Martyr vs. Martyr

The Sacred Language of Violence

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This paper attempts to capture the violence and immediacy of current events by applying semiotic analysis. The mutual cruelties acted out by Israelis and Palestinians is analyzed in terms of the growing usage of words from religious contexts to legitimize violence and to attach powerful collective emotions to it. The focus is on the use of the term "martyr" to refer on the one hand to Palestinian victims or suicide bombers, on the other hand to Israeli victims. A concise historical analysis of the word "martyr" in Jewish sources points at its contingent changes in various situations. In the twentieth century the vocabulary of death has radically changed in European discourse, but probably specifically in Jewish discourse. The analysis points to mechanisms of appropriation of individual lives and deaths as a result of the application of the term "martyr". The analysis of such language use hopes to contribute to some better understanding and greater tolerance.

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The events of 9/11/01 in New York City heightened the awareness of human frailty and the limits of control of even great empires. They sharpened the general consciousness of the power of images and words to shape not only the concepts of individuals but also to instantly reshape the behavior of millions of individuals and a great number of governments, public agencies, and commercial corporations worldwide. In the following paper I wish to touch upon an aspect that is present in the specific media complex regarding those events in New York City, but that is even more visible and audible in the public discourse in the Middle East where the named events have deep roots. I shall trace the semiotics of one specific term, "martyr", that has played a fatal role in the molding of images between Israelis and Palestinians in their longtime strife over the territories of the Holy Land. The way the concept of martyr functions in the communication between these two identities infuses the word dialogue with a different tone than the positive value that most of us are used to attach to the term in the wake of European humanist and existentialist traditions represented by thinkers as different from each other as Martin Buber, Mikhail Bakhtin and Hans Georg Gadamer.

The paper will not encompass the entire historical width and depth of the phenomenon of martyrdom. It has been part and parcel of religious phenomenology as long as we can trace it back, but was consolidated and institutionalized by Christianity and Judaism in the early centuries of the first millennium. It should, however, be mentioned that in the historical perspective it becomes very clear that the term martyr, derived from the Greek "witness", has always served in the generation of mutual relationships of entities contesting their legitimacy over a specific legacy, be it sacred texts or sacred territories. This fact as well as its phenomenal relationship to communication, and especially mass communication, may be illuminated by the following observation made by Daniel Boyarin on the "cooperative" emergence of martyrdom, under very different circumstances and power relations, in late antiquity:

"Martyrdom, even more than tragedy, is *Thanatoi en tōi phanarōi*, 'deaths that are seen,' murders in public spaces. Insofar as martyrdom is, then by definition, a practice that takes place within the public, and therefore, shared space, *martyria* seem to be a particularly fertile site for the exploration of the permeability of the borders between so-called Judaism and so-called Christianity in late antiquity" (Boyarin 1999).[1]

I shall in the following resort to the tools of the ethnographer who uses herself as the source of information, thus appropriating the witnessing function from those who have used it in death to one who hopes to do it in the service of life.

At five in the afternoon on the Sunday when I obtained the consent of the Dean of the Humanities to take off a week to go to Göttingen for the conference on "Sleepers, Moles and Martyrs", I participated in the funeral of Daphna Shpruch. She had died on Saturday, ten days after a bomb exploded at the Hebrew University Mount Scopus Cafeteria, at the Frank Sinatra Student Center, situated at the Nancy Reagan Plaz, on July 31, 2002. Daphna died of a severe head injury caused by the explosion that destroyed the front part of her head.

Some secularized Jews in Israel today, to whom the form of the ceremonies of death are a matter of principle and of deep feelings, create an individually styled ceremony with music, poetry reading, etc. At Daphna's funeral it became clear that her stricken family had not made an extra effort to salvage the ceremony from the hands of the orthodox religious authorities. As a result, the raw pain of the family was laid bare by the harsh contradiction between the formality of the orthodox officials and the introvert lack of communication of the family members and close friends with the undertakers. The official cantor who recited the traditional texts of the Jewish funeral ceremony introduced Daphna Shpruch as a martyr, *qedosha*. Although the usage somewhat disturbingly alerted my attention, it was familiar enough from the prevalent public discourse so that no explanation was needed. The cantor obviously considered Daphna a martyr because her death had occurred within the context of the national conflict between Palestinians and

Israelis. Her death was caused by a bomb in the current wave of terror.

