

THE VIEW FROM SINAI – A JEWISH PERSPECTIVE ON ABORTION

*A speech by Don Feder to the Massachusetts Citizens for Life's Assembly for Life, Worcester, MA
– January 21, 2018*

When I was a kid (a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away), my favorite TV shows were “The Adventures of Superman” and “The Lone Ranger.”

Remember the way “The Lone Ranger” opened: “Return with us now to those thrilling days of yesteryear! From out of the past come the thundering hoofbeats of the great Horse Silver! The Lone Ranger rides again.”

Well, apologies to the masked man and his faithful Indian companion, but those days of yesteryear often weren't that thrilling. In antiquity, they were frequently barbaric, bloody and brutal.

It was a time when human sacrifice, infanticide and the carnage of the arena were commonplace. People as diverse as the Carthaginians, Etruscans, Canaanites, Celts, Aztecs, Incas and Hawaiians sacrificed adults or babies to appease the gods, ward off natural disaster, and assure good harvests or victory in battle. In Carthage between 800 BC and 146 BC., it's estimated 20,000 infants were ritually sacrificed.

Infanticide was also common. Infants who were deformed or unwanted were left to die from exposure or be eaten by wild animals. Even Aristotle approved of the practice.

The Romans (who thought human sacrifice was barbaric) preferred bloodshed in the arena – in gladiatorial contests, or the execution of criminals or prisoners of war. To celebrate his conquest of Dacia (modern Romania), the Emperor Trajan had 123 days of games, in which more than 9,000 gladiators fought.

In Rome, a father (pater familias) had absolute power over his household, including the right to disinherit, sell or kill any of his children for any reason.

All of that started to change 3,000 years ago with the giving of the Torah at Sinai. According to Jewish tradition, half-a-million souls were there to hear the voice of God, amidst the fire and smoke.

The Declaration of Independence proclaims that certain truths are “self-evident” (meaning obviously true, requiring no proof) – “that all men are created equal and endowed by their Creator” with the rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

But said rights aren’t “self-evident.” In the ancient world, power flowed from the ruler down to a favored few (nobles, warriors, priests and the rich). The poor and powerless were considered inconsequential – objects to be used and disposed of by others. If you told them that the peasant grubbing in his field had inalienable rights, they would have stared at you in dumb disbelief.

Not until Sinai – with its positive and negative commandments -- did the concept of human rights appear. The Torah tells us that God created man “in His image,” that as He is holy, we were to be holy, and that we were to treat others as God’s unique creations, not as objects to satisfy our desires.

The Mishna says: “Therefore, Adam was created singly, to teach us that whoever destroys a single life in Israel is considered by Scripture to have destroyed the whole world, and whoever saves a single life... is considered ... to have saved the whole world.” Shortly after the account of Creation, the Bible tells us that Cain was punished for shedding his brother’s blood.

Two of God’s attributes are justice and mercy. If we are to emulate Him, we must ask ourselves: Is abortion just? Is abortion merciful? Or is it a denial of God and a reversion to human sacrifice – this time to an idol called “choice”?

The vision of Sinai found its highest expression in America, especially in our Constitution. That’s how we were able to build a civilization on these shores that became the wonder of the world in the blink of an eye, in terms of recorded history.

To give you an idea of Sinai’s profound influence on our republic, on the doors leading to the Supreme Court’s courtroom, there’s a carving representing twin tablets with the Roman numerals 1 through 10. Sometimes, guides tell visitors that they represent the first 10 Amendments to the Constitution. In reality, they are there to remind us of a much older code of law.

For the Great Seal of the United States, Franklin proposed a depiction of Moses leading the Children of Israel through the Red Sea.

Today, the vision of Sinai is being rapidly replaced by another vision. During the Second World War, Winston Churchill warned that an Axis victory would herald “a new Dark Age made more sinister and perhaps more protracted by the lights of perverted science.”

When abortion was legalized in New York State, prior to Roe v. Wade, the great Talmudist Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik predicted, “If you kill a fetus, a time will come when even infants will be killed.” Been there. Done that.

We’ve gone from abortion to infanticide to euthanasia and doctor-assisted suicide. Instead of acknowledging our common humanity, because we were all made in the image of God, increasingly, we play God with the lives of others.

But, what goes around comes around.

Deuteronomy 30:19 admonishes: “This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you may live, you and your children.”

This applies not only to individuals, but to nations and civilizations as well. Where are the Babylonians, the Persians and the Phoenicians? In the words of Mark Twain, they have “faded to dream stuff and passed away.” Twain added “The Jew saw them all and beat them all,” not by any innate virtue but by the power of Torah.

You choose life and you get life. You choose death and you get death. For more than half-a-century, we have chosen death – death by abortion, death by euthanasia, and death by rapidly falling fertility, due to a refusal to marry and have children.

The choice before us is stark – blessings or curses, life or death, Sinai or savagery and oblivion.