

The opposite logic of guilt, in America and in Israel



by Lev Tsitrin

Is engaging in criminality a strictly individual choice, or is it caused by social environment? Is crime the fault of an individual, or that individual's surroundings?

The question has, undoubtedly, been raised many a time – and is answered according to the politics of the one who does the answering. One often hears that, for instance, “getting tough on drugs” has a coded racist overtone, since doing so in practice would, if I remember the mantra correctly (though it is repeated so often that it is hard to forget it) – “disproportionately affect people of color.” One may of course conclude from it that, if criminality is an individual's choice, colored individuals are by their genetic makeup more predisposed to crime – which is classic, through-and-through biological racism. But this is easily avoided by switching the

blame from criminal individual to that individual's community, and from that community, to an entirely different community. It is that easy: communities of color have been historically disadvantaged, producing, as a result of discrimination, individuals who are more susceptible to the temptations of quick, albeit illegal, profit. Individuals are not guilty because the community is guilty, and the community is not guilty because it is the victim of a different community – whites. Thus, everyone is perfectly contented, the personal guilt of those people of color who are involved in illicit drug trade being ultimately turned into the collective guilt of the white folks. Hence, color-blind policing is racist.

And yet, elegant as this solution is, the fact remains that it redistributes guilt for criminality from individual to a community. This works well in today's America because the white community that, in a roundabout way is ultimately assigned guilt, accepts it. But suppose the ultimately-blamed community refuses to accept the guilt passed to it by the community that generates criminality? What then?

An interesting case study is Israel, and how it deals with terrorism. Consider the recent *New York Times'* report ["Israel's Right-Wing Government Pushes Home Demolitions as Violence Surges"](#) that examines "Israel's decades-old practice of sealing and demolishing the family homes of assailants accused of carrying out deadly attacks on its citizens." The analysis of the policy's ethics relies on the "criticism from human rights groups that call it collective punishment, prohibited by international law, leaving innocent parents, siblings, spouses and even children homeless." Looking from philosophical perspective, "critics also question its effectiveness, after hundreds of demolitions have failed to halt the attacks."

The philosophical query is, obviously, unanswerable, since what did not happen cannot be measured. It is indeed impossible to know how many terrorist acts would have occurred

if the house demolition policy did not exist – a point with which the article seems to agree. But what is much more interesting, is how the American logic of transferring to the community the cause of criminality of that community's individual members is, all of a sudden, turned on its head, and found unacceptable when it comes to Israel. It does not even matter that the "innocents" thusly deprived of a home are, according to their own selves, not necessarily innocent (the article quotes the father of the man who recently gunned down Israelis as they were leaving a synagogue, killing seven and wounding many more: he "said he was proud of his son and shrugged off the sealing of the house that was home to at least 10 family members. "Even if I have to sleep outside, I don't care," he said. "As long as my son fulfilled his duty, I don't care." One would be far from wrong imagining that he often expressed his hate of Israelis to his family, and that his son's murderous action was not an individual decision, but a collective one of the family.) So, what's interesting is the hypocrisy entailed in this sudden transfer of guilt back from community (or in this instance, family) to the individual.

By the *New York Times'* logic, when it comes to terrorism in Israel, we should treat the community and the families from which terrorists came strictly as innocents who have nothing whatsoever to do with terrorism – though in fact they have everything to do with it: terrorists are lionized by the Palestinian community, they are being declared religious "martyrs," their posters plaster the walls, their families get "paid per slay" by the Palestinian Authority, the community's admiration for terrorists is loudly broadcast on Palestinian TV, both in Hamas' Gaza and in PA's West Bank (not to mention the schoolbooks), There is no Palestinian "self-radicalization" – nor the need for it – since glorification of terrorism is all around. Clearly, it is the Palestinian community that radicalizes a perpetrator of Palestinian terrorism; the guilt is undeniably communal.

So is crime a communal, or individual affair? In the US, it is communal – the community that is responsible for much of it being, by the pass-the-buck logic, the whites. There is of course a similar attempt to shift the blame for Palestinian terrorism on Israel and its “occupation” – but the Israelis will have none of it, feeling strongly that the land is theirs, Arabs having come with the wave of Arab conquests of the 7th century AD, in a process that paralleled, even if it preceded it, the European takeover of the Americas. Somehow, historians do not look at the two events the same way, though they are identical in every aspect, religious and secular. Arabs being colonizers in Palestine, and Jews being indigenous to it, there is nothing for Jews to apologize for.

And it is this key difference that creates the paradox of the insistence that in America, the crime like drugs should not be treated as an individual’s fault, yet in Israel Palestinian terrorism be treated as a strictly individual matter – even though the actual evidence for both countries point in the exactly opposite direction.