

Peace? Not As Long As Humiliation Reigns!

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The horrific events on September 11, 2001 in the United States shook the world. Osama bin Laden acted as the ultimate humiliator of the western world. Taking down the World Trade Center's Twin Towers, the symbols of western power, was a cruel message of humiliation. Humiliation has to do with "putting down." The word humiliation has at its core "humus," which means "earth" in Latin. Indeed, the Twin Towers were taken down to the level of the ground, into the dust of the earth. Whatever these towers stood for was cruelly "debased" and "denigrated." Both words have the prefix "de-," which signifies "down from" in Latin, down from a great height to the ground. Thousands of innocent victims had to pay with their lives for this "message of humiliation" that was "sent" to the mighty masters of today's world in the act of "taking down" something that was seen to symbolize them, the Twin Towers.

During the past months, bin Laden's name has been supplemented with the name of Saddam Hussein. He is another rogue, who, it is feared, plans on humiliating the western world with as much cruelty as bin Laden did, or worse; "war on terror" has therefore been joined by "war on Iraq." In other words, the humiliated, the victims of terror, are sending a message back to the perpetrators; it is the message that the victims do not intend to succumb to this humiliation, on the contrary, that they are set on resisting it. In this situation many ask, "How come that we find ourselves enveloped in violence, war, and terror, or at least in apprehension and fear of it, even though the only thing we yearn for is peace?"

Some scholars and experts identify conflicts of interest (as to natural resources, for example), others deprivation as the main causes of violent conflict. Deprivation may be caused by poverty, for example, or low status or marginalisation. The argument as to deprivation goes as follows: deprivation represents a "grievance" that leads to "resentment" and "embitterment," and finally to a "backlash." I appreciate such theorizing, however, I believe that there is one element that is lacking. Poverty, low status and marginalisation do not automatically elicit feelings of suffering and yearnings for retaliation. A religious person may join a monastery and be proud of poverty, low status may be explained as God's will or a just punishment for sins

perpetrated in an earlier life, and also marginalisation may be the basis for pride; not all minorities feel oppressed. Furthermore, poverty may motivate a person to work hard in order to get out of it, parents may sacrifice to enable their children to have an education and a better life, and every small incremental step towards a better quality of life may be celebrated. The question must be: What is it that transforms deprivation into unbearable suffering of a kind that triggers the urge to retaliate with violence? Furthermore, even where grievances indeed do lead to suffering, is not the probability high that depression and apathy are bred, rather than highly organized terror? Thus the question becomes even more complicated: Firstly, what kind of deprivation is required for an urge for violent retaliation to develop, and secondly, under which conditions is this retaliation carried out in an organized way?

Feelings of humiliation, is my answer to the first part of the question. Feelings of humiliation may lead to acts of humiliation perpetrated on the perceived humiliator, setting off cycles of humiliation in which everybody who is involved feels humiliated, and is convinced that humiliating the humiliator is a just and holy duty. As to the second part of the question I would suggest that leaders are needed that channel the sufferings of masses into one single joint project of retaliation. Hitler is not the only master narrator of stories of humiliation that – as he argued in the 1930s - had to be resisted and prevented in a highly organized joint effort. Hitler incited the entire German population to undo the humiliation that Germany had suffered after World War I through the Treaties of Versailles. Not enough, he also engaged Germany in “preventive” extermination of the World-Jewry that he feared was set to dominate and humiliate the globe in the future if not stopped. Undoing past humiliation and preventing future humiliation, these were his justifications for unspeakable atrocities.

How do feelings of humiliation come about? Based on many years of research on this phenomenon I would suggest the following explanation: Feelings of humiliation come about when deprivation is perceived as an illegitimate imposition of lowering or degradation, one that cannot be explained in constructive terms. According to my analysis all human beings basically yearn for recognition and respect. I believe that it is when people perceive that recognition and respect are withdrawn or denied that they may feel humiliated, and that this is the strongest force that creates rifts between people and breaks down relationships. Whether this withdrawal of recognition is real or the result of a misunderstanding, still the perceiver is prone to feel humiliated, whether he or she is rich or poor, marginalized or not. Thus, I suggest that the desire for recognition unites us human beings, that it is universal and can serve as a platform for contact and cooperation. Consequently, many of the rifts that we can observe stem from an equally universal phenomenon, namely the humiliation that is felt when recognition and respect is perceived as lacking. I do not therefore believe that ethnic, religious, cultural differences or conflicts of interests create rifts by themselves; on the contrary, conflicts of interests can best be solved through cooperation, and diversity can be a source of mutual enrichment – however, cooperation and diversity are possible and enriching only as long as they are embedded within relationships that are characterised by respect. It is when respect and recognition are failing, that those who feel victimised are prone to highlight differences in order to “justify” rifts that were caused, not by these differences, but by something else, namely by humiliation.

