



RABBI DR. REUVEN FIRESTON: MUSLIM VIOLENCE THROUGH A JEWISH LENS

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HOLO: Welcome to the Bully Pulpit Podcast, Torah with a Point of View. My name is Joshua Holo, your host. And it's my pleasure to welcome Rabbi Professor Reuven Firestone of the Hebrew Union College to speak to us about Islam and violence in the world today. I direct our audience's attention to Professor Firestone's recent op ed in the Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles called "The Heads of the Hydra". Reuven, welcome to the Bully Pulpit Podcast.

FIRESTONE: It's good to be here.

HOLO: I want to start by asking the question that you want to answer in that op ed in the Jewish Journal. Is Islam intrinsically violent?

FIRESTONE: Well, you probably already know the answer coming from me which is that Islam is not intrinsically any more violent than any other of the scriptural monotheisms. So there is an aspect of monotheism that can be violent.

HOLO: What about an aspect of religion in general? Is monotheism an element here or is it just religion?

FIRESTONE: Yes, I think that in fact, there may be more of an issue with monotheism than other religions because there is an assumption in all the expressions of monotheism that there is one god, and that god has a truth. And when you have the notion of a single god then you have to have a single truth. So you already have a notion that there is truth and falsehood. Whereas in if you have multiple gods or multiple deities or powers that you assume run the universe, they can be in some tension with one another without necessarily fighting with one another.

HOLO: Sounds to me like what you're saying is relativism is peaceable and universalism is violent.

FIRESTONE: Universalism can be totalitarianism and that's one of the problems with universalism.

HOLO: Score one for Judaism's contribution to human civilization.

FIRESTONE: I guess you could say that because in fact, as far as we understand the first case of actual genocide, at least recorded in ancient text is the case of Israel where God says to the Israelites, “Kill every man, woman, and child among the Canaanites.”

HOLO: And in so far as the Jews are still here and the Canaanites aren't, there's the spooky possibility that we succeeded.

FIRESTONE: I think that's actually a literary piece. It isn't a historical statement. But it can be understood that way. And people can understand and put in the place of Canaanites whoever the enemy might be because there is not a statement by Canaanites that says, “We no longer exist.”

HOLO: We get the theoretical background as to why a universal truth has an element of imposition built into it. And that imposition of one's truth by virtue of it's being universal lends itself to violent interpretations, at least some times. But today, shortly after the Paris bombings when Islamic violence, in particular, is very much on our mind, let's just stipulate that Islam is neither more nor less violent than any of the other monotheisms. But we still have to tackle the situational reality wherein Islamic violence is really front and center. What are we supposed to do with that?

FIRESTONE: See, I wouldn't call it Islamic violence. I don't want to just be semantic about this but I would call it violence that is perpetrated, and in this case, by Muslims. I don't think there's a difference between an Islamic violence, Christian violence, or Jewish violence. But today, Muslims are in communities that tend to be engaged in violence. Violence often directed against the West but often directed also against other Muslims.

HOLO: Mostly directed to other Muslims if you're doing it by body count.

FIRESTONE: That's right.

HOLO: Alright, so what you're basically asking us to do is to treat the religions themselves as cancelling each other out and they become non-factors. And you're asking us to look at the socioeconomic, political, colonial, historical factors of populations, and the fact that they happen to be predominantly Muslim is a function of all of those factors rather than intrinsically Islamic ones.

FIRESTONE: I think that's a fair statement. I mean you can – it's very simple to put people in a box and say this is just intrinsically Islam. But there are periods of history where Muslims were not involved in very much violence. There's always some Muslims involved in violence.

HOLO: Just because there's a lot of Muslims.

FIRESTONE: And there are always some Christians involved in violence. You have that today as well. But there are periods of time that we know actually quite well in the high Middle Ages where the real violent religion in the world was Christianity. They were

engaged in violence of all kinds. And it's quite similar because it was violence engaged against non-Christians, but lots of violence engaged against the wrong Christians. The Christians holding the wrong point of view, or threatening politically or economically and defined as holding the wrong theology.

