

# *The Ghost in the Cave of the Patriarchs*

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**MARCH 26, 1995**

Sometime last Summer, the New York Times carried an article which said, in part:

It is an enduring paradox, how religions that teach peace can be taken by some adherents to justify acts of violence and bloodshed.

Combatants in some of the world's seemingly intractable conflicts often boldly wear their religious identities, whether in Bosnia, the Caucasus or Northern Ireland. But in many cases, their spiritual beliefs are a minor feature in a more complicated conflict, one that turns on ethnic rivalries, a clash of national claims or economic interests.

Even less understandable--and unnerving for the rest of society--are the destructive acts of individuals or shadowy groups who claim to be acting on God's behalf.

Over the last dozen years there has been no shortage of the latter, whether it be the suicide bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut, attributed to radical Shiite groups, or the killing of an abortion doctor in Pensacola Fla. In the latter case, the suspect is...a former minister who had claimed a theological justification for such killings....

Acts like these, from the furthest fringes of religious militancy, beggar the comprehension of mainstream believers....

As I read this article, my mind went back to last spring, when the world was shocked as the news was flashed that an Israeli extremist had entered the Mosque at the Cave of the Patriarchs and opened fire on Palestinians who were kneeling in prayer. Dozens were killed in the hail of bullets, others were injured and the fragile process by which it was hoped peace might come to that tragic land was left in tatters. In the months which have passed, governments have struggled to undo the damage, while people on all sides have tried to understand what happened and why. Everyone wanted to know how it was possible that an armed man could enter that mosque unchallenged, could murder thirty people, and many asked how such an outrage could be explained, let alone justified. Some began to voice the old doubts that peace could ever subdue the hatreds which rage in that ancient land, and periodically, over the months similar outrages continue to recur.

As I reflect on this tragedy, it occurs to me that there is another question which has been studiously avoided, as the months have passed and the world has processed the murders at the Cave of the Patriarchs. That question concerns the relationship between the tragic events of that day, and the entangled religious traditions represented at that holy site. It is my conviction that the murders in Hebron and similar outrages cannot be explained as the

work of fanatics "from the furthest fringes of religious militancy" and cannot be fully understood unless they be seen against the background of the traditional religions of the book--Judaism, Christianity and Islam. It is that perspective I would like to explore with you this Spring morning, and the hope for peace seems as fragile and evanescent as ever in that ancient crossroads of empire.

In all the news stories I read concerning this event, the media referred to the holy site, as the legendary burial place of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. One news source also reported that this was the burial place of the wives of the Patriarchs, but did not bother to name any of them. It is ironic to discover, according to the tradition recorded in the Book of Genesis, that Abraham originally purchased the Cave at Machpelah near Mamre as a burial place for Sarah his wife. Subsequently, according to the tradition, Abraham and his son and grandson were buried in the cave. But the place was obtained for Sarah and it was hallowed by her presence.

Now this may seem an irrelevant side-bar to the story about the murder of thirty Moslem worshipers last spring, but I would submit to you that the ironic aspects of events often have the power to reveal hidden and unexplored dimensions. You see, I believe that there is a ghost haunting the Cave of the Patriarchs, and that ghost is Sarah.

A superficial reading of the book of Genesis offers a picture of Sarah as the strong, beautiful, sometimes jealous wife of Abraham, the father of nations. As presented in the Genesis account, she is everything the wife of a Patriarch ought to be. She is, in the end, obedient to her husband, and supportive of his ventures, even when Abraham passes her off as his sister and weds her first to Pharaoh of Egypt and then to Abimalech, King of Gerar, even when Abraham, in an act of religious fanaticism, is willing to sacrifice her only child to a capricious God.

But if you read the book of Genesis with an ear open to what is not being said, and what is only being whispered, with an eye for what is communicated between the lines, and with an understanding of the intentions of the editors of the ancient traditions, one begins to suspect that there is more to Sarah than the redactors want you to see. Her very name, Sarah, means princess, royal one. She is the mother whose descendants are as the sands of the sea. So far as I can remember, she is the only character in the Bible who laughs. She is the one through whom title to the land passes; whom she chooses, becomes the king, becomes the patriarch, becomes the pharaoh. Sarah is the Great Goddess, the Mother Goddess, the Laughing Goddess who, by her sacred marriage to Abraham confers upon him all the strength and power he possesses.

