

Anti-Semitism: Fight with Light
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I hesitate to speak about Anti-Semitism.

Not because it means more Jews and others have not been killed or injured; they have.

Not because it's not a boiling or simmering crisis; it is both.

Not because I am unsure of what to say; I know my message well.

I hesitate to speak about Anti-Semitism because in these conversations the Jews play the role of victims fighting an oppressor. I don't want the message for kids and adults to be, "Be a proud Jew in order to defy those who hate us." Though tempting, this message sells us far short of our golden tradition. For thousands of years, in hundreds of communities, speaking dozens of languages, there have been copious reasons to be proud Jews in the world. Rabbi Donniel Hartman wrote a terrific essay about this a few days ago on the Times of Israel website.

Despite my inclination to minimize speaking about Anti-Semitism, this week I have no choice. The attacks last month in Jersey City, New Jersey, and last week in Monsey, New York weren't just national news for me; they were stories close to home. Before moving here 18 months ago, I lived in Northern New Jersey. A co-worker of mine worked in Jersey City, whose reflections I read aloud here a few weeks ago. And Monsey was only 30 minutes away, where I went periodically to Costco and for Passover food shopping. Tomorrow, the New York Jewish Federation is organizing a large solidarity march across the Brooklyn Bridge. The attack in Monsey is something we're all thinking about, so I address it today.

I don't spend time trying to understand Anti-Semitism because it is, as New York Times writer Bari Weiss says, a conspiracy theory. When someone has latched onto a conspiracy theory, you cannot talk them out of it no matter how insane the idea is.

The best articulation I've read is by Leon Pinsker, an assimilated 20th century Russian who became an early Zionist leader.

He wrote about Anti-Semites: "To sum up then: to the living, the Jew is a corpse; to the native, a foreigner; to the homesteader, a vagrant; to the proprietary, a beggar; to the poor, an exploiter and a millionaire; to the patriot, a man without a country; for all, a hated rival."

Pinsker correctly identifies that people hate Jews for conflicting reasons.

Here's my 21st century update:

Anti-Semites hate us because we try to fit in, and because we stand out.

They hate us because we're powerful, and because we're weak.

They hate us because we're capitalists, and because we're socialists.

They hate us because we're devoted to America, and because we're loyal to Israel.

They hate us because we're rich, and because we're poor.
They hate us because we care only about ourselves, and because we care about the strangers and the others.

One contradiction after another.

Anti-Semitism is a reflection of *our enemies*, not of Jews. Don't ever think we have anything to do with it; that if we just change in some way, we'll be more accepted. History bellows out its answer, "No!"

I think of the legend of Rabbi Akiva and the fable of the fox and the fish. The Talmud (Brachot 61b) teaches that after the Bar Kochva Rebellion the Romans outlawed Torah study - among other things - on pain of death. One day the Roman official Pappus Ben Yehuda found the legendary Rabbi Akiva teaching Torah to his students, in public no less. Pappus said to him, "Aren't you afraid of the government? Why are you doing something that will get you killed?"

Akiva answered him with a parable.

Akiva said, "There was once a fox walking by a river who saw fish swimming from one place to another. The fox asked, 'What are you escaping from?'
The fish answered, 'We're escaping from the fishermen's nets.'

The fox continued: 'Why don't you come up onto the dry land so that you and I can live together just like our ancestors did?'

The fish responded: 'And they call you the smartest of all animals? You're an idiot. If we're afraid while in the water, our source of life, all the more so on dry land, a place where we will surely die!'"

Akiva summarized: "It's the same with us.
If we study Torah, we may live or we may die.
But if we stop studying Torah, there's no more Judaism.
The Jewish people will die."

I think this is a really powerful model for us.

We must play defense. We must protect our shuls, our schools, and follow the guidance of the Anti-Defamation League and local authorities. I'm not minimizing this. But we need more.

We must also play offense. As Rabbi Schwab spoke persuasively on Rosh HaShanah, we need more Joy and less Oy. Moments of joyful and/or meaningful Jewish living are oxygen for living proud Jewish lives.

Let's look at the just-concluded holiday of Hanukkah. During the darkest part of the day on the darkest days of the year, we fight with light. We add candles, one by one, until the whole room

glows. The dark room symbolizes Anti-Semitism, hate, injustice, fear. But the light of the flickering flame stands for love, justice, Mitzvot, Torah...joy.

There's an illuminating story within a story about Joseph, the subject of today and next week's Parshiyot. Though as a youth he acted with immaturity, he grew up to be a person who really embodied worthy values. Before he dies, he gathers his family and makes them swear that when they one day leave Egypt, they will carry his bones with them to Israel. They agree, and bury him in a coffin - *Aron* - in Egypt. Centuries later, Moses fulfills this promise himself when he recovers Joseph's bones as the Exodus begins. Decades later, the Israelites bury Joseph's bones in Shechem, Israel. Thus, over many generations, the Israelites kept this promise.

The Talmud (Sotah 13a,b) wonders what it looked like to have Joseph's coffin traveling with the Israelites. It recalls that the holy ark, *Aron HaKodesh* with the Ten Commandments, was at the camp's center. And the Talmud picks up on a shared Hebrew word: *Aron* means coffin *and* ark; both are boxes.

The Talmud imagines that these two *Aron*'s traveled together. Passersby would ask, "What's in those two boxes?"

To which the Israelites answered, "One is for a dead person while the other is for G-d."

"Isn't that sacreligious?"

"No. This one fulfilled all that is written in that one. This one - Joseph, who grew up to be a role model - came to embody what is written in the Torah. So it's fully appropriate that they travel together."

For Jews, Torah, wisdom, justice, equality, generosity, and love of strangers are not confined to the words of a page. The verses are the script, and we are the actors who bring it to life. This is the light of Judaism.

I recently saw an inspiring video produced by Aish, called "Hanukkah: Fighting the Darkness with Light" with Charlie Harary. He quoted his grandparents, Holocaust survivors who said, "You need to understand how a Jew fights. A Jew never fights with the sword. He defends with the sword. But a Jew fights with light. Do you know how we fight Hitler? Not with anger. We fight him with light, by building a family, by helping each other, by living with joy. He tried to kill us. We fight by being more alive." Harary continues, "We fight with light. The more they target our spirits, the brighter we let our souls shine. Although Hanukkah was a miraculous military victory, the symbol is who we really are-the candle. We're the nation that brings light, that brings morality and ethics, that defends the vulnerable, that helps the poor, that heals the sick, that rebuilds from tragedy. That looks at darkness, and lights a candle."

This reminds me of a conversation I had with a group of 7th grade parents here a few weeks ago. We were speaking about how to encourage our children to not only receive gifts on Hanukkah but to share with others. One family said that every Hanukkah they get a grocery list from the Moraine Township Food Pantry of what a local family needs for the holidays. Their kids help pick out groceries and check the items off the shopping list, while the adults drive and make the delivery.

I think this Mitzvah, this act of kindness, is so inspiring. It's something kids and adults contribute to, and it makes a real difference in our own neighborhood. When Hanukkah inspires this family to share with others, then they understand what Judaism is really about: kindling lights inside the home, then adding light outside in the world.

Anti-Semitism is the surrounding darkness, but each of us is a candle. When the world gets darker, as it sadly seems to be, let's each glow a little brighter. We all know the expression, "To Life." Here's mine for us today: "To light."

Shabbat Shalom.