HOLO: For convenience sake.

FIRESTONE: But that wasn't the actual situation.

HOLO: Alright. We're still stuck with a situation of raw enmity. So fine, we don't call it Islamic. Great. That doesn't really situate us any differently when it comes to the American discussion around vengeance, refusing or allowing refugees, allocations of resources, human and material for war, and, you know, long term national strategy.

FIRESTONE: But it should. What we're doing is we're making a lot of really stupid mistakes. One is we're saying, "well the problem is with Islam so if only the Muslims could get their act together," or "if we could just prove that they're not going to be able to take over the world like we think they think they should be doing."

HOLO: Ah. Okay. So alright. So you're saying in America an engine behind those perceptions, American perceptions, is the sense of Islam's desire to conquer as a religion.

FIRESTONE: Yes. I think that's part of the deal. I think there's great fear among Americans. That's a fear that is played upon by people who want to get support and votes and...

HOLO: Did you hear the recent brouhaha about Trump and his reassertion that immediately following 9/11, you know, across the river in New Jersey, thousands, he said, of Muslims were cheering in the streets and having tailgating parties or what have you.

FIRESTONE: That was fact checked. It was proved to be wrong. It's - what that is simple, a simple attempt to reestablish white, Anglo-Saxon dominance in America today.

HOLO: So - so right. I mean...

FIRESTONE: That means - that means white, Anglo-Saxon dominance. That means we don't want Jews involved in political power position.

HOLO: Well he didn't say that.

FIRESTONE: Of course not because people are, uh...

HOLO: 'Cause Jews are kosher now.

FIRESTONE: Because Jews are white.

HOLO: Jews are white. Jews have become white.

HOLO: But what I'm saying is you're seeing the American wrong-headed approach to Muslim violence as a misconception of Islam. You think that's a misperception. The problem isn't Islamic. The problem is sociopolitical, economic, what have you, in a place where there's a predominance of Muslims. And so, it plays itself out with Muslims. I'm asking if you're misunderstanding American attitudes. I'm thinking, when I listen to Trump, that it's just nativism. And it doesn't matter what the object of their tirades are if they're not sufficiently light skinned, and sufficiently familiar they're going to freak out anyway.

FIRESTONE: Demographically, and politically, and economically the white, Anglo-Saxon minority is going to be losing its dominance in the kind of cultural - cultural wars that occur in America today. I think that's correct. And I think when you feel like you're being pushed out of your privilege or you feel like threatened, then you start to lash out. I think, by the way, that to a certain extent it's what's going on in the Muslim world as well. That is Muslims in general tend to feel so-called Western values, Western culture, Western norms, Western ways of doing business are dominating and kind of taking over the world. That's what globalism is all about.

HOLO: Are they right?

FIRESTONE: I think it's in fact true that they are right.

HOLO: So their fears are truer than our fears?

FIRESTONE: I think that in a way no. I think that the white, what I call the white, Anglo-Saxon or WASP are dominant in America is waning and they're losing.

HOLO: So that is what I mean by nativism. And you're saying that the nativists have good grounds for their fears. It's not paranoia.

FIRESTONE: Well, if you think that's going to be bad for America then I guess you have good ground for your fears. I don't think that's bad for America. I think it's good for America to have a white dominant class society be pushed out for a more truly democratic system where you have more opportunity for people of all races and all ethnic backgrounds. So I think that is a good thing. But I understand where it's coming from. But we have an interesting problem. You have a problem of a very powerful entrenched elite in America that is losing ground and lashing out. And finding a scapegoat, if you will, to a certain extent, in Muslims or people - because Muslims are really different. They're more different than European immigrants let's say.

HOLO: They're more different than the Jews have become.

FIRESTONE: That's for sure. You have a similar problem in Europe. The homogenization of Europe with the European Union is very threatening for the ethnic communities living in Europe. Some of the resentment in the growth of the right in Europe

is not because of Muslims and because of the threat of Islam, but it is because of the threat of the homogenization of ethnic distinctiveness in Europe.

