Words of Darkness...and Words of Light: Thoughts for Parashat Noah

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Noah

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

It is painful to hear hateful words. Unfortunately, hardly a day goes by when we aren't confronted by statements of anti-Semitism, racism, political mud-slinging. So-called "celebrities" spout their malicious lies about Jews, about Israel, about any group they wish to slander.

Why is hateful speech so widespread?

Erich Fromm has written of the syndrome of decay that "prompts men to destroy for the sake of destruction and to hate for the sake of hate." Because of their frustrations, feelings of inferiority and malignant narcissism, many people poison their own lives with hatred. Indeed, some only feel truly alive and validated when they express hatred of others.

When we hear bigots rail against "the Jews" or "the Israelis," we instinctively sense that these haters are morally blind, ignorant about Jews and Israel. When we are confronted by so-called human rights organizations and academics who malign Israel, we are appalled by their hatred and perversion of truth. Haters are dangerous. It is imperative for moral and informed people to stand up and refute the lies and calumnies.

Hateful words are uttered by many people on various rungs of the social ladder. The common denominator is their participation in the syndrome of decay. Their hatred not only erodes their own lives, it contributes to undermining the social fabric of society as a whole. It makes all good people feel uneasy. Where will this hatred lead? To spreading hatred among others? To violence?

In this week's Torah reading, God orders Noah to build an ark. Humanity had become so corrupt that the Almighty decided to destroy all but Noah and family. In providing instructions for the construction of the ark, God tells Noah: "You shall make a light for the ark"—*tsohar ta'aseh latevah.* Our commentators suggest that this light was a skylight window or a precious stone that could refract light throughout the ark.

A Hassidic rabbi offered a different reading of the text. The word "tevah" means ark; but it also means "word." In his homiletical interpretation, the verse should be understood as follows: "make your word generate light." When you speak, your words should be positive, encouraging, enlightening. They should contribute light to a world struggling against the forces of darkness.

Martin Buber diagnosed a serious problem within modern society. “That people can no longer carry on authentic dialogue with one another is not only the most acute symptom of the pathology of our time, it is also that which most urgently makes a demand of us.” His observation relates to the breakdown of honest communication among people, especially among people outside one’s immediate circle of family and friends. It also relates to the breakdown in communication among nations.

Instead of viewing ourselves as co-partners in society, the syndrome of decay leads us to view others as enemies…real or potential threats to our well-being. When we can’t trust each other, when we can’t speak kindly to each other or about each other, then society is afflicted with the pathology that Buber laments.

Tsohar ta’aseh latevah: each of us, in our own way, can add light and understanding to our world by speaking words of encouragement, kindness, and respectfulness. We should work toward a society that repudiates hateful words and deeds, where the haters themselves will come to see the error of their way.

Those whose words are hateful generate darkness, mistrust, societal disintegration.

Those whose words bring light to the world are humanity’s only real hope.