting plight of the Palestinian people, which began in 1948, at the end of WWII and Germany’s horrific attempt to exterminate the Jewish people.

But such hostility emanating from the Middle East reaches back further still. Anti-Semitism, hatred of the Jewish people, had been prevalent throughout much of the world, including in the United States, long before the rise of Nazi Germany. Hitler only took advantage of this prejudice in his rise to power, by offering what has been called “The Final Solution” to what was considered the “Jewish Problem,” by much of the western world.

It took the execution of six-million human beings before the Allied Forces realized they would have to come up with a different solution, which was to give the Jewish people, who had been dispersed around the world for nearly 2,000 years, a place of their own. So, in 1947 the United Nations approved giving them the land that has

since become modern day Israel. Throughout the centuries, despite being homeless and dispersed, rather than eventually melding into the various societies their remnants had fled to, these resilient people managed to maintain their Jewish identity. Although simply being Jewish wherever they were was enough for some, many longed for a homeland of their own. At various points in history, places in Argentina, Chile, Uganda, Kenya, Madagascar, Guyana, Russia, as well as others, were considered. But after the War, the decision was made to establish the new Israel where it had begun.

Long before this, however, even before Christianity emerged, the Roman Empire captured Jerusalem, destroyed it, and, to add insult to injury, renamed the land after the Jews' legendary enemy, Philistine, or, as we now say, Palestine. Despite this ancient injustice, one of the first attempts to eradicate Jews from existence, today's Jewish homeland had been occupied by millions of Palestinian people for nearly two millennia by the time 1947 came around and the United Nations helped forcibly remove them, another historic injustice that is still having tremendous global repercussions today. As David Ben-Gurion, the State of Israel's founder and first Prime Minister, once acknowledged, "in our political argument abroad, we minimize Arab opposition to us... let us not ignore the truth among ourselves... politically we are the aggressors and they defend themselves... the country is theirs, because they inhabit it, whereas we want to come here and settle down, and in our view we want to take away from them their country, while we are still outside."¹

In the U.S., President Truman also acknowledged this problem, but told those concerned, "I am sorry gentlemen, but I have to answer to hundreds of thousands who are anxious for the success of Zionism. I do not have hundreds of thousands of Arabs among my constituents." Perhaps he should have worried as much about making hundreds of thousands of resentful enemies. For the result has been almost constant unrest in the Middle East ever since, as well decades of terrorist activities around the world.

So, we find, many of today's worst global hostilities have ancient roots, and are only perpetuated by more hostility and violence. Rod Sterling was right in saying we must not rid ourselves of the monuments necessary for serving as the reminders of our madness, but we also must not confuse the erection of those monuments as the origin of such madness, or worse, think the solution is more of the same kind of madness. The only way to end our ancient resentments and our continuing violence is to see our perceived enemies as human beings who deserve our respect and deserve equal footing in our global community.

This point is illustrated in a parable involving Hazrati Ali, who is considered the founder of Sufism, Islamic mysticism, and, as the story goes, was:

¹ Chomsky, Noam, *The Fateful Triangle*

...the close companion of Muhammad, who was once late for the dawn prayer. The prophet, who was leading the prayer, was about to begin when the Angel Gabriel appeared and asked him to wait a little longer. At that moment, Ali was on his way to the mosque, but he had found himself walking behind an old Jewish man. Out of respect for this man's age Ali did not want to pass him on the street. Because of this respect, Allah, who did not want Ali to miss the benefit of the first prostration of the day, sent Gabriel to delay the beginning of prayers.²

This is a simple story with a simple meaning—having respect for one another is the essence religion, not our religious rules and rituals. Even so, its subtle intricacies are worth further consideration. For among the five pillars of Islam—*Shahada* (declaring that there is only one God, Allah, and his prophet was Mohammad), *Zakat* (eliminating inequality through charity), *Sawm* (ritually fasting, especially during Ramadan), the *Hajj* (a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once)—none is more pervasive than *Salat*, requiring Muslims to prostrate and pray 5 times every day. The very word *mosque* itself means “place of prostration.”

