

Anti-Semitism, Here? Now? Thoughts for Shabbat Re'eh, August 15, 2009

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"Any weapon whetted against you shall not succeed, and any tongue that contends with you in judgment, you shall condemn; this is the heritage of the servants of the Lord and their due reward from Me, says the Lord." Isaiah 54:17

When I came to synagogue on Tuesday morning August 11, I was told at the door by our superintendant that there was going to be an anti-Jewish rally right across the street. I had not been notified about this in advance, and was puzzled why a "rally" was being staged against us.

There were lots of police cars, and some curious onlookers. The demonstrators were only a handful of strange people who held up placards stating that they hate Jews and that God hates Jews and that God hates Israel. I later learned that this group was composed of members of the extremist Westboro Baptist Church, based in Kansas.

My first reaction was deep resentment. This hate group had violated my sense of security and serenity. As an American, I have been raised on the notion that all people--including Jews--have a right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; that blatant public expressions of hatred have no place in the American way of life. My second reaction was: this is a crazy fringe group of obviously troubled people. Why should I let these fools disturb my peace of mind?

Throughout the day, various thoughts danced in and out of my mind: is this how it was in Germany in the early 1930s? Should hate groups be allowed to vent hatred under the guise of freedom of speech? Don't the victims of hatred also have rights? Am I over-reacting to a small, insignificant group of disturbed people?

If I had known about this demonstration in advance, my inclination would have been to mount a large and vocal counter-demonstration. On the other hand, wouldn't that be giving too much play to this extremist group, allowing them to think that we take them very seriously? Aren't we better off just ignoring them, and assuming that passers-by who see them will realize they are a group of crazies, not to be taken seriously.

My feeling is that these kinds of groups will become increasingly troublesome in the future, and we had better develop a strategy for dealing with them. We need to rally our friends and neighbors, Jewish and non-Jewish, to stand up against hatred and bigotry. While we should not over estimate the influence of such groups, we also should not under estimate the corrosive force of hateful language and ugly words.

We are currently in the period of time known in Jewish tradition as the Seven Weeks of Consolation. This coming Shabbat we will read the words of Isaiah, quoted above, assuring us that those who rise against us and who speak against us will not prevail. We pray that Isaiah's words will be fulfilled. Meanwhile, we will each need to do our share to battle against the enemies of the Jews--who are ultimately the enemies of all humankind.

* * *The Angel for Shabbat column is made available by the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals (jewishideas.org). Please feel free to share it with you contact lists and to reprint it for distribution in your synagogues and schools.

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