Thoughts for Shemini Hag Atsereth

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By

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This has been a very difficult time for us as Americans and as Jews. Anti-American and anti-Israel attitudes are sources of great distress and sadness. How frustrating it is that these two nations, representatives of the highest humanitarian ideals, should be the victims of such deep, irrational hatred.

As Jews, we are particularly sensitive and troubled by anti-Jewish and anti-Israel propaganda and violence. We are pained that new generations of children are bred on vicious anti-Semitic stereotypes, and that they are taught that it is virtuous to be suicide bombers if in the process they murder Jews. We are troubled by anti-Jewish and anti-Israel bias in the media. It is ever so difficult to maintain equanimity when reading one-sided articles or seeing one-sided news reports that insidiously vilify the people of Israel.

When we take our current frustrations and add to them all of our people's frustrations throughout history, we have good reason to be bitter about the nations of the world. The Jewish people have suffered discrimination, persecution, violence, and the ultimate Nazi atrocities. The Arab world has inflicted untold suffering on the people of Israel, and it is due to the mercy of God and the heroism of the Israelis that the State of Israel continues to exist and to flourish.

So, if we want to vent our anger at the nations of the world, we certainly have had more than enough provocation.

But the festivals of Succoth and Shemini Hag Atsereth remind us that the Jewish people have a different approach. We do not wish evil on our enemies; we only wish them to repent, to see the light of reason and justice. We do not pray for their destruction: we pray for their well-being!

An ancient rabbinic teaching notes that on the festival of Succoth, the ancient Israelites brought seventy offerings to the Temple in Jerusalem. In antiquity, it was believed that the world consisted of seventy nations. Thus, the Jews offered sacrifices on behalf of all the nations of the world. In the words of the Midrash Shir ha-Shirim: "Israel atones for all peoples, for the seventy calves that were burned on the altar at the feast of Succoth were offered on behalf of the nations, in order

that their existence might be maintained in this world." Many of those nations were not kind to Israel, and many were actually hostile. Nevertheless, the Jews prayed for all the nations of the world.

The offerings were a way of demonstrating moral responsibility for the world and a positive relationship with all people. For those who were bad, we prayed that they would become better. For those who were good, we prayed that their goodness would be rewarded. For those who were neutral, we prayed that they might become enlightened with truth, and learn to act in righteousness. These offerings helped us keep things in proper perspective. They prevented us from becoming angry and bitter. They helped fire our sense of optimism and humanitarianism.

Whereas Succoth offerings in the Temple reflected concern for the nations of the world, the Temple service on Shemini Hag Atsereth focused on Israel alone. We had one day for a "private" dialogue between ourselves and God. It was a day to look inward, to strengthen ourselves spiritually. Yes, we need to keep in mind the well-being of all people: but we also need to have time to tend to our own specific needs and concerns.

During this festival season, we offer a prayer in the spirit of our ancestors:

"Almighty God, we the people of Israel pray for the well-being of all the nations of the world. Please grant your blessings to all those nations and individuals who have acted with kindness and understanding toward us, who have had the moral courage to stand with the Jewish people in good times and bad.

Please grant inspiration and courage to all those nations and individuals who turn the other way when we are in trouble, who offer us no help, who abstain when we are being maligned. May they grow braver. May they soon join us in our battle for universal righteousness and human dignity.

Please grant loving hearts to those nations and individuals who are filled with hatred. Inspire them with true love of God and humanity. May their evil thoughts and intentions be nullified, and may they repent their ways speedily and in our days.

Help us, the Jewish people, to maintain our inner strength, our courage and faith, our idealism and commitment to a better future for ourselves and all humankind."

Angel for Shabbat