Abraham did not purchase the cave at Machpelah. It had always belonged to Sarah, to the Goddess. It was her shrine, close by her sacred grove at Mamre. What lies buried in the Cave of the Patriarchs is the great Goddess, and the world view, the value system she represented. And what haunts that ancient site is the brooding spirit of Sarah, weeping for her children and for the terrible consequences attendant upon the triumph of the patriarchal religions which swept out of the east to infest the globe and which still work their terrible consequences in the land that gave them birth.

Hard as it may be for us to believe, human society has not always been organized as we have experienced it over the past five thousand years, nor are the religious traditions which have shaped and formed the historical world the only pattern of faith and practice human beings have ever followed. There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that the neolithic world view which dominated cultures ranging from Britain and Brittany to Malta and almost to Siberia, from the Balkans and Turkey across southwest Asia into India were substantially different from the cultures which succeeded them around five thousand years ago. Marija Gimbutas, the archaeologist and anthropologist, has concluded from her study of what she calls the culture of "Old Europe," that for most of our existence as a species there is no clear evidence of warfare or organized violence among human beings. She details culture after culture in which there are no remains of defensive walls or fortresses, in which ! there are no artifacts the major purpose of which was warfare, cultures which offer no artistic representations of war or organized violence, no buildings or other structures which would indicate a hierarchical system. In everyone of these cultures, she argues, the archeological record presents a society that was egalitarian, that sought to live in peace and harmony with the natural world and its inevitable cycles, which did not exalt violence and aggression and warfare, which honored the generative powers of life, and which found in the image of the great mother, who brought all into being, who sustained all life, and who received all back to her in the end, an ideal by which to structure a humane social order.

Beginning somewhere around five thousand years ago, this vast culture experienced a series of invasions from groups committed to a distinctly different religious and social vision. These groups were hierarchical in nature, were the worshipers of violent sky-gods, and exalted force and aggression as the means for establishing and maintaining social order. With their appearance comes the fortified city, the emphasis on weapons, the ideal of the warrior, the stratified social class, and the assumption that stability can only come from force and the willingness to use it. The religions of the book, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, those who still struggle for supremacy at the cave of the patriarchs, are quintessential examples of the religions on which this brutal social order was built.

If you doubt this is true, consider a few simple facts. Every Spring, Jews celebrate the central festival of their faith--the Passover--and in many places Unitarian Universalists join in that observance. We have sanitized this festival by referring to it as a celebration of religious freedom. We tend to block from our minds the central image around which this celebration centers. Let me lift it out of the celebratory language of the Haggadah, and state it starkly.

At the center of the Passover, at the beginning of the Jewish tradition is a story of terrorism and violence and murder. According to the account, when it came time for Yahweh, the sky god, the war god, the thunderer, to free the Children of Israel from slavery in Egypt, he who was unfettered by any necessity, who possessed the power to create an entire universe out of his own thoughts, devised a plan by which he would send upon Egypt a series of terrible plagues--rivers of blood, darkness at noon, hail, boils, lice, frogs, vermin of all kinds. But as the plagues escalated, Pharaoh steadfastly refused to free his slaves. And why did Pharaoh remain so obstinate in face of such awesome

power? Because, says the tradition, God hardened his heart. Yahweh would not let Pharaoh accede to the divine demand until the terrible drama had been played out. The tenth plague, you will remember, came when God murdered the first born of every living thing in Egypt, except his chosen peop! le.

According to the tradition, God invented political terrorism in Egypt. He murdered innocent people to force a change of policy in Pharaoh's government. That is the bloody tradition which is celebrated at Passover; that is the murderous tradition which is at the center of the Jewish tradition. And the reason for the passover celebration, according to the Bible itself, is so that all succeeding generations will have this story impressed upon their memories, and never forget God's acts in Egypt.

Nor is Christianity any improvement. In the same season every year, the Christian world celebrates the tradition which lies at its very center and most Unitarian Universalists join in that observance, as well. We tend to sanitize this story also, talking about a gentle man, a teacher of love and acceptance, who was faithful unto death, and whose faithfulness permitted him, in some manner to triumph over death. But, if we look at what the tradition truly says, it, too, is a story of violence and brutality at the very center of creation.