In the original usage of martyrdom in early Christianity and rabbinic Judaism (*qiddush ha-shem*), the agency of the martyr who chooses death to witness her or his belief was reportedly of central significance. Political manipulation of individual agency seems to characterize the contemporary discourse of martyrdom. Perhaps we should not rule out the possibility that such manipulation lies also behind some of the martyrological discourse of earlier eras. However I cannot deal systematically with this last question in the context of the present paper, and will rather return to my short ethnographic account.

Upon hearing the word *qedosha*, I made an instant comment turning to one of Daphna's closest friends standing next to me. Incidentally the friend's father is one of the chief ideologues of the Canaanite movement that was especially active in Israel in the late forties and the early fifties of the twentieth century (Diamond 1986; Shavit 1987; Kuzar 2001). The major platform of this minuscule cultural movement, however of some consequence, was to diminish the influence of Jewishness and to ground Israeli identity in the territorial aspect of Canaan and the common heritage of the peoples of the land west of Jordan valley prior to the Moslems, Christians, and the Jews. The Canaanite ideology failed to incite the masses. However, its secularist, almost pagan, message infiltrated such enterprises as the reshaping of Jewish holiday traditions in the context of the agricultural life of kibbutzim. It is therefore noteworthy that the secularizing tendency of some parts of public language has with regard to the language of public mourning, especially concerning violence occurring in the context of national conflict, suffered a blatant failure. The way martyrs figure in public uses of language is a major example of this.

Let us return to Daphna. By the current language usage, applied for instance by the Rector of the Hebrew University (at least outwardly a perfectly secularized person) in his words of lament at the funeral, her name may or perhaps "should" be appended by the cliché *hashem yiqqom dammah* "may God revenge her

blood" – routinely added to the names of victims of terror in speech as well as writing (obituaries, ads of mourning etc.). One could assume that the forwarding of the act of revenge to the Almighty in those words expresses a belief in the governance that will restore some kind of moral balance into the grim reality experienced by mourners. Conceivably it could then serve to cancel any ideas about human revenge meted out by official agents of the state or others. There is, notwithstanding, a danger for another alternative to emerge, that will find some footing from biblical traditions onwards, that the collective "we" of the speaker envisages itself as the legitimate tool for the fulfillment of divine justice, dictated by internal group interests.

Since the religious language of the present quotes heavily from classical and medieval sources, I will now sketch some of the historical connotations emerging from the linguistic usages of *qedosha* (masc. *qadosh*) and *hashem yiqqom dammah* (masc. *dammo*).

The main usage of *qadosh* according to the dictionary of the Hebrew Bible concordance is "holy" as an attribute of God (translates into the *sanctus* of the Latin mass, according to Isaiah 6:3 *Qadosh, qadosh, qadosh adonai tsevaot)*. Imparting the idea of emulation of the divine, anybody of great righteousness and adherence to God, and in special cases also Israel as a people (Exodus 19:6) may be described by the term. It also denotes places, objects, and persons who are not in any way defiled, and serves generally as the antonym for impure and secular.

In Rabbinical literature of late antiquity the connection between *qadosh* and martyrdom is created in complete dialogue with the emergence of martyrdom in Christianity, as shown in the above mentioned work of Boyarin. The main semantic extension of the concept consists of an act of sacrificing one's life to testify (the Greek etymon of "martyr") to the existence of God, an act that sanctifies His name and elevates it. The expression in rabbinic literature is indeed the verbal compound "to sanctify His name", rather than an attribute of the martyrs themselves. The holiness of the martyrs is thus derived from their own act and from the holiness of its addressee, God, rather than from the atrocity meted out to them by others. This may be understood as intimately associated with the change in mentality occurring in late antique culture, first in the eastern part of the Mediterranean and later in most of the Roman Empire. This change may be best formulated as a new stage in the development of subjectivity and individual responsibility, expressed especially in the texts of Early Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism in parallel.

