

## Living the Peace

-- Krzysztof Franaszek

There are two fundamental forces that propagate all human development in the world: one is dehumanizing, counter-productive, and parasitical; the other, enlightening, constructive, and perpetual. One wishes to turn brother against brother, while the other teaches to love thy neighbor as thy self. One will consume it's servants in their fervent labors, while the other will reward with a safe heaven where all can prosper. One is wide-spread in every corner of the world, an engulfing darkness whose flow must be dammed at all cost; namely, it is corruption. Because injustice occurs with such frequency and effortless ease, it is essential that its anti-thesis, integrity and righteousness, be based in and proliferated by individuals of immense capability and resolve. The leaders of the three Abrahamic faiths were indeed such men, who through their works and preaching became oases of hope and humility, around whom countless other men and women learned to live their lives with the highest standards of integrity. Moses, a lawgiver and herald of self-discipline to his people, Jesus, the preacher of forgiveness and turning the other cheek in the face of one's enemies, and Muhammad, a fair arbitrator and just authority<sup>6</sup>, all combated the cycle of depravity and decadence in their surroundings, in a plethora of creative and inspiring ways. Should modern leaders apply the same altruistic standards and code of conduct in the way they go about dealing with war-time prisoners and captive terrorists, such as those at Guantanamo Bay, the world would make a huge step forward in showing that justice is omnipresent even in times of great danger or despair, not just when it is convenient for those in power. By studying the defining characteristics of the core teachings of Moses, Jesus, and

Muhammad, not only will one find many overarching similarities, but also the potential for a combined force that can overcome any defense human vice tries to stop it with.

From a very early age, Moses was witness to a great deal of corruption, and did his best to combat it. The Jewish people at the time were essentially slaves of the Egyptians, and Moses was adopted son of one of the Pharaoh's daughters. However, he did not exploit his comfortable standing in power, and he quickly alienated himself from the oppressors when he killed an Egyptian overseer who was abusing a Jewish man<sup>1</sup>. One of the most important elements in the pursuit for evenhandedness is the ability to recognize, and then refute acts of violation or misconduct. In the aforementioned situation, Moses set aside his personal considerations about what might happen to him, and went along with what he knew would be proper. The ability to forego personal interest in a situation is crucial for a leader promoting universal fairness and equality. When Moses descended from Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments, only to find that the Israelites were committing idolatry, God threatened to destroy all of the Jews and make a new people from Moses. Moses replied that in that scenario, he should be destroyed along with them<sup>2</sup>. Moses demonstrates exceptional leadership and understanding of principle, as he was not at fault for any crime in this situation, but he risked his own welfare to show his fellow Jews that the weight of the crime they had committed could be equaled or even outdone by immense acts of personal integrity and selflessness. When God relented, Moses' actions served as a prime example of how powerful the actions of an individual can be when he places the welfare of others in perspective. Moses is extremely well remembered by both followers of all the Abrahamic faiths as well as judicial functionaries in his role as a lawgiver. Moses brought down the Ten Commandments from Mount Sinai, instructed the Jews on priestly and prayer rules when the Tabernacle was constructed, and trained his followers in other aspects of moral conduct.

Moses took advantage of the fact that writing down and listing all of these laws would serve as a basis from which common people could find out exactly what sort of behavior to avoid in order to maintain themselves in high spiritual regard, thereby preventing them from starting down on a path of vice that would not easily let go. In essence, Moses shone as an exceptional guardian of his people, by repeatedly forgoing his personal safety to protect others and giving them clear guidelines on how to conduct themselves in a manner that would eventually lead to peaceful and stable lives.

Jesus serves as another example of how high personal conduct can be used to spread a noble set of moral values. His teachings emphasize aspects of justice that are usually not included in the generalized definitions most individuals hold in their minds. One of Jesus' most recurrent parables is that of turning the other cheek, of sacrificing one's chance for defense in favor of promoting extreme compassion. Jesus said that if one were asked to carry a load a mile, he should carry it two miles, and if asked for one's cloak, one should give up his tunic as well<sup>3</sup>. These maxims are evidence of that fact that Jesus understood that common people are not perfectly restrained, that they do commit the occasional crime even if they do not harbor any malicious intent, and that if one is to prevent small grievances from escalating into bloody conflicts, one must have an open and compassionate temperament. Jesus was very insistent on the need for accepting and caring for one's enemies, even going to the extreme of visiting the socially exiled tax collectors and speaking with priests who strongly opposed his message. He fulfilled the role of a far-seeing leader by embracing everyone, not just his allies, in order to make his message a universal one, and setting the precedent for future followers of it. In effect, Jesus was blocking the influence of the corrupt forces of his day with an all-encompassing, humanitarian message that served as a direct antithesis. Lastly, Jesus not only showed that for a

society to be at peace it must be understanding and flexible in its treatment of other people, but the law itself must be taken with a measure of salt. An edict, if taken for exactly by letter for too long becomes obsolete, and itself a tool of the power-hungry. Jesus made sure that his students understood this, as during the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon on the Plain, he criticized those who took the law, and purposely misinterpreted it, while giving false instructions to others that they themselves did not follow<sup>4</sup>. Jesus said one should not judge or condemn if one hopes to avoid being the recipient of these actions himself. Recognizing that the corruption and foreign influence of the Romans had created a large amount of distrust amongst his people, Jesus was acting as a unifier by making such assertions, teaching his people to end the cycle of corruption by beginning with themselves. Jesus noted the specific effects of corruption present throughout his society, and strove to build strong individual integrity, thereby fulfilling the role of not only a sagacious, but also benevolent leader.