This elicits yet another question: Do we – members of communities around the world today – live in contexts that make people accept explanations for inequality and

deprivation such as those mentioned above, explanations alluding to God's will, or to nature's order, or to punishment for past failings? The answer is: No. We live in a world that is listening to the message of human rights that indicates that every human being has a right to live in enabling circumstances, that equality is the ruling idea and not hierarchy, that every person has an inner core of dignity that ought not be lowered. My international experience indicates that this message indeed is heard. However, it has not, at least not in the short term, had the effect that many human rights advocates hope for, namely to decrease suffering around the world. On the contrary, in the first instance, it augmented feelings of humiliation, because inequalities and deprivation that were accepted before turn into unacceptable acts of humiliation perpetrated by the powerful on the less powerful. And, as mentioned already, acts of humiliation create feelings of humiliation that in turn have a potential to lead to retaliating acts of humiliation.

The terror attacks of the September, 11, 2001 in the United States, that shocked the world, show – at least to my understanding – that the entire world community is caught in a cycle of humiliation. Men such as Osama bin Laden would never have any followers, if there were not a pool of feelings of humiliation somewhere, feelings that are so intense that young intelligent men, who could found families and have satisfying careers, are willing to follow such leaders and lose their lives in suicide attacks. The rich and powerful west has long been blind to the fact that its superiority may have humiliating effects on those who are less privileged, even if unintended, and that neglecting this phenomenon may be dangerous, especially during times when the west simultaneously teaches the world the ideals of human rights, ideals that heighten feelings of humiliation.

My main task is at present to write a planned book on humiliation. I start the book with the following narration:

Julius Paltiel, a Norwegian Jew, was imprisoned in the “SS Strafgefangenenlager Falstad” during World War II. Falstad is situated in the midst of a breathtakingly beautiful landscape, in the middle of Norway, not far away from Trondheim (something like the latitude of Anchorage, albeit much milder, because of the Gulf Stream). Falstad, a large building almost forlorn in this lovely nature, wrapped around a rectangular courtyard, was once a special school for handicapped boys. However, in 1941, it was taken over by the German occupying power and turned into the “SS Strafgefangenenlager Falstad,” a detention camp for political prisoners. I met Julius Paltiel in October 2002. He lived through a deeply gripping and thought provoking episode that I would like to narrate to you here.

Once, one of the prisoners was asked to sing. SS officers and prisoners, including Julius Paltiel himself, stood in the courtyard, listening. The prisoner who was to sing was very knowledgeable and had an extremely beautiful voice. He was able to recite several deeply reflective songs from the German cultural heritage, in German. He sang these songs so wonderfully and touchingly that the SS officers were taken in to a degree that they stood still and listened in silence; in complete silence. Julius Paltiel explained that this had never happened before; the SS officers never used to be silent, on the contrary, they continuously shouted insults and orders.

After about a quarter of an hour of beautiful sounds filling the air, a dog began to howl, trying to “accompany” the song. This “woke up” the SS officers. They immediately set out to “cover up” for their vulnerability with an excess of humiliation. They ordered the prisoners to go to the tree in the middle of the courtyard and shake off its leaves; it was autumn. Then they ordered the prisoners to lie down on their stomachs and crawl to the leaves, take them up one by one with their mouths and bring them to one of the corners of the courtyard, all this while dragging themselves ahead on their stomachs. Thus the prisoners had to lie on the ground and use their mouths to “clean” the courtyard from the leaves that they first had been ordered to shake off the tree!

I would say that the beautiful songs and their touching appeal had undermined the hierarchy of “Übermensch” und “Untermensch” that the SS officers otherwise attempted to maintain. In their minds they were not “supposed” to feel and be touched in the same way as other people. Being merely human beings among other human beings, this was not their world; they believed to be “higher” beings. However, the songs confronted them with a truth they did not want to know, namely that they, indeed, were mere human beings like anybody else, and no more. When they “woke up,” they remembered the ideological frame they had subscribed to, namely a hierarchy of lesser and higher beings where they were supposed to occupy the seat of the master. Interestingly, they did not beat the prisoners “mindlessly” or treat them with mere physical brutality, no, they perpetrated a highly symbolic and intelligent “message” to both prisoners and themselves: they reinstated physically, mentally and emotionally the hierarchy of “Übermensch/Untermensch” by sending the prisoners literally “down,” down to the ground and let them carry out “services” that were so “low” that there could be no doubt of who was the master!

Thus, we could conclude that the beauty of the songs performed by the prisoner elicited humility in the SS officers, at least for a few minutes, a humility that is at the core of the human rights message of equal dignity for every human being. Humiliation, on the contrary, characterizes a world of inhuman inequalities and brutal rankings of human worth and value in “higher” and “lower” beings. It seems that humankind’s current task is to avoid such rankings, and avoid cycles of humiliation where victims turn into humiliators.