That tradition, you will recall, celebrates the account of an innocent man who is publicly humiliated and beaten and murdered in a cruel and brutal manner, in order to appease the wrath of his own father, Yahweh, the great creator God. The center of the story is that the God of the heavens and the earth was so angry with his children, that he required the innocent blood of his own son to assuage his anger. And so Jesus of Nazareth was put to death in cruel agony, and thus met Yahweh's demand for vengeance. As William Ellery Channing commented over a century ago, with its symbol of a cross, Christianity has erected a gallows at the center of history and hanged an innocent man from it.

And the author and instigator of that event was not Judas, nor Pilot, nor the High Priest, nor the Jewish people, nor the Roman army, but Yahweh himself, the ancient god of war and violence and bloodshed, Yahweh who promises his followers, to this very day that they will triumph over death if they be but obedient to his will, and who promises all who fail that obedience an eternity of pointless pain and suffering.

Nor is Islam an improvement. Islam, steeped in the bloody traditions of Judaism and Christianity, swept out of Arabia like a wind of death, carrying its message at the point of a sword north and south, east and west. Islam offered a vision of paradise won at the point of the sword, a paradise most assuredly earned by participation in holy war. How many innocents died to establish the assertion that there is no God but Allah, none can count. This youngest of the religions of the book is rooted in the same bloody tradition as the others. All three see the Patriarch, Abraham, as the great ancestor--Abraham who, at the command of God, was prepared to murder his own son and who has been extolled as the ideal man for that very reason.

Those are the religions which underlie western culture. Can one truly believe that there is no connection between the violence which lies at the center of those informing traditions, and the random murder of innocent commuters on the Long Island Railroad, or of peaceful worshipers in the mosque at the Cave of the Patriarchs, or the decision to advance a moral, political argument by shooting a doctor and his escort at an abortion clinic? The culture we have created is the incarnation of the values at the heart of the great patriarchal religions of the western world. If the god of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the god of Islam, Christianity and Judaism is truly our father, then we are all of us the products of a monumentally dysfunctional family, the victims of an all-powerful, abusive father. The wonder is not that we sometimes murder each other. The wonder is that so many of us manage to live together in relative peace most of the time.

Like most victims of abuse, we tend to make excuses for the very source of that abuse. It is *our* behavior that provokes the punishment. *We* are not good enough; *we* are not faithful enough; God only punishes us because he loves us, because he wishes to teach us. God is truly a god of love, a caring father. If *we* could only be better, then the violence at the center of our lives would diminish.

But, of course, the only true path to health is to name the source of our pain. And then, having named it, refuse to play the co-dependent game any longer. The root of violence in our culture is to be found in the destructive world-view which is celebrated in the great religions of the western world, a world view which sees force and power and aggression and willingness to kill and to die for an ideal as central to our humanity. The beginning of health for us lies in refusing to serve that value system, however it may be sanitized and disguised by sweet sentiment and pretty nostalgia.

That is why I am not a Christian, or a Jew or a Moslem. That is why I have such difficulty celebrating the central holidays of the traditional faiths. That is why I am forever attempting to reinvent the language of religion. I am driven to seek the recovery of a religious view of life, rooted in compassion and cooperation and a reverent celebration and acceptance of the cycles in which all existence is ensorcelled. My loyalty is not to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and the God of wrath they worshipped. My loyalty is to Sarah, the great mother of nations.

There is a ghost haunting the cave of the patriarchs, the cave at Machpelah, near the sacred groves at Mamre. The ghost is the Great Goddess, who is the living earth, she who bore the world and sustains us in the world, and receives us back unto herself when life has used us up, she who is the symbol of a world of balance and proportion, of cooperation and acceptance as central to the natural order, she who offers us a different pattern for our social order, one rooted in compassion rather than vengeance. Sarah, she who was the laughing goddess, now is the weeping goddess mourning her children who torture themselves and each other, who are driven to murder and madness in their effort to appease the bloody god of the patriarchs.

The source of our social and cultural pain is our unwillingness to name the evil at the root of our corporate life. That evil arises out of the central religious vision upon which we

have constructed our civilization for more than five millennia. Our future, indeed the future of the entire planet may depend upon whether we can find the courage to name the evil and turn from it and return to the organic world of the great mother, creating anew a society founded on cooperation and mutuality and celebrating the natural world of which we are but one expression.

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