

October 13th, 2006

Habits of the Informed Heart

By Leonard Fein

It can hardly be called a parade. Some people are frenzied, others are sluggish, the drums beat out of synch, it's altogether a mess.

But even so, some things become clear. For example, we can now state definitively that Jerusalem is neither Washington, D.C., nor Batavia, Ill. The way we know this? When the Torah scroll is taken from the Ark at the beginning of the Torah reading ceremony, the congregation chants, "The Torah will go forth from Zion and the word of God from Jerusalem."

Well, here is what happened in Washington last week, by way of Batavia: Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert announced for all the world to hear that he takes responsibility. A simple declarative sentence, but upon examination, utterly meaningless.

What, exactly, was Hastert taking responsibility for? For not knowing the ugly truth about Rep. Mark Foley, or for knowing the truth and not acting on it? More important: Exactly what does it mean to "take responsibility"?

Hastert pointed out that "someone in Washington" once said, "The buck stops here." (That "someone" was President Harry Truman, and the words were in fact displayed on a painted glass sign on Truman's Oval Office desk. Hard to believe Hastert didn't know that; easier to believe he doesn't like mentioning Democrats.)

But so far as the buck stopping at Hastert's seat, it apparently just stayed for a moment and then moved on. Otherwise, obviously, he'd have resigned or in some other way given something more than mere verbal expression to the responsibility he claimed.

But he gave no indication whatever that his assertion of responsibility means anything at all. Empty words; his buck isn't worth a dime. Bunk is more like it, and that is what stops "here," and stays.

But while we're at it, it's useful, albeit depressing, to observe that Jerusalem isn't Jerusalem either — at least not the Jerusalem that Micah and Isaiah had in mind when they talked about the provenance of God's word. We're told, of course, that if we forget Jerusalem, our rights hands will forget their cunning, our tongues will cleave to the roofs of our mouths. But even in the face of such calamitous possibilities, willful amnesia is a sore temptation.

The Foley thing took place, so far as we know, exclusively in cyberspace, in that still new virtual world that more of us spend more time visiting just about every day. (One hopes our visits are to the innocent precincts thereof.) Scandals in Israel, by contrast, are more earthbound.

Consider: The president of Israel, Moshe Katsav, has been under active investigation for rape and sexual harassment, for his illegal wiretapping of phone calls made by employees of his office as well as for irregularities in his granting of pardons. The president vigorously denies all the allegations.

But the police have gathered sufficient evidence to warrant its transmission to the attorney general, perhaps even recommending that he be formally charged. (Rape, assault and "forbidden consensual sex" are under consideration; results of police investigations on the other charges will also be forwarded to the attorney general, but without specific recommendation.)

Then there is the case of the manically pathetic former justice minister and environmental minister Tzachi Hanegbi, indicted last week for fraud, breach of trust, bribing elections and perjury. Hanegbi's core defense, insistently and repeatedly asserted in a lengthy interview in Haaretz, is that the things he did are the norm in Israeli politics. (Talk about washing dirty linen in public. But then again, if everybody does it, it can't be dirty. Call that the "Hanegbi Defense.")

A few weeks earlier, the incumbent justice minister, Haim Ramon, resigned his position, having been indicted for introducing his tongue, sans invitation, into the mouth of a young female soldier.

Oh yes. There are also the two ongoing investigations of hanky-panky by the prime minister, Ehud Olmert. The latest surveys report that Olmert's public approval in Israel is about

half that of President Bush in the United States. But the investigation in question is not about Olmert's mismanagement of the summer war in Lebanon; it involves real estate transactions in which Olmert bought low and sold high, generally considered a smart thing to do unless the transactions involved bribery, as they may have in the case at hand.

What to make of all this? Dirty e-mails, dirty dealings, dirty linen; dirty wars, dirty detentions.

Perhaps all the miscreants — indeed, all of us — might take a lesson from the Amish. The horror of what took place at the West Nickel Mines Amish school in Lancaster County, Pa., takes its sorry place in the miserable annals of gun violence in American schools. It is an especially poignant entry because of the intense peacableness of the Amish and because of the tender age of the children.

The dignity of the families in the wake of the tragedy was widely remarked, but even more remarkable was their readiness to embrace the widow of the murderer. They ate with her, prayed with her, and when it came time to bury her husband, they came with her to the cemetery.

In this season of forgiveness, we have all been given a lesson in stoic kindness that ought not be forgotten. Such lessons, sometimes dramatic but often mundane, come to remind us of quaint terms and abiding aspirations like “dignity” and “integrity,” of words that are not throwaway sound bites but habits of the informed heart. They mark neither a virtual world nor the dirty real world we know too well, but a very real world of virtue, an alternative universe that can be ours if we work at it.