Muhammad, despite being born into a world of idolatry, materialism, and inter-tribal warfare, excelled and was renowned for his sense of justice and capacity as a fair arbitrator. In one incident, after parts of the Kaaba were destroyed by flash floods, there was so much disagreement over which clan would have the honor of lifting the Black Stone to its resting place that violence was about to erupt. When asked for his counsel, Muhammad suggested that stone be placed over the middle of his cloak and hoisted upwards by members of all four major clans<sup>7</sup>. The creative thinking, not to mention, lack of self-interest that Muhammad displayed are characteristics of a leader capable of organizing the contending factions of society in a joint force for peace and development. Muhammad showed classic resolve and unique commitment to principle when he began his preaching in Mecca. Many of the local tribes around Mecca were dependent on the Kaaba for their wealth, but the Muslim prophet's teachings threatened to

overthrow this manner of life in favor of more spiritual way of religious being. The merchants of the city proposed a great deal of wealth, an upgraded social status, and an advantageous marriage if Muhammad agreed to cease his preaching. But staying true to what he knew to be ethically just, Muhammad rejected the offer<sup>5</sup> and exemplified himself as a man of immense self-restraint and perspective, as his teachings benefited not only himself, but the people at large. Lastly, Muhammad showed that an effective and just leader must be able to settle disputes in a manner that allows for the mutual consent and benefit of all parties. Medina had been involved in fighting between its various Arab and Jewish communities for over a hundred years, embroiled in endless cycle of slaughters and disagreements, where blood-feuds were reducing the city's welfare to ashes. Muhammad was asked by a delegation from the twelve clans of Medina to act as an arbitrator for the entire community, and quickly realized that the base-line concept of 'an eye for an eye' was futile, an element of the very injustice that many were fighting to end. Muhammad drafted the Charter of Medina, a revolutionary document that among many achievements, established the security of the community and the novelty of religious freedom. Muhammad was a pioneer of liberty, creating a haven where promoting co-existence was the safest and most reliable measure of self-preservation. In essence, Muhammad was a revolutionary in his time, eradicating graft with his example as leader who balanced the needs of all of his followers and forwent his personal well-being to demonstrate the capacity with which one human being can care for another.

With the advent of modern terrorism and asymmetric warfare, parts of Western society seem to have forgotten the cornerstone principles many of them were founded on. In the U.S. military installation at Guantanamo Bay, prisoners are held in a convenient legal loophole that denies them due process, and reports of abuse and psychological torture are abound. In 2004, the

world was made witness to horrific and de-humanizing management of prisoners in the Abu Ghraib military prison. In 2006, several ‘black sites’ in East Europe were revealed: extraordinary rendition prisons where terrorist suspects could be held distant from the US and the events in their home countries. It would seem that the Western world, in hopes of saving itself, has condemned its foes to punishments that are considered inhumane by any standards, thereby entering a cycle of perpetual injustice and malice. But this fate is not a binding one; should the United States, one of the most powerful and influential countries in the world, show that it will not stand for such transgressions, it can break free. Of course, the national security apparatus of the country can not change its dogma momentarily, but the most important step towards breaking the cycle of corruption is to show that there is a hope, a potential, a possibility that wrongs can be righted, that one is committed to bettering the world. The U.S. could demonstrate it’s faith in such a hope if it were to ratify Protocol I and Protocol II of the Geneva Conventions, amendment protocols pertaining to the “Protection of Victims of International” and “Non-International Armed Conflicts.” Such an endeavor would reaffirm the teachings of all three of the Abrahamic prophets. Following Moses’ example, by signing the Protocol’s, American citizens would show their pledge to the safety of other citizens of the world, and set an example of high integrity and philanthropic concern. Heeding Jesus’ message of an open heart and love for one’s enemies, the ratification of the Protocols would serve as a symbolic change in temperament, from one where national security is the only priority to one where good faith in the human spirit serves to forge common bonds with people who could potentially harbor feelings of loathing. Following the footsteps of Muhammad, ratifying the amendments to the Geneva Convention would be synonymous with endorsing a policy of restraint and evenhandedness, where the U.S. would make sure that all captives suspected of terrorism are given the same treatment accorded to any

human being. Therefore, endorsing the aforementioned treaty would be perfectly in sync with the combined message of love, unity, and peace that Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad strived so earnestly to teach to people, who just like the residents of the modern United States, found themselves in situations of danger and conflict.

Corruption is truly a cycle: after being demoralized, one naturally repeats the same mistreatment towards another human being, who in turn makes the same mistake. Like all cycles, it is difficult to break free of the parasitical chain of vice and misconduct. But we are fortunate in that there is another cycle that is evenly more powerful and encompassing; the cycle begun by Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. By demonstrating the zenith of personal integrity, the prophets opened the eyes of their people to a dream of compassion and peace, a dream that in return, has found its way over the millennia to us, the present children and peacemakers of the world.

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