HOLO: These are big, big things. But when you get down to it the Basque terrorists of the '80s mostly did their damage in Northern Spain in the Basque territories to fight their fight. When you're dealing with terrorism from the Muslim world, I don't know what the adjective is that you want us to use here. Maybe Muslim as opposed to Islamic. I'm not sure that helps, but fine.

FIRESTONE: Actually, I think that's good. That's a good distinction because it's not Islam as a religion. It's a person who is a Muslim who is engaging in the terrorism. Is it because he's reading a text from the Koran that says you should go out and kill everybody that I'm killing everybody? No, that's not the reason. There are other reasons that are motivating. And then you can like resonate with those versus if you have verses to support that in your tradition. But that's not the driving factor. Because if it were the driving factor why didn't it happen 50 years ago? Why didn't it happen 150 years ago?

HOLO: Right. Right. Okay. So, we have Muslim violence which is not confined the way Basque violence was confined. Although, in some ways it was just as violent. You have an invasion effectively. It feels like an invasion. And you said it's not a horrible sin for Europeans to feel invaded. You can understand that. Surely it means that we have to tackle this problem in very different ways. It's hard.

FIRESTONE: It is hard. It's hard because if you want to solve the problem it means you have to do an analysis of what is really driving people to engage in their kinds of activities. People are doing that. Academics are doing that. People who are in the field are doing that. I mentioned in the article that I was at a conference at Rutgers University in which people from Syria, Kurdistan, Iraq, and from Nigeria and Niger, people that are being effected by Boko Haram all got together and we were talking about what motivates young people to be involved in these kinds of movements. And there was overwhelming agreement among all these different people, they were Christians, they were Muslims, they were Africans, they were Middle Easterners, there were North Africans, people from Libya as well. There's a general agreement that you can't solve the problem by just going in there and, you know, playing whack-a-mole because when you hit that mole in one place it's going to pop up somewhere else. You have to deal with the driving issues. And in fact, I don't think it's going to be completely resolvable because the issue is part of the fallout of globalism. I'm not an anti-globalist, but global capitalism and the export of Western ways of doing business is threatening to people, and it can be manipulated by politicians on that side in the same way that I'm saying politicians in America.

HOLO: Well we know they're manipulated terribly cynically, and violently as well. Alright. So, we have these huge trends. I know you resist very, very, very strongly the notion of a clash of civilizations but let's remove clash of civilization from us and them and right and wrong and just talk about global Western capitalism versus, I don't know, what we would call Middle Eastern traditional culture. I don't know what we would call it. And it's not all traditional either. But there is a clash. You're articulating it yourself. I mean if

it's not really soluble, should we just leave it to resolve itself and save ourselves and get out?

FIRESTONE: There's a difference between a clash of civilizations and conflict between cultures and different world views. There's always conflict between different cultures and world views. Conflict between religious expressions. Conflict between linguistic communities. That's normal. The clash of civilizations is a philosophy that says that these conflicts are absolutely unresolvable and they will always result in a kind of Manichean division, a binary division, between parts of the world constantly fighting one another. I think that's bologna. I think that's silly. I don't think it's analytic. I think it's simplistic. I don't suggest for a second that there isn't a conflict or tension between communities of Christians and communities of Muslims for the reasons we just spoke about in the very beginning.

HOLO: Right. So okay, so you don't want to get too semantic. You've made the distinction clearly. I don't know what we're going to call the conflict that you described in a way that you're comfortable with. Give me a term. It's not clash of civilizations, which has baggage. But it is civilizational and it is a clash.

FIRESTONE: So you can call it clash of civilizations but let me just back up history about 30 years and let's talk about the clash of civilizations then. There were two clashes of civilizations of that time. The clash was the inexorable impossible conflict between capitalism and communism, or between the free world and the totalitarian world of communism. We don't really think about that so much anymore.

HOLO: Because the conflict was resolved. But it was no less a clash of civilizations.

FIRESTONE: Okay. Nobody talks about it anymore because it's not a clash.

HOLO: It was resolved.

