

**Parshat Va-ayra
January 17, 2015
Do you believe?
Rabbi Alan B. Lucas**

How many of you believe that today's torah reading is true?

Today's Parasha of Va-ayra deals with Moses confrontation with Pharaoh – it contains most of the plagues – blood, frogs – you know the list. Is it true? Did it happen?

A new Hollywood movie thinks it did – do you?

Had I had the chance to interview those terrorists in Paris – had I had a chance to ask them – before they were killed – if they believed the Bible was true – if they believed this week's *parsha* was true - - you know what *they* would have answered.

For those of you who said – “yes,” to my question, “do you believe today's *parasha* is true,” does it make you a bit uncomfortable that you gave the same answer as those terrorists and fanatics?

Time will tell – but the terrible events that took place in Paris last week may be a watershed moment on so many levels. The challenge it presents to France, the challenge it presents to French Jews, the challenge it presents to all of us in the Western World as we realize that there is indeed a clash of civilizations, one which we ignore at our own peril. Again, time will tell, but it just feels to me like something of significance has taken place.

Let's talk about this clash of civilizations that I mentioned. What exactly do I mean by that?

I believe it is becoming undeniably clear that there are large numbers of people who populate our modern world, who view the world very differently than I do. Not all of these people are radical Islamists, and just some of them are willing to use terror and violence as a means to promote their world view – but enough of them are to cause us serious concern and the rest of us need to find a way to respond and yes, even combat those on the radical fringe of this world-view because, make no mistake – if we do not defeat them – they intend to try and defeat us.

But in mounting a meaningful response, I think it is critical to understand that at its core, what we are battling is bigger than radical Islam and although the current manifestation of this thinking that is plaguing our world is in the form of Al Quaida, Isis and other fanatical Islamic groups –it is a manifestation of a much larger phenomenon. To defeat Al Quaida is to win a battle, but not the war. To eliminate Isis will be a victory, but still leave the core problem untouched.

In my humble opinion the real battle that is playing out here is the one between faith and reason and how faith and reason seek accommodation in a modern world. Allow me to explain.

How many of you saw the iconic photograph of the march that took place in Paris last Sunday – the one that showed the world leaders marching arm in arm? How many of you saw the story of the Israeli Ultra-Orthodox newspaper that doctored that photo for its front page – by photo-shopping all women out and erasing any trace of women from the picture?

For those of you who may have missed it, (it was picked up by the New York Times and the Washington Post after first being publicized by a number of Jewish media sources) - but the Jewish newspaper HaMevaser which publishes for an ultra-Orthodox clientele in Israel, altered the picture before they would publish it on their front page. They removed Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany and other women leaders from the picture. Why? Ultra-Orthodox publications generally avoid pictures of women for reasons of modesty – men should not look at pictures of women – period. And when they

cannot conveniently avoid such pictures, as in this case, they simply alter them to conform to the images that suit them – even though it means denying the reality of what actually happened. A writer for Israel’s left leaning Haaretz newspaper commented, “It is rather embarrassing when, at a time that the Western world is rallying against manifestations of religious extremism, our extremists manage to take the stage!”

Yes, it is embarrassing, but it is also instructive. Look, let me be absolutely clear – I intend to imply no equivalency between our extremists and their extremists. Our extremists are not going around murdering and terrorizing people all over the world. And to the extent that over the years a few of our extremists have ventured into the world of violence and terror, they have been roundly condemned and opposed by the majority of Jews of all stripes and beliefs. This is very different from the current challenge of Islamic radicalism that seems to be creating an industry of terror and mayhem around the world and is not being sufficiently opposed, in my opinion, by the moderate Muslims who have much more to lose than anyone else.

But, having made that distinction – I find the case of the picture on the cover of HaMevaser enlightening and informative about the core of what makes religious extremists so, well, extreme.

