

The Conscience of the Cowards

Luke 13:31-35

When the Oscars are handed out this evening, it's quite possible that at least one nominee, if not two, may very well be denied the award on the basis of politics alone. No, it has nothing to do with our former senior Senator, Chris Dodd, who went to Hollywood to become the President of the Motion Picture Association of America. Nor is it about Tinseltown's love affair with certain A-list actors, or any influence peddling among the big-name film directors and producers.

Instead, that to which I refer has been a somewhat hidden controversy over the last few months, at least until one of the Oscar-nominated directors was detained at LAX when he and his family arrived Tuesday night. Emad Burnat is a Palestinian filmmaker who wrote and co-directed the highly acclaimed documentary, *5 Broken Cameras*, which tells the story of a six-year period in his West Bank town when villagers nonviolently were protesting the Israeli security wall that cut through their farmland. The film, financed by investors from both Israel and France, and co-produced and directed by an Israeli, Guy Davidi, has received widespread acclaim by critics and viewers around the globe. The Oscar nomination is only one of many awards and recognitions the film has received.

However, it has not been adored by Limor Livnat, the head of the Israeli Culture Ministry, or by much of the Israeli media. Meir Bardugo, the spokesperson for the Culture Ministry caustically

remarked: “Israeli cinema doesn’t have to be anti-Israeli.”¹ This makes many of Bernat’s supporters wonder, could the Israeli officials have had anything to do with Burnat’s detention upon his arrival in the U.S., even though he was an Oscar-nominee?

The irony is, Burnat’s documentary isn’t even the one that is provoking the most stir. Another Israeli-backed film, *The Gatekeepers*, features confessions by the various heads of the Shin Bet, the main agency overseeing Israel’s occupation, who are all very critical of Israel’s policy toward Palestine—one even comparing it to the Nazi occupation of Europe.² It has created a firestorm of controversy in Israel and among Israel’s supporters here in the U.S. Yet, *The Gatekeepers* has been picked up by Sony Pictures for distribution and may even have the better chance at the Oscar for Best Documentary after a win at the Berlin International Film Festival.

Despite what the Israeli government and pro-Israel groups claim, these movies were never intended to be Palestinian propaganda. They are mainstream productions financed mostly by Israelis revealing to other Israelis the failures of their own government’s policies and the great injustices rendered against Palestinians on a daily basis. As Guy Davidi lamented:

Many people in Hollywood are working very hard to make sure that neither film wins. ... From Israel’s point of view, an Oscar would be a public relations disaster and mean more people get to see our films.³

¹ Jonathan Cook, “Pictures Speak Volumes in Oscar-Nominated Israeli films,” *The National*, 20 February 2013.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

That's why there's a political reason some nominees won't leave the Academy Awards with an Oscar tonight.

If this were only about a film award, the day would pass and nothing would be made of it. But, in Israel, it reflects a much larger set of issues: why is it, even in a purportedly free and open society, those who cite the sins of the government and ruling establishment face routine scrutiny, harassment, if not outright repression? Why are whistleblowers treated like traitors and their messages dismissed as propaganda, or excoriated for being a threat to national security, or shamed for being unpatriotic?

In many ways, it's not just about Israel. Security concerns often trump constitutionally-guaranteed freedoms of expression even in our own country more than we realize, particularly since 9-11. For more than a decade now, the Patriot Act has been a powerful (and potentially nefarious) justification for constant surveillance and employing tactics typical of tyrannies to suppress dissent and perceived threats. Most Americans accept it as necessary; it's only "good" police work, unless you happen to be Muslim, Arab, African, or someone else subject to security profiling. Much like Israelis, many Americans trust the government's right to oppress some people in order to protect others—all on the basis of fear. Fear has an uncanny way of distorting our common sense of what's right.

Soon after the introduction of the Patriot Act, social critic, Noam Chomsky, voiced what many in free societies were beginning to figure out: that "the more you can increase fear...the more you control all the people." Even the old British warrior himself, Winston

Churchill, knew it wasn't just the threat of bombs that strike fear into governments and their leaders:

You see...dictators on their pedestals, surrounded by the bayonets of their soldiers and the truncheons of their police ... yet in their hearts there is unspoken fear. They are afraid of words and thoughts: words spoken abroad, thoughts stirring at home... A little mouse of thought appears in the room, and even the mightiest potentates are thrown into panic. [my emphasis]

Churchill was right, of course, which we might expect in a dictatorship, but it is increasingly evident in even some of the more liberal democracies in the world. Just stating the truth, or critiquing the system, or unmasking the powers has a way of frightening the established order. That's why words and thoughts and images are considered so dangerous and why they must be controlled.

