Israel as Humanity's Conscience: Thoughts on Anti-Semitism

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By
Rabbi Marc Angel

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It is really amazing how much calumny is aimed against the Jewish people. The basest lies are spread against us; the vilest charges are leveled against Israel. No matter what we do or how good we really are, it seems we are destined to be vilified. Terrorists aim their missiles and bombs against innocent Israelis and Jews: no comments are forthcoming from the world's leaders--and certainly no action in our defense. Yet, when Israel strikes back at its enemies, it is immediately accused of "war crimes", and rallies are called throughout the world to condemn Israel. Other countries can engage in all sorts of immoral, illegal and ruthless behavior; they can persecute minorities, restrict freedoms, murder their enemies: no one seems to care. But if Israel makes even one real or imagined mis-step, she is condemned by the U.N. and smeared in the media. Why is this so?

A midrash relates that God offered the Torah to the various nations of the world, before offering it to Israel. But when the nations learned that the Torah forbade murder, adultery, and theft, they rejected the Torah. They did not want to be bound by the lofty morals that the Torah commanded. When God offered the Torah to Israel, the Israelites accepted it: We will fulfill it, we will listen to its teachings.

This midrash, I believe, is teaching us what is at the root of anti-Semitism. The Israelites, by accepting the Torah, became the conscience of humanity. We represented (and still represent) God's commandments to the world--commandments of justice, mercy, kindness, righteousness. Whether we like it or not, we are humanity's conscience, a constant reminder that all human beings are ultimately answerable to God, that evil will not go unpunished, that immorality is an affront to humankind and to God.

Humanity does not want a moral conscience. It does not like to be reminded of its responsibilities and shortcomings. It does not want to accept the prohibitions of murder, adultery, robbery and so much more.

But the Jewish people are humanity's conscience. And humanity resents us for that reason. It doesn't even matter what we do or don't do; whether we live up to the Torah or don't live up to it. As far as the world is concerned, we are God's agents on earth--and they don't want to hear God's commandments and they take it out on us. They unceasingly strive to find fault with us, and to exaggerate our sins: they do this as if to say: you are no better than we are; in fact, you are worse than we are; we don't need to listen to you; we don't want you to be our conscience; we don't want to be reminded about God's justice and righteousness.

Hatred for Jews is really a transference: in essence it is the anti-Semites' hatred of themselves and of their own wickedness. Whatever they say about us is a projection of their own self-image. As long as there is anti-Semitism in the world, humanity cannot be redeemed. It cannot face its own moral turpitude and cannot turn in repentance. As long as the Jew-haters devote energy to wiping out humanity's moral conscience, humanity remains in a mode of self-destruction.

Our rabbis noted long ago the similarity in sound between the word Sinai (representing the Torah and moral code given at Mt. Sinai) and the word "sinah", hatred. Every human being has to make a choice as to which side to cast his/her lot. We need to remind ourselves and the entire world that the word of God will rule, that justice and righteousness will prevail, that evil will be punished and crushed out. Those who are for Sinai will ultimately be blessed. They are the foundations of civilization. Those who are for "sinah", hatred, are not only the enemies of God and humanity; they are their own worst enemies. They condemn themselves to a life of ugliness and cruelty, when a life of blessing and happiness is so easily available to them.

When the nations of the world will join the Israelites to hear God's voice at Sinai, humanity will enter a new and glorious phase.

Angel for Shabbat