**Hear O Israel**

Adeel Wahid

Friday, Nov 03, 2023

 “Hear O Israel the Lord Our God the Lord is One” murmured Rabbi Akiva, as he was painfully tortured to death by the Romans in front of all in plain sight.

The Jews of Judea had risen against the Romans in what has been named as the Bar Kokhba revolt. The Sicarri (dagger holders), led by Simeon Bar Kosevah, in the third uprising, wanted to free themselves from the oppressive reign of Romans, to end the “disfigurement of the young men of Israel”. They had the blessing of Rabbi Akiva, one of the most revered sages in the Jewish tradition.

What did Rabbi Akiva expect to achieve in backing the uprising, knowing the immense strength of the Romans and the futility of the effort? The primary goal was the uprising itself, to teach the nation of Israel that they had to rise up and “not to sit idly waiting for the Grace of God”.

The expected transpired. It had already been foreseen by the sages, including Rabbi Akiva who had been shown the future by the God Himself. Rome destroyed everything in Judea. It needed no Jew captives. The Romans only sought to keep the blind and limbless alive, to serve “as a living testimony to the fate of Judea”. The “screams and the smell of charred flesh” pervaded. Such has been the ruthlessness of the powerful in all ages: nothing satiates except for complete annihilation.

The fictionalized version of this history is contained in the book, ‘The Orchard’ by Yochi Brandes. The current prime minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu, has said that he read the entire book over a single weekend, and it “swept [him] into the orchard and into the sources of the tradition”.

As Netanyahu was swept into the orchard, one wonders what was revealed to him there. The current Israel and its incessant, unceasing lust for Palestinian blood and land is reminiscent of the Roman Empire and its treatment of the Jews in Judea. One, in fact, is reminded of Nietzsche’s popular quote: “Beware that, when fighting monsters, you yourself do not become a monster … for when you gaze long into the abyss, the abyss gazes back into you”. Israel, as a nation-state, has stood affixed, gazing into the abyss for way too long.

The identity of the state of Israel itself arguably is rooted not necessarily in the worship of God or God’s Torah, but instead, or more so, in the shared sense of suffering for centuries. This has been the rallying cry. This is probably what unites all and sundry: the cultural and the religious Jews.

God in ‘The Orchard’ revealed to Rabbi Akiva the fate of the nation of Israel, and the calamities that were to befall Jews in the times to come: “They will accuse us of all the evil in the world … They will spread monstrous libels about us – that we kill babies, poison wells, bake the blood of children in our unleavened matzah bread”.

And this is where the twin aspects contained in ‘The Orchard’ intertwine. First is Rabbi Akiva’s message of self-reliance, of putting faith only in one’s own self, relying on no one else, not even God. Israel has prospered in recent decades, with unparalleled advances in science and technology. This faith has paid dividends.

Second, as Israel has amassed success, weapons, and immense power and influence, it has still kept a deep sense of victimhood alive, with entire generations raised with this irremediable sense of injustice, ever apprehensive of its continuity. Rabbi Akiva, in ‘The Orchard’, further added that “[t]here is no injustice or act ofcorruption that they will not attribute to us”.

The immense power and victimhood are laced together. As Israel, for instance, continued to snatch land in Palestine, establish colonial settlements, force the entire population into narrow straits of land, and control every aspect of Palestinian lives, it has kept the image of its own suffering front and center. Meanwhile, the world remained willfully blind to the “disfigurement of the young men of [Palestine]”.

And while the Romans might have had the advantage of numbers and weapons, modern-day Israel has supplemental ammunition. Israel completely controls, or at least heavily dominates the mainstream narrative, and anyone who deviates from the ‘correct’ narrative has to pay a price. The label of ‘antisemite’ does a lot of work, and under its shield, even a genocide is kosher.

As Palestine, erased in popular narrative with the word Hamas, fills with the screams and the smell of charred flesh, the Palestinians continue to testify to the Lord, the same God, in whose remembrance Rabbi Akiva had breathed his last.

The writer is a lawyer based in Islamabad. He can be reached at: awahid@umich.edu