In medieval Jewish texts there is a slow but clear semantic shift that turns over the agency to create martyrs, *qedoshim*, to the executors. One could speculate on the transformation and varieties of Jewish identity, subjectivity, and agency in the transport from the land of origin, to first the Moslem, then the Christian Diaspora. Spanish-Jewish Maimonides (11th century Moslem Spain) in his essay on conversion calls those who prefer to die rather than embrace another religion "saints" (*qedoshim*) thus still retaining the exertion of a free will (Kellner 1991: 49–59). The chronicles describing the pogroms against the Jews of the Rhine valley (notably Speier, Worms and Metz), as a result of the zealotry of the crusaders on their way to the Holy Land, also apply the term for those who refused to Christianize, often in the context of cruel torture and desperate acts such as suicide and slaughtering their own children (Yuval 2000: 108–218; Einbinder 2000). From the fifteenth century onwards in Jewish texts from Germany (the emic term being Ashkenaz) *qedoshim* and *qadosh* have become standard usage for Jews being killed by non-Jews in a variety of contexts. Thus in the seventeenth century autobiography of the remarkable woman Glikl Hamel, two Jewish thieves who were caught and repudiated the clemency of conversion are called by her "saints". In a number of epic poems of historical topics, for instance the victims of a great fire in Frankfurt are called *qedoshim* although there is no indication in the text that the fire was anything else but a calamity (Lowenthal 1977; Davis 1995).[2]

The earliest occurrence of the dictum *hashem yiqqom dammo* that I have been able to identify is the 13th century Spanish poet-hermeneutic Moshe Ibn-Ezra's elaboration on Deuteronomy 32:43: "Rejoice, o you nations, with his people, for he will avenge the blood of his servants, and

will render vengeance to his adversaries, and will be merciful to his land and to his people". This first half of the final verse of Moses' lengthy prophetic and didactic valediction (in which he outlines all the calamities that will befall Israel due to their disobedience before God will finally absolve them) is commented by Ibn-Ezra with the above mentioned exhortation, in plural: *hashem yiqqom dammam.*

In the twentieth century a completely new vocabulary for death, especially Jewish death, was created through the lethal industry of World War II and the Shoah. Ethical and political texts referring to the victims of Shoah often call them *qedoshim*. A forest of six million trees planted in the mountains close to Jerusalem, to commemorate the victims of Shoah, is consequently called "The Martyrs' Forest" – *ya'ar ha-qedoshim*. The very term "Holocaust" denotes a religious connection. This is a deplorable association to sacrifice, atonement, purgation. It constitutes a reply to the metaphor of defilement attached to the victims by the Nazis and thereby resumes it. This discursive act has aptly been critiqued by Giorgio Agamben:

"The wish to lend a sacrificial aura to the extermination of the Jews by means of the term 'Holocaust' was, from this perspective, an irresponsible historiographical blindness. The Jew living under Nazism is the privileged negative referent of the new biopolitical sovereignty and is, as such, a flagrant case of *homo sacer* in the sense of a life that may be killed but not sacrificed. The truth – which is difficult for the victims to face, but which we must have the courage not to cover with sacrificial veils – is that the Jews were exterminated not in a mad and giant holocaust but exactly as Hitler had announced, 'as lice', which is to say, as bare life. … If today there is no longer any one clear figure of the sacred man, it is perhaps because we are all virtually *homines sacri*" (Agamben 1998: 114–115).[3]

The final sentence of this quote may be interpreted as a sinister description of the reality of terror of state, religious, political as well as individual nature.

I offer this all too concise historical excursus because it seems absolutely necessary to keep these facts in mind if we wish to even try to understand the complex resonance of the usage of *qedosha* for a woman like Daphna Shpruch. What the performer of the funeral service (not a rabbi, by the way, but a member of the hevra *qadisha,* 'the holy association" – an ancient institution responsible for the handling of the corpse and the funeral) did not know was that Daphna Shpruch was a fervent peace activist, one of the Women in Black of Jerusalem's Paris Square, women who in their body and presence have for fifteen years, since the beginning of the first Intifada, stood at the heart of Israel's capital, voicing (if mostly in silence) their resistance and disagreement with the occupation and oppression of the Palestinians. Her death thus signals a double appropriation: that of her murderer who appropriated her as an enemy, as part of the occupation, a fact that no Israeli can avoid whatever the degree of her resistance to the majority politics is. The other appropriation is by the rhetoric of occupation, especially by applying on her the tag *qedosha,* communicating a rhetoric and state of mind fed and fueled by every act of terrorism.