Rama Burshtein, an ultra-Orthodox filmmaker whose 2012 movie “Fill the Void” won international acclaim, said in an interview that the alteration of the photo would make perfect sense to the newspaper’s readers. “It’s very, very, very, very, very hard for a nonreligious person to understand the purity of eyes,” Ms. Burshtein said. “By us, men don’t look at women’s photos, period. As long as you don’t know that, then it sounds ridiculous, or changing history or events. But we’re not here to get the events the way they are. We are here to keep the eyes.” Now her English is a bit stilted – but if you translate it back to Hebrew her thinking is very clear and I think crucial for us to understand. “We are not here to get the events the way they are we are here,” in Hebrew, *lishmor et haeynayim* – which she translates, “to keep the eyes, but probably better translated, “to guard the eyes.” Most of us are familiar with the requirement to “guard your tongue” – and the whole *Lashon Hara* movement that seeks to help people avoid gossip and idle talk – well there is a similar concern over “guarding one’s eyes” – avoiding pornography or any other visuals that might ultimately pollute the mind – one who wishes to achieve a state of purity – seeks to avoid seeing certain things that destroy the mind and prevent us from achieving a higher state of purity. In so many ways it is a beautiful concept and one worthy of some serious discussion. It is not so beautiful when it suggests that any and all women pollute men’s eyes.

But for our purposes here this morning here is the rub. What do you do when reality and faith collide? Which takes precedence and to which do we owe our ultimate allegiance? This is the fault line upon which our modern world now hangs. Ironically it is not a new question - -and many of us thought it was resolved once and for all some time ago – apparently not.

It was Baruch Spinoza the 17th century Dutch philosopher whose work laid the foundation for the Enlightenment and who becomes a pivotal voice in the history of philosophy as he contends that for all of history, up until him, reason was the handmaiden of faith. But, from Spinoza onward, faith must be the handmaiden of reason. This was Spinoza’s question: If faith and reason clash – which has to give way?

This is a crucial question. Most of us, sitting in this sanctuary would insist that if faith and reason clash faith must give way to reason. That is in the tradition of Spinoza. Many scholars assumed that he had begun a trend, that spread to almost every endeavor of the modern world that gave rise to science, medicine, modern philosophy and psychology and transformed our world in ways that even Spinoza could never have imagined. Many thought that modernity was a one-way street – that once faith was harnessed to reason – the world would move “forward” and embrace this “truth” and all of its implications.

Not so fast – say millions and billions of people who are now flexing their muscles and expressing their doubts and have chose to exit this particular highway.

The front page of the New York Times reports on the latest round of discussion regarding the insistence of certain rabbis to use “oral suction” to draw out blood when doing a brit milah – a circumcision. Even though this method is deemed by most rabbis, many of them Orthodox to be unnecessary – some stubbornly insist on this tradition – even though it places the infant at risk for herpes and other disease transmissions. The article features a bris that was being held in Brooklyn and the father of the infant – himself a doctor, is asked how he could allow the mohel to practice this metzitza, this oral suction. His response – is revealing. This educated, enlightened doctor says, “I close one eye and permit it. After all, the rabbi says it must be done and if the rabbi says it must be done it is a divine thing – divine things do not change. So it must be done.”

I wish you my congregants thought that way..... No I don't!

When a well educated and well trained doctor says that he permits – on his own son – a medical procedure he knows to be inappropriate and dangerous because the rabbi demands it – what he is really saying is that when faith and reason clash – faith wins.

This week's Parasha, (you knew I was going to get back here eventually) deals with the confrontation between *Moshe Rabeynu* and Pharaoh in Egypt. It contains the famous words – *Shelach Et Ami* – Let my people go! It also contains the first seven of the 10 plagues that God brought against the Egyptians in order to convince Pharaoh to let the people go! You know the plagues – they are part of our Passover *seder* – 1. The rivers turn to blood, 2. The plague of frogs 3. *Kinim* – insects swarm over the land, 4. *Arov* – usually understood as wild beasts, 5. *Dever* – disease, 6. Boils and 7. Hail. Now how do we make sense of these plagues? Well, don't go see the current movie “Exodus: Gods and Kings” as it has not gotten very many good reviews and friends who have seen it have cautioned me not to waste my money. But the fact that I haven't seen it won't stop me from talking about it. I read the reviews, and here is what one critic wrote: “...the film's eagerness to have the miracles make scientific sense will only annoy believers and fail to convince skeptics. If, in a movie, an all-powerful God causes the Red Sea to part then, just as he or she suspends belief when watching Darth Vader at work, the reasonable atheist viewer will hop on for the ride. Tying the event to some fantastic accident of the tides only causes such people to cast eyes furiously to heaven.”

