



Besa: A Community Covenant

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During WWII, thousands of Muslim-Albanians created an underground network to shelter their Jewish citizens as well as Jewish refugees and Italian deserters who crossed into their country from Greece, Kosovo, and Macedonia. Today Yad Vashem, the Jerusalem Holocaust memorial, has given 65 Albanian rescuers the great honor of “Righteous Among Nations.” Considering the generations of persecution and warfare between Jews and Muslims in the Middle East, I had to know, what would make Muslims rescue Jews. In this search I wondered if there can be a redemptive communal value in religion. Not redemptive as in personal salvation, but redemptive as in preserving and honoring human life and its diversity.

Prior to 9/11 I staunchly defended religion as a force for good. With that said, I was fully aware even before 9/11 that terrible things have been done in the name of religion: the Inquisition, the Salem Witch Trials, and Catholic and Protestant anti-Semitism that encouraged the Holocaust. I just maintained that while organized religion could be corrupted and used for purposes of power and greed, many individuals, if not most individuals, have clung to the positive elements of religion. I looked towards the Civil Rights Movement in America, emanating from the black church, as proof that religion could be a force for good.

9/11 required soul searching. What would make human beings hijack planes and drive them into sky scrapers in the name of religion, for the benefit of religion, albeit a fundamentalist view of religion? I wanted to say that fundamentalism, the notion that one belief is the correct belief and followers must change the minds of all they encounter, to persuade or harm any who defy or stand in their way, that fundamentalism was an anomaly, a misuse of clear and positive religious principles.

What I came to admit is this, the seeds of intolerance are in every religion, including Unitarian Universalism (we aren't friendly to Christians all the time, though at least we are not prone to violence). It wasn't just power or corrupted individuals that warp religion – the seeds of intolerance are in every religion. Any and every religion that maintains a better or best way is subject to fundamentalism will be drawn towards fundamentalism. You do not know what pain this understanding cost your minister. I have given my vocation to religion, something inherently flawed with the potential for epic violence and destruction.

Several months ago I heard about a photo journal essay, *Besa: Muslims Who Saved Jews in World War II*, by Norman H. Gershman. Upon learning about the many Albanian Muslims who saved Jews during the Holocaust, Gershman traveled to this poor, isolated country to find the survivors and record their stories. What Gershman learned is that these Albanians were motivated, almost compelled, to become rescuers based on local folk custom and their interpretation of Islam. As Mordecai Paldiel notes

In Albania when a person gives you're his Besa to act in a certain way, then he is committed to abide by it whatever the circumstances . . . Survivors relate that Albanians vied with each other for the honor of sheltering the fleeing Jews, a phenomenon unheard of in other European countries under the heel of the Nazis.”¹

Local custom dictates that shelter must be given to anyone who knocks on the door. The stranger who knocks must be given shelter and even more, treated as a family member. Coupled with this is the Albanian principle of Besa, one's word of honor, which must be kept regardless of circumstances. Besa is the code of conduct, the agreement of communal behavior and obligation; it was and is a covenant among Albanians. Hamid and Xhemal Veseli who sheltered Jews explain “Besa exists in every Albanian soul. Our parents were devout Muslims and believed, as we do, that every knock on the door is a welcome from God.”² Remember, as Unitarian Universalists we also uplift the notion of covenant, our obligation to support one another as we walk together.

In addition, prior to WWII Albanians were members of the Shia Bektashi sect. The Bektashi formed in the 13th century as a Sufi sect, Sufi's being the mystic branch of

¹ Norman H. Gershman, *Besa: Muslims Who Saved Jews in World War II* (2008), xiii.

² 90.

Islam. In the 1920's the Bektashi were removed from neighboring Turkey (by the secular Atta Turk) and deepened their base in Albania. The Bektashi were and are known as a liberal branch of Islam, recognizing the importance of women, allowing men and women to be together, and emphasizing one's personal relationship with Allah.

According to Baba Haxhi Dede Reshat Bardhi, the current worldwide Bektashi leader

At the time of the Nazi occupation the prime minister of Albania was Medi Frasheri. He was a member of the Bektashi. He refused to release the names of Jews to the Nazi occupiers. He organized an underground of all Bektashi to shelter all the Jews, both citizens and refugees. At that time nearly half of all Muslims in Albania were Bektashi. Prime Minister Frasheri gave a secret order: "All Jewish children will sleep with your children, all will eat the same food, all will live as one family." We Bektashi see God everywhere, in everyone. God is in every pore and every cell, therefore all are God's children. There cannot be infidels. There cannot be discrimination. If one sees a good face one is seeing the face of God. God is Beauty. Beauty is God. There is no God but God.³

The Bektashi of Albania believed that by saving Jews they were being good Muslims. Yes, these decisions were made before the creation of the modern State of Israel, and all the Jewish/Muslim conflict that has followed. Yet, within the pages of this book are photographs of Albanian Muslims proudly displaying their certificates as Righteous Among Nations. One photograph shows members of the Kocerri family toasting the Jews of Israel. The family patriarch, Kasem Jakup Kocerri, who as a young man took the local rabbi and his family into hiding for six months said

I am proud to be recognized by the state of Israel as Righteous Among Nations. We have been a family of Muslims for five hundred years. Besa came from the Koran. The Jews and Muslims of Albania are cousins. We both bury our dead in coffins. I salute all the Jews. May they be honored with their homeland because the Jews are still at war and need to be remembered. I drain my glass of raki to honor all my Jewish friends. To save a life is to go to paradise.⁴

³ 4.
⁴ 70.

