Hatred, Racism: They Just Don't Seem to Go Away

View PDF



Rabbi Marc D. Angel is Founder and Director of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, and Senior Editor of its journal, Conversations.

A popular quip has it that "I love humanity; it's the people I don't like." It seems easier to love an abstract concept like humanity, or the Jewish people, or the community--rather than to love actual individuals. After all, individual human beings are not always pleasant, nice, courteous or considerate. Individuals can be rude, obnoxious, violent, immoral. We can more easily love the abstract concept of humanity, rather than having to deal with the negative features of particular individuals.

Dr. Robert Winters, who taught at Princeton University in the 1960s, offered a different perspective. "When I look at the human race all over the world, I think there's zero reason for humanity to survive. We're destructive, uncaring, thoughtless, greedy, power hungry. But when I look at a few individuals, there seems every reason for humanity to survive." Humanity as a whole may be rotten, but uniquely good and loving individuals make things worthwhile. Life takes on meaning not by focusing attention on "humanity", but by appreciating particular human beings, outstanding individuals.

When we ponder the hateful expressions of racial bias and anti-Semitism, we ponder the strange predicament of the human race. We witness the viciousness and violence of haters; but we also witness the faith, compassion and sympathy of good people throughout the country who have demonstrated against the bigots. We are reminded that the world is filled with haters who are ready, willing and able to victimize those they hate. We are also reminded that the world is filled with good, loving people who want to make things better.

In the battle between good and evil, good does not always prevail. Human beings have the capacity to be loving and altruistic; but also have the capacity to be blinded by hatred. Each individual has these capacities, and can choose which road to follow.

The late psychiatrist and philosopher, Dr. Silvano Arieti, pointed out that the root of bigotry is fear. The hater fears those of other races or religions, those with different political views, those who are “different.” These fears are often exaggerated far out of proportion so that the hater becomes obsessed with the individual/group that he or she hates. The hater sees in “the others” an immediate threat; the hater fears his/her victims and therefore feels justified in resorting to violence. In the warped minds of the haters, it is justified to attack “the others.”

It would be comforting, in a sense, to think that the psychology of haters is restricted to a few misfits who suffer mental illness. Unfortunately, we know that this is not the case. Whole societies become infected with hateful thinking, with stereotyping “the others,” and with victimizing those whom they deeply fear…even when the victims have done nothing to warrant this fear and hatred. The Jews, of all people in the world, are well acquainted with the perils of being stereotyped and feared and hated. It seems that no matter how good we are, no matter what we do or don’t do, there will be those who fear and hate us, and who will encourage violence against us.

We can see from the recent happenings that there are still strong elements of racism within American society. With all the progress that has been achieved over the years, fear and hatred still plague our society.

So what are we to do with all the hatred and violence that fills our world? How are we to diminish the fear and mistrust which characterize the haters?

Psychologists have demonstrated that when people have phobias, these phobias can be diminished or overcome as people confront the object of their fear directly. As applied to human interrelationships, people tend to develop warmer feelings toward those with whom they have direct and positive experience. When people of various races and religions meet with each other as fellow human beings, they begin to develop empathy with each other. Their fear levels decline. The root of blind hatred withers.

Inter-religious and inter-racial dialogue are positive steps in overcoming divisiveness and violence in our society. It is not only important to “love

humanity” but we need to love (or at least live peacefully with) the individual human beings who constitute humanity.

Each person can play a role, however small it may seem, in improving the tone of our society. We can interact in a courteous way with those of different races, religions, ethnic backgrounds. A simple smile, a word of greeting, a sign of friendship and respect—these gestures contribute to the increase in peace and decrease in fear. We can get involved in communal groups and civic agencies that foster mutual cooperation and understanding. We can contribute to those institutions which promote civic harmony.

With all the hatred in the world, it is clear that the Messiah has not yet arrived. In our unredeemed world, it is easy to lose heart and to give up on humanity. But Judaism’s message is ultimately a message of optimism. Good will indeed prevail over evil. The day will surely come “when nation shall not lift sword against nation, when they will no longer learn warfare.” The day will surely come when “the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.”

Redemption comes one step at a time, one person at a time. We can each bring that redemption a bit closer.