From this, it's easy to understand how some have come to believe that ritual prayer is what epitomizes Muslim faith and practice. To be seen in attendance during prayers is a bit like being seen at church on Sundays in the Christian faith. One's absence or even one's tardiness is also sure to be noticed. Religious rituals are only meant to remind us of what should be at the heart of all faiths—compassion, justice, peace, and mercy—but some followers come to equate their religion with merely performing the rituals, while ignoring the stuff about love and peace.

There is so much injustice in the name of religion, from, so-called, Holy wars to parents rejecting their own kids for being gay: from ignoring science and facts to burning heretics at the stake: from occupying the lands and homes of others to treating women like chattel: from conning the elderly out of their wealth to flying airplanes into skyscrapers. This common tendency in religion is the reason for these words from *Amos* in the Hebrew scriptures:

I hate and reject your festivals, and your religious ceremonies stink! I cannot accept your burnt offerings and refuse to look at your animal sacrifices. I can't stand that noise you call singing and music. Instead of all that, let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.³

When religion is about performing arbitrary rituals and following arbitrary rules at the expense of human welfare and compassion, it becomes a perversion of faith. This is why Jesus said, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath,” meaning religious laws like all laws should benefit human beings, not the other way around. It is why in *Ezekiel*, Yahweh rejects the commands engraved in tablets, saying, instead, “I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, so that they may follow my statutes and keep my ordinances and obey

² Helminski, Kabir Edmund, *Living Presence*, Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, New York, NY, 1992, p. 84.

³ Amos 5:21-24

them.”⁴ The point being that love and care ought to be the expression of our religion, not adhering to lifeless rules and rituals at the expense of human kindness and welfare.

In light of all of this, I wonder if Hazrati Ali worried what other would think of him when he showed up late for prayer? How would he be judged for not following the letter of the law? What consequences might he suffer? Several years ago,⁵ I met with an envoy from the Middle East. During lunch I sat next to a Syrian woman, an attorney working on her PhD, who was telling me about how difficult it was to be a liberated and educated woman in her country, how much judgement there is, including from other women, for not knowing her place, when she suddenly realized her companions had all left the room to attend their afternoon prayers. Her eyes widened and her cheeks blushed. She stood in a panic, apologized, and abruptly dashed away in search of her cohorts. Liberated as she was, she was still bound by the Salat, her duty to pray five times a day, and she dreaded facing the stigma associated with running late for prayers.

Ali would have felt this same trepidation. Yet he could not bring himself to disrespect the old Jewish man on the road because, at least intuitively, he understood that such respect and consideration was more important than the Salat, even if doing it is among the five pillars of Islam. Nor was his tardiness merely a matter of respecting his elders. In this case, the old man was Jewish, meaning Ali was showing greater respect to a non-Muslim and, we can assume, to a non-Arab, that he was for his own Islamic faith. In so doing, he demonstrated a heart of flesh, rather than one that had become set in stone.

For me, this is the point that makes this parable so special and gets at the core of its meaning. Not only is it more important to show others kindness, compassion, and respect than to attend to the commands and rituals of our religions, but it is important to do so for all persons, whether they are believers of our religion or not. This is what the word *respect* means, to re-see—as in *spectate*—to look twice, to give somebody a second look, beyond our superficial prejudices that only see the infidel, the heretic, the dissenter, the wrong religion, the wrong color, the wrong gender, the wrong country, whatever it might be. To respect others is to look again, beneath what we see on the surface in order to recognize in everyone our common humanity, the worth and dignity of every person.

And the road these two strangers, who are different in race, religion, and age, are upon is more than just a road, it is the path all of us are upon, no matter our differences. As Master Morihei Ueshiba, the founder of Aikido, the Way of Harmony once said, “There are many paths leading to the top of Mount Fuji, but there is only

⁴ Ezekiel 11:19-20

⁵ Louisville, 2008.

one summit—love.”⁶ And Gandhi, the Great Soul, once said similarly, “Different Religions are different roads converging to the same point,”⁷ which is especially significant given what he experienced while living in South Africa, where it was illegal for him to walk on the pavement when a white man was on it. Recognizing that no matter our faith, no matter our color, no matter where we are from, that we are all worthy of walking together in our journeys toward truth and meaning, was a realization born from Gandhi’s own pain, pain that he transformed into compassion for everyone.