Here is my advice to any filmmaker - -don't take a miracle and try and make it reasonable. It is the best way to ruin a good story – which apparently the filmmakers of this particular movie have succeeded in doing.

I have told you many times before – I am not a fan of the scientific explanation of the plagues. You know how they go, the splitting of the red sea was caused by some island that sunk causing a sudden and dramatic change in the sea – or the blood was algae and the insects came to eat the algae and on and on. For thousands of years most people believed that reason always, always had to bow to faith. Spinoza and those who created the Enlightenment broke faith's hold on the world by inverting the equation and placing reason as the arbiter of all truth and placing faith as the handmaiden of reason. But now we see a world wide backlash to enlightenment. We see large segments of our modern world rejecting this approach upon which the modern world as we know it is based.

To return to a world that places faith over reason means a future where righteous believers can cut off the heads of the infidels, impose Sharia law, countenance *metzitza ba'al peh* even when you know it is not safe, alter pictures to conform to your sense of reality and on and on. This is the world we are headed for until and unless we are prepared to fight for the future – not by killing the terrorists but by attacking their philosophy and the belief system that animates it.

The battle for the future of the will be won – if and only if – we can convince people to move from binary thinking to embrace a more sophisticated way of looking at the world. Truth is rarely this or that – either/or, yes or no – and we do an injustice to truth when we allow the question to be framed as faith **or** reason – choose one. We must create a world that embraces faith **AND** reason.

Our faith has to be reasonable – and our reason has to be grounded in faith. This is the approach of Reform and Conservative and Modern Orthodox Judaism, it is the way of many modern religious Christian religions, it is the way of the Dali Lama and the current Pope; it is *not* the way of Radical Islam, it is *not* the way of Scientology, it is *not* the way of Ultra-Orthodoxy. And while few of these groups share the murderous bent of their Islamic counterparts --they all do represent a threat to our modern world, if embracing their concept of faith means surrendering any hold on or allegiance to reason.

To deny that the earth is warming due to human intervention is no longer reasonable, the New York Times published today that 2014 was the hottest year on earth in recorded history – and placing one's beliefs, even if they are political beliefs, over reason – endangers our future. To deny the value of Darwinism and choose to ignore evolution and insist on writing text books that are based on a false science called "creationism" – is placing one's beliefs over reason and it endangers the future of this great country.

Some 800 years ago, the Rambam, Moses Maimonides insisted ("Guide to the Perplexed," Part I chapters 32-48) that God's truth and man's truth are one – that they cannot contradict because truth is truth. So, the Rambam went on to write – in any case where you confront an *apparent* contradiction - - than either your understanding of God's truth is wrong or your understanding of man's truth is wrong – but they do not and cannot contradict.

The Rambam at times doubted the science of his day – go back and check your math – he would say – maybe you came to your "scientific" conclusion in error. Science can and often does get it wrong – so first make sure that your human truth is really truth. But then,when confronted by irrefutable truth, the Rambam was not afraid to go back and question long held and cherished beliefs – he was willing to re-interpret the Bible to look at what he thought was God's truth in new ways in the light of the science of his day - -because the one thing he refused to compromise was his belief that truth was truth. We should do no less today.

This, in my humble opinion, is the battle that now must be fought. It is the battle for truth. Not seeking to impose religious truth, or scientific truth, but a truth that is informed by science and religion. It is a reasonable faith and a faithful reason that will save the world.

Do I believe that today's torah portion is true? Yes, I do, every single word of it. Just not the way that they do.