Thoughts on Anti-Semitism and the Future of Humanity: Thoughts for Parashat Shemot

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By
Rabbi Marc D. Angel

The ancient and so-far uncured disease of “anti-Semitism” is reflected in this week’s Torah portion. Pharaoh tells his people: “Behold, the people of the children of Israel are too many and too mighty for us. Come let us deal wisely with them …lest they join themselves unto our enemies and fight against us…” (Shemot 1:9-10). Pharaoh’s description of the situation is not only wrong, but reflects wild paranoia.

Wasn’t Joseph a great leader for the Egyptians? Weren’t the Israelites actually a tiny minority of the Egyptian population? And weren’t they harmless shepherds who could hardly pose any military threat to Pharaoh’s regime?

The crazed statements of Pharaoh led to the enslavement of the Israelites. The Egyptian populous was stirred to believe the worst about the Israelites, even though the facts would demonstrate that this was a small, quiet and productive group that contributed to the wellbeing of Egypt.

The disease of anti-Semitism continues today, with all its false accusations, paranoia and dangerous consequences. How are we to cope with this deep-seated irrationalism? How are we to explain this to our children and grandchildren?

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Each generation of Jewish parents and grandparents seems to face the same dilemma. We teach our children and grandchildren that all humans are created in the image of God; that we should respect and assist others; that love of God necessarily entails love of God’s creations.

Yet, these right and proper teachings are challenged by the realities which our children and grandchildren witness with their own eyes. They see thousands of missiles shot at Israel by Hamas terrorists with the aim of killing as many Jews as possible. They see throngs of Palestinians cheering as missiles are launched to murder Jews. They hear the rantings of the President of Iran who calls for the annihilation of Israel. They read of anti-Semitic diatribes and attacks by anti-Semites throughout the world. They see the large number of countries at the

United Nations who consistently vote against Israel, who consistently side with those who would destroy Israel. They know of the so-called humanitarian groups and journalists who seem to find fault only with Israel, but rarely, if ever, with the vicious enemies of Israel.

We Jewish parents and grandparents constantly teach our young generations about love of God, love of humanity, the sanctity of human life. Yet, there are so many millions of fellow human beings who are saturated with hatred, who engage in murderous activities against us. And there are so many millions of others who are complicit with the evils of anti-Semitism by their neutrality or silence.

How can we teach of love in a world filled with hatred? How can we teach that all humans are created in the image of God, when so many humans are actively trying to murder us? How can we preach the goodness of humankind, when so much of humankind is engaged in violence?

For thousands of years, our people have weathered the storms of persecution. In spite of the senseless hatred and violence perpetrated against us in so many lands, the Jewish people are still here to tell our story. Our enemies always disappear; we always survive. That is an iron law of history. And that bothers the anti-Semites greatly.

Why do anti-Semites give us such a hard time? Why do people who do not even know us express hatred and malevolence toward us? Why do Israel’s enemies persist in demonizing the Jewish State, rather than in finding a way to co-exist peacefully and happily?

Jews represent an infinitesimal fraction of the world’s population. Yet, so much negative energy is directed against us! I suppose we should feel complimented to receive so much attention!

Our enemies are astounded and troubled by the fact that such a tiny Jewish people has been able to accomplish so much. We gave the world Moses, King David, Isaiah and Queen Esther. Our Bible is venerated by Christianity and Islam and has been a major influence for human civilization. Our sages have produced an unmatched legacy of literature dedicated to righteousness, ethics and law. For thousands of years, our communities have striven to maintain the highest ideals of our tradition.

Jews have distinguished themselves for service to humanity far out of proportion to our numbers. Our enemies resent our persistent commitment to excellence: generations of Jewish doctors and teachers, social workers and scientists, artists

and philanthropists, business people and diplomats. They resent the incredibly high proportion of Jewish Nobel Prize winners and other world-class intellectuals and writers.

Some hate us because they see in us a highly educated, highly idealistic, highly charitable group. In contrast to their much larger groups, we are an annoying paradigm. The enemies of Israel do not understand how a tiny Jewish State has become a world leader in science and technology, agriculture and industry. How can such a small State, constantly embattled and boycotted by much of the Arab world, be so amazingly successful in so many ways? How is it that only Israel of all countries in the Middle East has been able to maintain a vibrant and dynamic democracy, a society that gives so much freedom to all its citizens?

Our enemies solve their dilemma by denying or belittling Jewish virtues, or by blaming us for preventing their own advancement. When they cannot come to grips with their own shortcomings, they look for a scapegoat: and we are a convenient target since we are so small and yet so visible. If anything, their anti-Semitism is a blatant admission of their own failings and weaknesses. Those who devote themselves to hatred thereby destroy their own humanity.

The Jewish people are persistent in believing in the ultimate goodness of humanity. In spite of all our enemies and all their hatred, we remain eternally optimistic. We believe that reason and benevolence will prevail. We work to make society better and to alleviate suffering. We believe that even wicked human beings can be redeemed through love and compassion.

When we come under fire from anti-Semites, we call on our collective historic memory to give us strength. We have survived the millennia due to the incredible courage and fortitude of our forebears. We are the children of the prophets who taught justice, righteousness and love to the world. Our teachings are right: the world simply hasn’t absorbed them as yet.

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We teach these things because they are true, and because they are the ideas and ideals that can best bring fulfillment to humanity. In spite of so much hatred and evil in the world, the Jewish people teach love and righteousness.

The day will come when hatred and bigotry will disappear from humanity. In the meanwhile, we must stay strong, courageous and faithful to our tradition. And to our collective Jewish memory.

Angel for Shabbat