The enormous impact of the peoples of the Middle East and especially the Holy Land for the religious history of Europe and the entire world resonates again through the dialogic double construction of the qedoshim and the *shuhada* (sing. *shahid*), the Arabic term for martyr.[4] The complexity of the lethal dialogue between those two concepts of martyrdom would need a much more thorough ethnography and especially a study of mass media than can be provided here. However, a theoretical insight that seems fruitful in this context is Homi Bhabha's concept of "mimicry", in his cultural analysis of colonialism inspired by Lacanian psychology:

"In mimicry, the representation of identity and meaning is rearticulated along the axis of metonymy. As Lacan reminds us, mimicry is like camouflage, not a harmonization of repression of difference, but a form of resemblance, that differs from or defends presence by displaying it in part, metonymically. Its threat, I would add, comes from the prodigious and

strategic production of conflictual, fantastic, discriminatory 'identity effects' in the play of a power that is elusive because it hides no essence, no 'itself'" (Bhabha 1994:90).

The threat mentioned by Bhabha reminds us of the powerful effect of religious language when geared into the business of stereotyping the other in creating the fantasy of averting the threat. The discursive transformation is perceptively described by Paul Ricoeur:

"Defilement itself is scarcely a representation, and what representation there is is immersed in a specific sort of fear that blocks reflection. With defilement we enter into the reign of Terror. Thereupon the philosopher recalls Spinoza's *nec spe nec metu*: hope for nothing in order to fear nothing; and he learns from the psychoanalyst that this fear is akin to an obsessional neurosis" (Ricoeur 1969: 25).

The moral, religious interpretation of terror results then, according to Ricoeur, in a problematic apology: "If it is true that man suffers because he is impure, then God is innocent" (31–32). Ricoeur's dilemma, that has been reiterated by him numerous times, whether in dealing with Shoah or the biblical book of Job, sharpens the problematic arising between the canonized forms of religion and their potential for either interpreting the violence of the other religiously, or the worse case, in turning violence into a religious act.

This essay cannot be brought to its inconclusive end without mentioning a private nightmare of mine that was sharpened by the reactions on the Israeli raid in the Jenin refugee camp in 2001. Is it possible that by legitimizing the foundation of Israel on the martyrdom of the Shoah, Western consciousness may have set a challenge for the Palestinians to produce a martyrdom of the same magnitude in order to establish Palestine? If so, are the Jews again cast in the taboo-laden role of the Sacred Executioner traditionally allotted to them by European culture? (Maccoby 1982). The inflamed effect of the usage of *martyr-shahid-qadosh* on all sides of the Middle Eastern conflict, the Western, European and Third World

"audiences" included, becomes thus a dangerous weapon. How will the Jews in Israel harness the moral traditions of Judaism in order to subvert and counteract this karma?

The following poem by Israeli poetess Agi Mishol does not conclude this essay but rather adds another uneasy voice into the complex and multi-vocal discourse on the terror of martyrdom:

> "The afternoon darkens,
> and you are only twenty."
> Nathan Alterman, *Afternoon in the Market*

"You are only twenty
and your first pregnancy is an exploding bomb.
Under your broad skirt you are pregnant with
     dynamite
and metal shavings. This is how you walk in the
     market,
ticking among the people, you, Andaleeb
     Takatkah.

Someone changed the workings in your head
and launched you toward the city;
even though you come from Bethlehem,
the Home of Bread, you chose a bakery.
And there you pulled the trigger inside yourself,
and flung yourself into the sky
together with the Sabbath loaves,
sesame and poppy seed.

Together with Rebecca Fink you flew up
with Yelena Konreeb from the Caucasus
and Nissim Cohen from Afghanistan
and Suhila Houshy from Iran
and two Chinese you took with you
to your death.

Since then, other matters
have obscured your story,
about which I speak all the time
without having anything to say."
     (Translated from the Hebrew by Lisa Katz)

Notes

1. Also see the following groundbreaking works: Frend, 1967, and Bowersock, 1995. Whereas Bowersock's historical approach situates the origin of the phenomenon strictly within early Christianity, Boyarin's cultural method opts for a dialogic, mutual emergence of the phenomenon in a way that breaks down the dichotomy between the two entities in their early phases of formation.
2. The information regarding Glikl as well as early modern German Jewish historical poetry has been generously shared by my friend Hava Turniansky, the greatest expert on these things and many others.
3. The centrality of sacrificial violence is the focus of discussion in Girard, 1977, especially relevant for our discussion is chapter 6, "From Mimetic Desire to the Monstrous Double".
4. Due to ignorance I cannot venture a similar reconstruction of the historical roots and associations of the Arabic term *shahid* as I have tried to provide for the Hebrew *qadosh*.

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