This, of course, is the way ruling power has often been abused. Some of the greatest cowards in history have been those who have hidden behind their power to control their people. Michel de Montaigne, a French writer of the Renaissance period who influenced many philosophers from Descartes to Pascal to Rousseau to Nietzsche, claimed that cowards were the cruelest tyrants of all—that, in effect, cowards cannot face their critics so they try to eliminate them, and do so brutally, usually without a conscience. Cowards exercise power to intimidate their critics, to undermine their message, and to neutralize their influence. Real threats and perceived threats are indistinguishable, for the fear that motivates cowards and tyrants lies not external to them, but within their own hearts.

All of this is pertinent not only to the backstory on the Academy Awards, but also for understanding our short text for today from the Gospel of Luke. Translate all of this back to a first century

Mediterranean world and the political dynamics were very similar. It wasn't a sleepy biblical bedtime story—Jesus was enmeshed in some of the political intrigue of his day.

In many ways, Herod Antipas (the ruler of Galilee where Jesus grew up and lived) was a first century Israeli tyrant who ruled out of fear, except instead of the military backing of the U.S., he relied upon the power of Rome in order to stabilize the region for the empire. Cruelty against his own wasn't out of the question with insurrections occurring periodically, requiring security measures that kept Galileans in check and tactics that sent troublemakers on the run.

Yet, much like today, the presence of security forces wasn't enough to keep critics silent. One of them, of course, was John the Baptist. His arrest and subsequent execution for publicly condemning Herod's personal immorality and corruption gave evidence of how insecure Herod actually was, and how capricious and cowardly he acted. Then, when Jesus of Nazareth took up the prophet's mantle, he naturally became a new target, not because he threatened violence against the state, but because, taking up the mission of John, he was a truth-teller. Like John, Jesus struck a nerve in Herod and his cohorts on the basis of telling it like it was—refusing to be intimidated by threats of arrest or the disinformation sent out through religious cronies of Herod to discredit Jesus' authority and message. The Gospel writers suggest that Herod could well have been concerned that the masses he sought to control for Rome's sake would latch onto Jesus' vision of a new just and righteous kingdom that would rival and replace the corruption of his own. So it's fair to say, more than the Roman governor, Pilate, Herod

was threatened by John's and Jesus' proclamation of the coming reign of God.

Perhaps, for that reason, some of Herod's gofers—Pharisees in this case—came and warned Jesus to flee Galilee and get out of Herod's jurisdiction. If he stayed, he was subject to the same silencing that John the Baptist suffered. “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you!” And Jesus' response was quick and to the point:

Go and tell that fox [Herod] for me, “Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.”

Scholars are correct in noting that Luke was foreshadowing Jesus' final days into this encounter, but the original point is also clear: Herod's intimidation tactics were not going to silence Jesus or rush him from what he intended to do. Even if Herod didn't want to hear it, even if the powers that be grew nervous, Jesus' mission was to tell the truth, to transform the thinking of those bedeviled by the spirit of revenge and anger, to heal those lives frozen in fear over what will happen to them and their homeland, and to call out leaders like Herod for their corruption and rule, seek God's justice for the poor and the oppressed, and appeal to the best hopes and vision of Israel's historical destiny with God. Jesus' life may be placed in jeopardy, it may be on the line, but unless he stood up for the poor of Palestine, their best hope in life would not be advanced.

The parallels with today fascinate me. Who are the “Herods” of our time, trying to keep order by intimidation and cowardly acts of repression—not only in Israel, but also in Palestine? Who are the

prophets who rise up within Israel and Palestine to speak the truth, to challenge the policies and politics that silence voices of those who question the legitimacy of those who lead—leaders who are so blinded by their fears and anger that they cannot see how their violent actions do little but destroy their hope for peace (e.g., Likud, Hamas, etc.)? Who will stand up to the intimidation, and who will care enough to notice injustice, and who will refuse to cooperate with warmongers and tyrants in this troubled land?

I think they are truth-tellers like Emad Burnat and Guy Davidi, and Dror Moreh, and Lia Tarachansky, and Elias Chacour, and Adam Keller, and Atta Jabar, and Mitri Raheb, and Naim Ateek, and Mazin Qumsiyeh, and hundreds and thousands of others, well-known and unknown, who are standing up to the powers that be and telling it like it is. They hold up a Jesus-like vision where fear no longer cripples the compassion people can have toward one another. They maintain a Moses-like courage to lead an oppressed people out of their slavery into a land that can and will produce milk and honey. They are the conscience of the cowards—cowards who otherwise lack a conscience toward what are the things that will make for peace in Jerusalem and the West Bank and Gaza and Tel Aviv. The cowards are the ones who are destroying this holy land, but those who are the prophets—they who are the conscience—will continue to rise up and meet the challenges of this generation.

It won't be an Academy Award that will be their goal; it will be the hope for a transformation of thinking and acting and relating and sharing that will be their crowning achievement. When these, who are the conscience of this time, rise up enough to silence the cowards,

then they will join Jesus and John and all the prophets before them in announcing that God has indeed delivered this chosen people—both Jews and Arabs, Israelis and Palestinians—from their eternal suffering and into a reign of peace.

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