The hospitality of the Albanians was/is staggering. Families poor and rich sheltered Jews, in one case up to four years. I try to imagine what it must have been like to add 2-4 members to one's family for 1-2 years, to find beds and clothes, to pay for food, to not demand payment and to live with great risk. One of our members, Benno Benninga, wrote about his life during the Holocaust, hiding with a Dutch family that verbally abused and extorted money from his father. This was not the case with these families in Albania, who took it upon themselves to share whatever they had and preserve life. I asked myself if I would be willing to do this today. Would you?

Parents with children also took part, though they risked the lives of themselves and their children. Children as young as 3 and 7 were trusted with the family secret and obligation to shelter strangers. One woman, then a girl, remembers sheltering a Jewish brother and sister, who became her friends. She remembers "Those years were very fearful, but friendship overcame all fear. My father said that the Germans would have to kill his family before he would let them kill our Jewish guests."⁵ This did not reflect a lack of care for his family, rather a deep care for Besa, which linked them all, and would not be broken by the evil outside their faith and home.

Many families celebrated Jewish and Muslim holidays together. When the Gestapo conducted searches, families either hid Jews within their homes, or sent them to a neighbor's house across the alley, or sent them to remote villages where other family members and friends gave shelter to the Jews. Entire villages conspired to hide Jews. Often the Jews hid "in plain sight," being given an Albanian name, working, eating, and going to school alongside the rest of the family. In one case a Gestapo search confiscated the briefcase of a Jew in hiding, possibly exposing many participants. The patriarch went to the Albanian police and demanded the briefcase be returned, unopened, under the code of Besa. The briefcase was returned unopened.

One woman, Bahrije Seiti Borici remembers sheltering Jewish family friends (Isak, Bela, and Rashel Biva) when she was seventeen.

We were told that they would live with us as one family, posing as our relatives from another district. No one was to know they were Jewish. The Nazis had warned our community in Shkoder that anyone harboring Jews would be killed. My father was the burgomaster of our district, and when the Germans demanded to know where Jews were located, my father said he had never heard

⁵ 58.

of Jews in Shkoder. Rashel and I became the best of friends. I taught her the Albanian language, and she even went to religious school with me. She now lives in Israel.⁶

Obviously, if “no one was to know” not every Albanian took part in sheltering Jews. However, many community members worked side by side to preserve the lives of Jews.

Another woman from Shkoder remembers

We were well known and quite wealthy . . . We owned two large homes with servants . . . My husband hid many Jews in and around Shkoder, and he organized other hiding places. He secretly drove Jewish families to our country home, high in the mountains . . . Many of my husband’s activities in saving Jews were well known to our employees, and many of them helped in these rescues.⁷

The rest of this story is that many of the Albanians never knew what happened to the Jews they rescued. Communism descended on Albania shortly after WWII ended, the borders were closed, communication with the outside (even letters) were forbidden, and in 1967 religion was outlawed. Scholars, partisans, imams, the wealthy, all these people were arrested, their property was confiscated, and many spent time doing hard labor. The country spiraled into poverty and isolation. Several of those who rescued Jews lost everything (including their lives).

The wealthy woman from Shkoder with two homes and servants remembers “After the war we lost everything to the communists, even our food stamps, but we made do with our hoarded gold. My husband was arrested and spent three years at hard labor. He died in 1957. Our former house still stands, empty and abandoned, in Shkoder.”⁸

Almost fifty years later communism was overthrown and communication with the outside world was once again permitted. Slowly some letters trickled in from survivors scattered around the world, still looking for those who had preserved them.

⁶ 86.

⁷ 38.

⁸ 38.

But by now many had died and names had been forgotten. However, some do now exchange letters, and some have also had reunions.

In a recent article in the *New York Times Magazine*, Mark Lilla details the continued failures of religion, both in terms of orthodox fundamentalism and weak liberalism (where people do not care about much other than a religion to appease them). He also critiques those who believe or want to believe that religion is or will become passé. He notes that religion always returns to influence politics, and we better get used to this and find ways to respond, because significant countries, like Iran will be speaking to us in the language of religion. We can stick our heads in the sand or offer blanket condemnation of those who are religious, but that will not help us with the basic problem of communicating with countries and leaders who live political theology (revealed divine commands applied to social life).⁹ Lilla recommends we embrace religious reformers who while criticizing fundamentalism, retain their religious values and accommodate the modern world via renovation and reformation. Lilla concludes his article noting “By speaking from within the community of the faithful, renovators give believers compelling theological reasons for accepting new ways as authentic reinterpretations of the faith.”¹⁰ This is what the Bektashi did. This is how they are both devout Muslims and able to positively respond to the difficult demands of a modern world. I admire their ability to retain the best of their faith, to cling to this, and to be a force for positive change. I envy their ability to do it together, not alone, but in a village, an extended family, a large business.

So if you originally thought the Chalice Lighter program was not for you, I hope you will think again. What else is this program but Besa, our code of honor and obligation, our covenant to aid one another. Consider making a pledge for this reason. Because I would like to leave you with a thought and a question. We are that liberal faith that Lilla described, easily concerned with ourselves and unable to delve into our theology and make deeper personal, social, and communal commitments. My question is “What could we do more of if we agreed to a Besa, knew our Besa, and lived our Besa. Mostly poor Albanians saved the lives of thousands of Jews, and retreating soldiers. Could there be a more astounding gift to the world? What is our Besa? Who or what could we shelter if we knew and lived our covenant with one another?”

⁹Mark Lilla, “The Politics of God” in *New York Times Magazine* (August 19, 2007) 28+.

¹⁰ 55.