

About what happened in Jerusalem

by Susan_Estrich

I was in elementary school in Swampscott, Mass., when I learned that the Jews had killed Christ. Or so we were told, right around this time of year. Most of the kids in the class just nodded when they heard. It seems they already knew. I was shocked.

I went home to tell my mother, for whom the news provoked the familiar dilemma of whether to fight back or not make a stink. My mother spent much of her life afraid of what people might think or do, which may be why I have spent so much of mine fighting back. This time my mother decided, probably wisely, that the problem belonged in hands more experienced with such matters. She called our rabbi, who called the school, and the next week we were told that, actually, the Romans killed Jesus Christ at the behest of the Jews.

In a way, it all made sense. There had to be some reason, after all, that my dad couldn't play golf at the closest course and I couldn't be Mary in the school play (even though I had the longest hair); some reason that my mother looked at the world in terms of what "they" could do to "us"; some reason that the big relief in my house was that at least JFK hadn't been shot by a Jew, even if his assassin was. Better to be responsible for Jack Ruby than Lee Harvey Oswald.

Growing up in the shadow of the Holocaust, we knew from hate. Assigning a reason to the unreasonable, trying to make rational what is insane, has always been one of my defenses against life's terrors. If you can understand something, maybe you can change it. If you can change the beginning, change the motive, control the uncontrollable, maybe you can change the ending, as well.

Except that it doesn't work. There is nothing I can do about what happened in Jerusalem two thousand years ago. There is nothing any of us can do about the wrongs committed by our "ancestors." And at a certain point, there is nothing we should try to do about the wrongs committed against them.

Learning the lessons of history is vitally important so that history's worst chapters do not keep repeating themselves. Embracing the injuries of history only makes certain that the injuries will never heal.

Were Armenians the victims of a Turkish genocide a century ago, or was it, as the Turks were urging last week on the eve of the president's visit, a case of atrocities on both sides? The lessons of history matter, but do they matter at the cost of finding peace today? Can we learn lessons without hating the grandchildren or great-grandchildren of those who wronged us? Can we study Jesus' death without blaming his descendents for their role?

The president this week reached out to Muslims, making clear that America has no quarrel with their faith.

But we do have a very big quarrel with those who would use that faith, who would use the words of the Koran, as a basis for violent attacks on us as "infidels." That they "believe" in what they are doing makes them more dangerous and more deadly.

Religion is one of God's and man's great gifts, a source of faith when life is hard, a source of meaning when life is cruel, the tie that binds us together as families and people. It is also the greatest source of hatred in the world today. Handle with care. Happy holidays.

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