FIRESTONE: It was resolved because what? Because one...

HOLO: Because China's not really communist and the Soviet Union collapsed.

FIRESTONE: Okay. Alright. So, let's take another one that was occurring at the same time which was the clash between America and the East. It was actually Vietnam and the kind of, I don't know, Asian peril that was going to destroy America. And it didn't destroy America. We didn't destroy them. And we didn't take over Vietnam. Vietnam is not an American colony. And there still is tension and clash in different ways of doing business. And we've - nobody even talks about it.

HOLO: That's true.

FIRESTONE: In 50 years I would - if I were a prophet I would make some money for this maybe somehow. I'd lose my life because prophets just lose their lives. They don't usually

make any money. But if I were to prophesy this I would suggest that in 50 years we're not going to see a huge clash between the Muslim world and the...

HOLO: Just because of the pendulum of history and the conditions will change.

FIRESTONE: But we get stuck. We get stuck. It's short sighted. It's myopic. And it doesn't solve problems. So, in the meantime, there are a lot of people dying. A lot of people being made miserable because we're not dealing with the problems.

HOLO: But I also hear you saying that it might just be the case that the problems themselves have to run their course.

FIRESTONE: If we continue with our current policies, then we are not going to be resolving problems and they're just going to have to peter out.

HOLO: Well that's pretty bleak.

FIRESTONE: Yeah.

HOLO: Do you think there are focused meaningful solutions that we can engage in to at least ameliorate the situation?

FIRESTONE: Yes, I think there actually are. There has to be a military response, I think, to major suicide destruction because the message that has unfortunately been given to people in that world is that that's a successful policy. This round of suicide engagement started in the very early 1980s in Lebanon. And it was eminently successful. It succeeded in pushing the...

HOLO: When they drove the truck into the, uh, American Embassy compound.

FIRESTONE: That's right. The French soldiers too. So, the Americans left right away, immediately. They packed up and said goodbye. We don't need to be here. The French left. And the suicide activism against Israelis pushed them out of Lebanon. That was successful. Kind of suicide violence against Israelis in Gaza also pushed Israelis out of Gaza. And I don't know if you're aware of this but Al-Qaeda was known for publishing the lessons of our engagement, right. They would publish these are the lessons we learned. Suicide bombing is successful. Suicide activities are successful because we can coerce powers that are more powerful than us through these kinds of tactics. And they're right. I mean it has worked. So, A, we can't withdraw. We have to engage, but that's not going to solve the problem. That is resolving certain aspects of the problem that is responding in a way that's saying...

HOLO: It's not lying down.

FIRESTONE: It's saying, no this kind of behavior is not going to be rewarded. We can't reward this kind of behavior. But it doesn't resolve the issues that are behind it here.

Kobane in Syria, which is this area that's under the control of ISIS and is now has been taken back by Peshmerga and the PCC which is another somewhat competitive...

HOLO: Terrorist organization.

FIRESTONE: Well, we call it that. I don't think it is but it's another Kurdish military group. And together they were able to capture this area. And there were a lot of Yezidis living there and in the area as well.

HOLO: Yezidis are heretical offshoot of Islam, right.

FIRESTONE: Yeah, I wouldn't call them heretical. I would say Yezidis are a religious tradition that does not accept principles of Islam or Christianity or Judaism. They are an independent religious tradition that has retained some of the pre-Islamic and pre-Christian religious ideas and practices, really probably from Zoroastrian and other traditions. That particular part of the world has remnants of very ancient traditions that are still active among the communities.

HOLO: And point taken the word heretic in any context of course is utterly subjective and it doesn't really mean anything.

FIRESTONE: But let's go back to Kobane. So, Kobane has been taken. It is a destroyed city. It looks like Berlin and it's about as functional as Berlin. Berlin only was able to survive because...

HOLO: We funneled money into it.

FIRESTONE: We - yeah. We need to - if we want to remain not the enemies of people in the third world, or people who are feeling victimized by this excessive globalism then we need to be involved in a very heavy reconstruction campaign.

HOLO: A Marshall Plan.

