

“Power Corrupts and Absolute Power Corrupts Absolutely”
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Rabbi Jay M. Stein

Reuters reported on February 2, 2007 that “Boys in Sudan's war-torn Darfur region are more often at risk of being recruited into armed groups, while [sexual] violence against girls is unabated, despite growing official awareness,” a top United Nations envoy said Thursday.

Following visits to Darfur and the South Sudanese capital of Juba, and meetings with top Sudanese government representatives, Radhika Coomaraswamy, the UN special representative to the Secretary-General, spoke on children and armed conflict. He told reporters in Khartoum that while Sudanese officials have made promises to reduce threats to children, little progress has been seen on the ground.

“In Sudan, there is recognition at the official level of the problems of child recruitment and [sexual] violence,” Coomaraswamy said. “[Sudan] has agreed to frameworks and they have agreed to commitments. However, we are concerned that there's not enough implementation and that results are not showing on the ground.” “Increasingly, children are recruited by both rebel factions and the Sudanese army, and independent monitors have pointed out through verified data that child recruitment is increasing in Darfur, and all parties to the conflict engage in child recruitment,” Coomaraswamy said.

Since 2003, violence in Darfur has killed an estimated 200,000 people, while displacing at least two million more, but it is the abuse of children that I find impossible to comprehend.

We live in a world where there is war. We live in a world where conflicts abound and control is sought; control over land, resources, and people, but there must be limits and there must be boundaries. Like many of you, I reject the idea that all is fair in love and war. There is such a thing as war crimes. All is not fair in war and all is not acceptable. The genocide that is occurring in Darfur is unacceptable. The ethnic cleansing going on in the Sudan is unacceptable. However, the use of children to carry out those heinous acts is reprehensible. I recognize that conflicts on the African continent are not simple. I realize there is much I do not understand about the civil war taking place, but I also understand children should never be used in an armed struggle. I find it repugnant, whether it is Hamas or the Janjawee. It is a principle we know intuitively and a concept articulated in our Torah. Although wars are distasteful, they are part of human history, but we get to decide how we are going to fight those wars, and more than that, we decide who is going to fight those wars.

We can debate military strategy. We can have honest discussions of the value of diplomacy over military action. We can weigh economic sanctions over preemptory strikes, but there has never been a discussion as to who will fight those wars. The opening of this week’s reading concludes the discussion about who is eligible for military service. In America, we recognize that we simply cannot and will not conscript children into military service. There are limits. This is where we draw the line. We say and our tradition says, “Ad Kaan.” There is a line we will not cross and there are limits, even when national security is at stake. America says children cannot be drafted into service. Americans say you must be 18 years or older and the Torah says 20 years

or older. Either way, when our nation is at risk, there's a limit to what the government can impose. There's a limit to the power and a limit to the control because when there is no control on government there is tyranny. Where there is no control there is abuse and no real freedom.

That is what this week's Torah reading talks about, limits, constraints, and checks and balances.

There are three essential components to this morning's reading. Each offers insight into seizing control of control, and of having power over power. The first concludes the section about the census which was employed in order to see who's available for military service. The second section is about the Sotah and the third about the Nazir.

The Sotah was a case about a lack of trust between a husband and a wife. A man suspects his wife of infidelity and brings her to the priest. He explains the source of his concern to the priest. When they were unable to reconcile differences within their own home, they went to the priest to bring some control and perspective. In the ancient world, the wife was property and she had no "real" rights to speak of as in a modern context. She had no protection from her husband. To which the Torah says "No." Everyone has recourse to a higher authority. No one is property, no one stands alone. The community comes to their aid.

In the case of the Nazir, it is the person who takes an oath of piety, an oath that separates them from the community. The Nazir says, "I choose to live by a certain standard, a standard of discipline, a life many could not follow." Immediately, the rabbis point out that although people may want to strive for this life, it is not acceptable. Too much control is not a good thing. Our tradition wants us to enjoy life, not to separate ourselves from it. Our sages teach us control, they teach us to direct our appetites, but not in the extreme. Our legacy is not abstinence. Our charge is directed, thoughtful living. Where others say fast, we say keep kosher, when others say poverty, we say *tzedakah*.

With each example of this morning's reading, we see opportunity and growth as it relates to a very real need. Each and every one of us wants control in our lives. We want to be able to avoid poverty, sickness and isolation. We believe we can control that. This week's parasha reminds us that control in the extreme is tyranny. When the individual denies himself too much, whatever the motivation, the outcome is negative. When the family tries to control every member without regard for the individual's needs, there is dysfunction, and when a government seizes absolute power over its people, we experience oppression.

Those are the examples offered in this morning's reading; personal, communal and national. However, there is one area where this theory needs to be extrapolated – the international level. We live in an ever-shrinking world, a world in which we live in a global community. It is in this arena that conflict will most certainly play out. What goes on in Darfur is easily ignored. I, myself, am guilty because it doesn't affect me. However, more and more conflicts are waged overseas and may make their way to our shores. I'm not a prophet but I think the next great world conflict will be over oil. If we don't learn how to control our own consumption, this conflict will come faster and with greater intensity. We must learn control in proper measure.

The Hubbert peak theory says that for any given geographical area, from an individual oil-producing region to the planet as a whole, the rate of petroleum production tends to follow a bell-shaped curve. It is one of the primary theories on peak oil.

The Hubbert peak theory is based on the observation that the amount of oil under the ground in any region is finite. At some point, it is going to run out and, just before that, we will find ourselves in a war. At this time, we will have to decide what we are willing to do to get more oil. This conflict will dwarf our current conflict over terrorism. There will be extreme anxiety and fear and we will justify all sorts of approaches that would otherwise seem unconscionable. People do unthinkable things when they are afraid and desperate. The solution is to look for some control.

This country is currently engaged in a great debate about torture and whether or not there is any justification for its use. We live in what we perceive to be desperate times. Para-military units, radical fundamentalists, terrorists, rogue regimes and even pirates abound. America wants some control. We want to ferret them out wherever they are, and gain information at any cost, as long as it will save lives.

When President Obama was speaking to the CIA about interrogation techniques on April 20 of this year, he said the following: "I believe our nation is stronger and more secure when we deploy the full measure of our power and the power of our values, including the rule of law..." He continued, "I understand that it is hard when you are asked to protect the American people against people who have no scruples, people who would willingly and gladly kill innocents. Al Qaeda is not constrained by a constitution. Many of our adversaries are not constrained by our belief in freedom of speech, representation in court, or the rule of law. In fact, sometimes it may seem we are operating with one hand tied behind our backs. Those who would argue for a higher standard are naive. I understand that this makes the United States special, but what makes the U.S. special is that we are willing to uphold our values both when it is easy and also when it is hard, even when we are afraid or under threat, not just when it is expedient to do so. That's what makes us different. So, yes, you have a harder job." I say the same to you this morning. Living is hard. Living under constant pressure and threat, fear of losing your job, fear of not being able to pay the bills, pressure from family and friends to do something about it, is hard, but don't let go of your principles or your convictions. Take pride in your people, your nation, and your country. Ground yourself in community, hold onto your family. Believe in yourself and in God.

What we want isn't control, but safety and security. That comes from God and the power of our values. This hasn't been an easy sermon to write and it hasn't been a light topic that leaves you entertained. The message is an important one. It is the message of hope.

I apologize for the seriousness of these remarks and, as I have concluded in past remarks and again today, "When the love of power is overcome by the power of love, the world will know peace." May God bring peace to us, to our people and to our world, "*bimhaira biyamainu*," speedily in our day.