Understanding that Ali also lived in a world where some were looked down upon and were considered unworthy of walking on the road, gives greater meaning to Ali’s unwillingness, as a Muslim, to disrespect the Old Jewish man in his way, preventing him from fulfilling his own religious obligations. But Ali understood something more important, that his religion does not own the truth and, therefore, does not own the road. He understood, as Rumi, the great Sufi poet said, “All religions, all this singing is one song. The differences are just illusion and vanity.”⁸

This point about the true nature of religion is driven home when Allah himself, so pleased with Ali’s act of respect and compassion, intervenes on his behalf by sending the Archangel Gabriel to delay the beginning of prayers so that Ali will not be late. This sounds pretty simple, but it refers to a lot more than just saying, “Let’s wait a few more minutes until Ali gets here.” The reason Gabriel is sent is because the situation requires divine intervention. In this case, Gabriel is bending time itself in order to accommodate Ali. This is often the case with Sufi parables, that Allah will alter time and space if that’s what it takes to show compassion and mercy. So why can’t we bend our rules a little for the same purpose?

It reminds me of another parable of the road, in which both a Jewish priest and a religious scholar pass by a man who has been beaten and left for dead on the roadside. The scripture says of each, that they “passed on the other side.”⁹ Contrast this heartless behavior with that of Ali who cannot bring himself to pass by the old man. It isn’t until a Samaritan, who would have been looked down upon by these two religious experts, comes along and cares for the injured man. “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man?” Jesus asks.

This is a good question for people of any religion to ask themselves. What does it really mean to be a good neighbor? What does it mean to put our faith into practice? Is it about giving the most money, or singing our hymns on Sunday mornings, or

⁶ Ueshiba, Morihei, *The Art of Peace*, trans., John Stevens, (Shambhala Publications, Boston, MS, 1992), 42.

⁷ Gandhi, M. K., *The Message of Jesus Christ*, (Greenleaf Books, Harford, MA, 194, 2008)15

⁸ Fox, Matthew, *One River, Many Wells*, (Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, New York, NY, 2000), p. 20.

⁹ Luke 10:31

getting to the church on time? Or is it about showing compassion for others, including those who look, and think, and worship differently than we do? Is it to offer the best sacrifices, and incense, and music, or is it, as Micah says, “to do justice, and love mercy, and be humble about your religion?” There are so many different kinds of people interacting in today’s world. We are all in this together and must learn, as the bumper stickers says, to “share the road.” Today we need to be more tolerant and more compassionate than ever if we are going to thrive together.

Yet, today ancient hostilities in the Middle East continue to rage in a land where Jews and Muslims can’t always share the same road or live in the same neighborhoods or have the same rights. How many others are there around the world, or in our own country, in our own community, whom we cross the street to avoid or are willing to bypass along the way? There is a growing housing crisis in our nation that’s making it too expensive for working people to keep their homes or rent their apartments. We see them on almost every downtown corner in every American city as we drive our roads and walk our streets. How long, as a society, will we cross to the other side when we see them, rather than, like Ali, slow down to recognize, respect, and care about what’s happening right in front of us? How long, as a society, will we continue to have roads in which it feels unsafe for many blacks to drive on them without fearing for their lives? How many do we pass on the way to our churches and synagogues and temples who don’t have adequate healthcare, or shelter, or food, or the security and belonging necessary to live a happy life?

I began by mentioning Rod Serling, known mostly for hosting *The Twilight Zone*, but Serling was also an American Jew who grew up during a period of tremendous anti-Semitism in our nation, who experienced its prejudice and hostility firsthand. In order to marry his non-Jewish girlfriend, Serling had to convert from Judaism to Unitarianism before they would be allowed, and even then, her wealthy parents permanently disowned her for marrying a Jew. He also became a bonified World War II hero, and later a peace activist who protested Vietnam. Serling knew what it was to be passed by and disrespected in the streets, and he knew what it was like to go to war against others. Yet he advised never to forget such things, not for the purpose of holding a grudge or feeling ashamed, but so we don’t keep repeating the same ancient hostilities over and over again. Let’s slow down, give those before us a second look, and do what we can to care for one another. If we can’t do this much, all the rest is meaningless.