FIRESTONE: A Marshall Plan for the areas that are retaken and are reestablished.

HOLO: Is that not what we tried to do in Iraq?

FIRESTONE: We bungled that so badly from the very beginning by alienating all of the power groups - now we're getting off into another tangent which is - it's a relevant one but it's complicating the - this podcast in some significant...

HOLO: Alright. We'll hold that for in reserve.

FIRESTONE: It could have been done better.

HOLO: But you are arguing, in the case of Kobane, we capture physical territory in sort of a traditional military way and then upon capturing it and stabilizing it that we inject resources into it to promote good things on the ground and goodwill.

FIRESTONE: Yes, except with one major distinction. America did not capture it. It was captured by people on the ground there with American help. There is a sense of gratitude. There are people who are in conflict with one another, various factions there. But they proved that they are able to work together. And with a little help from the outside we can demonstrate that we're not here just to dominate and kill people, but we actually want to rebuild an economy. It's good for us too.

HOLO: It just seems to me that we tried that in the Middle East and I appreciate that you're saying that it's not analogous and that there's - that we've bungled a lot of things. But I can't help but go back to your own, at least, incipient sense of it being insolvable. And that there is just some evolution that these Middle Eastern societies have to go through on their own.

FIRESTONE: It depends on how we do it. I can't stress enough the assumption that American knowhow and we can do it was so naïve, we're going to do it our way. We're not going to be sensitive at all to the sensibilities of Iraqi culture, or the internal tensions and issues that are part of Iraqi society. Just shut up. Let us do it our way. We'll solve your problems. We're going to do it. It's the American knowhow. It was a ridiculously stupid policy.

HOLO: And we know it.

FIRESTONE: And we knew it then. I mean people who actually knew something who weren't just political appointees who were people who were experts on the ground were saying this is not a good idea. Don't do this. And they did it anyway.

HOLO: It's hard for me not to circle back to the core pessimism here. I get the screw-up. I get why it was seemed doomed and people in the know could have, indeed did, foresee that. But that just brings me back to your solution for Kobane and it seems to me like more of the best intentions paving the way to hell.

FIRESTONE: Listen to the experts. We had this group of people who were experts at Rutgers University. They had a lot of ideas. They had great ideas. They knew what needed to be done because they were on the ground there. They also were very sensitive to the problems and to the issues that the people, the bad guys, were having. What were driving them to engage in what they're involved with. And they had ideas on how to deal with this community of people. Not just how to get rid of them and establish something that would be helpful for their own communities. So, with true people on the ground who are real experts, and listening to them and not just doing the kind of American exceptionalism thing, you know, we can solve this.

HOLO: Alright. In some ways I find even more intractable, deeper American problems of domestic policy with respect to refugees. And this strikes a chord as a Jew that I find very resonate, very troubling, very painful.

FIRESTONE: I'm actually writing an article about that we may get published in the Jewish Journal next week.

HOLO: Well then, let's hear a preview.

FIRESTONE: The Jewish people suffered terribly from the Holocaust and there are two kinds of paradigmatic reactions to that suffering. One paradigmatic reaction is, look we were victims. And the world essentially stood by and didn't raise its head even, let alone its hand, to try to help. And so, we know what it really means to be victimized. We then, therefore, have this kind of awesome responsibility to ensure that it never happens again, not only to us, but to anybody because we are sensitized to the victimhood in a way that nobody else really is sensitized to that victimhood. So, we can empathize and in addition to that kind of ability, we have a kind of moral responsibility to do more than anybody else would. It's because of our very history. That's a logical response to the Holocaust. Another logical response is polar, is quite the opposite. We were victimized by an evil community of people and the world stood by and watched us be decimated. But we survived. We, therefore, owe nothing to that world. That world's an evil world essentially at heart. We owe all of our resources and energies to our own survival. And we have no moral compunctions about needing to be concerned about the rest of the world. There's a logic to that I think.

HOLO: Of course.

FIRESTONE: I think the first perspective was dominant in the decades after the Holocaust. It became weakened and the second perspective has become increasingly dominant in the Jewish community today. That is the reason why, one of the reasons, why we Jews are much less open to the idea of Syrian Muslim refugees and Iraqi refugees coming into the United States than I would have expected from Jews. And I think that's a shanda.

HOLO: It's a shanda. It's a shame. It's an embarrassment that we should not have chosen the former of the two options of moral indignation and engagement. To what do you attribute the shift in Jewish consciousness from the empathy leading to sympathy versus the empathy leading to apathy?

FIRESTONE: I think there are probably two vectors I'm thinking of. I haven't really thought this through in great detail. But I think one is the, at least in America and the American Jewish community, is because we are increasingly establishment and...

HOLO: So we're comfortable. We're complacent.

FIRESTONE: We're complacent.

HOLO: We're settling in to being white.

FIRESTONE: We are settling in to being white and we feel that the influx of non-whites, if you will, is at some level threatening to us. I think that's part of it. I think the other piece either - maybe two more I'm thinking about. The other piece is that we feel that we still are being victimized because of the Israel-Palestinian conflict and we still need to be extremely on the defensive. We are hypersensitive to threat. It's not just an issue of perception of being under threat. We are indeed under threat.

HOLO: Particularly from the Muslim world.

FIRESTONE: Particularly from the Muslim world. But we have to be very careful not to allow that fear to move us to despair. And that's an important point because we are in fact targets in Europe, Israel, other parts of the world by virtue of our Jewish identity. And so, that is something to be concerned about. And in fact, that's something that I think can be a source of legitimate fear. On the other hand, we have to be very careful not to allow that fear to turn to despair, to cynicism. And we have to make sure that that does not distort our ability to examine the situation and to make good decisions about our own future and our relations with other people in this world. And I'm thinking particularly of the American Muslim community who are our natural partners in many respects in the United States. We need, and we have not yet capitalized enough on that relationship. And hopefully, also in the future, we'll be able to improve our relationships with Muslims in other parts of the world. And I'm thinking specifically of Israel-Palestine. And then the third issue is our deeply ingrained feeling of persecution that is so much a part of our identity.

HOLO: In general.

FIRESTONE: In general. That I think that kind of window was open for a period of time where our persecution complex was blown apart by the extraordinary nature of our suffering. And it ironically sort of broke down the general veneer of persecution that would keep us concerned only for, or more, for our own survival rather than for the world at large. I think that is a general Jewish narrative that was blown apart because of the extraordinary horror of the Holocaust. It kind blew through that veneer. But then I think that veneer has sort of refocused itself, I think, in our community.

HOLO: So what is the emotional vein that we can tap to reassert the compassionate response to the refugees that we now face?

FIRESTONE: I think it's our tradition of compassion in Judaism. Our tradition of understanding God as the real *ha'Rachaman*, the compassionate one, where judgment is in many cases simply overruled by compassion. And our job is to act that out and emulate that perspective in our dealings with other people. I think that that's part of the tension of being a Jew that is the sort of particularism of our own tradition and the need to focus our resources on our own survival and our own thriving life. And the other side is our repeated concern for the world at large. That we, as Jews, have a special need to be

conscious of the needs of the world that's outside of our community. Partly because of our own ancient theology that the world exists because of us. There is a biblical notion that the world exists because the Israelites are God's chosen people. And the sins of Israel are, in a way, they're the sins that concern God. The sins of everybody else are really, God doesn't really care about because they don't understand the truth of God and the monotheist relationship. So, we need to get our act together because if we continue to go against the will of God, morally and ethically in our own communities, and in relation to other people as well, then there will be no reason for the world to continue to exist because the world exists for our sake. So, if the world exists for our sake, and we screw up, then why should the world exist at all? So, we have a kind of responsibility much beyond ourselves for our behavior. Our own behavior impacts on other people as well as us.

HOLO: On that note then, let's hope the best and work towards it as best we can. And thank you for taking the time and the stimulating conversation, as always, on the Bully Pulpit.

FIRESTONE: My pleasure.

(End of audio)