Reflections on the Current Rise in Anti-Israel and Anti-Jewish Manifestations

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The following is a note I received from a friend who is a professor at Columbia University:

"Campus is indeed very difficult; no dialogue is possible, no conversations, and absolutely zero knowledge of history prevails among the loudest voices. We only have fear and sadness in abundance (along with terrifying yelling and cheering--for loss of life. It is unthinkable). I think the majority of students are oblivious but those who are affected are very affected. Many of my students are having a very hard time. One student told me he is scared to wear a kippah (I suggested he talk with his parents and hometown rabbi for advice). I wish I could help my students more. I've reached out and let them know I am available to speak with them individually and have been doing so…I worry especially about my students studying Arabic language. It's not a safe space. Do you have any advice on any of these matters--articles, advice to give students, etc.?
My thanks and wishes for peace."

Here was my response:

"I wish we could wave a magic wand and get people to become more reasonable, understanding, kind. Unfortunately, when hatred runs so deep all other humane qualities seem to vanish. Unfortunately, this isn't the first time (and won't be the last time, I'm afraid) that Jews are targeted with hatred and violence. We American Jews had thought that we were basically living in a fairly safe environment (and to a large extent it is still so), but current events have reminded us of our eternal vulnerability. Fortunately, the government on all levels is taking a strong stand against hate crimes, working against anti-Semitism in society and campuses...but this will be a prolonged battle. Remind your Jewish students that we are all ambassadors and soldiers of the Jewish tradition, that our people have stood strong for over 3000 years, that in spite of our enemies we have found ways to thrive, to foster humane values. Rabbi Nahman of Breslav has a famous line, which I think of often: All the world is a very narrow bridge (precarious), but the essential thing is not to be afraid, not to be afraid at all. *Kol haOlam kulo, gesher tsar me'od, ve ha'ikar lo lefahed, lo lefahed kelal.*"

We have always been aware of an under-current of anti-Semitic and anti-Israel attitudes, but things today seem qualitatively and quantitatively different. We witness throngs of people throughout the United States and throughout the world who brazenly and unabashedly call for the annihilation of

Israel and the murder of Jews. The public display of raw hatred is alarming.

Hamas is a terror organization that openly calls for the destruction of Israel and murder of Jews. It has shown time and again that it will commit acts of terror to promote its goals. On October 7, Hamas launched a heinous attack on Israelis, killing hundreds and taking hundreds as hostages. Israel has responded to this brutality by launching a war with the intention of ending Hamas rule in Gaza.

Hamas and its sympathizers deny Jewish history, Jewish rights to its own homeland. They deny Jews the right to live in peace. The Gazans keep describing themselves as “refugees” although I suspect that most or all of them were born and raised in Gaza. They refer to their towns as “refugee camps.” What they are really saying is that they are the rightful owners of the land of Israel and as long as Jews control Israel the Gazans are “refugees” from a land they never ruled and to which they have no legitimate historic claim.

Hatred is an ugly thing. Saturating a society with hatred is especially pernicious. It not only promotes hatred of the perceived enemy, but it distorts the lives of the haters themselves. Energy and resources that could be utilized to build humane societies are instead diverted to hatred, weaponry, death and destruction.

The media report on college students (and faculty) who support Hamas, who call for the annihilation of Israel. Hateful voices are raised calling for murder of Jews.I suspect that almost all of those spewing hatred of Israel and Jews don’t even know Israelis or Jews in person. They actually hate stereotypes of Jews. They are indoctrinated with propaganda that dehumanizes Jews. They are fed a stream of lies about Israel and about Jews.

The real enemy is dehumanization. The haters are so steeped in their hateful ideology and narratives that they perpetrate lies and violence against individual Jews that they don’t even know. The haters think that by killing anonymous Jews or Israelis, they are somehow doing something constructive. They don’t think of themselves as liars or murderers, even though that is exactly what they are.

When societies allow hatred to flourish, they are sowing the seeds of their own destruction. When universities, media and political forums condone blatantly anti-Jewish intimidation and violence, the infection spreads well beyond Jews. Civil discourse is threatened. Respectful dialogue is quashed. Hopes for peace diminish.

The Jewish community, and all those who stand up for Israel, are a source of strength to humanity. We will not be intimidated by the haters, bullies and supporters of terrorism.

As Rav Nahman of Braslav wisely reminded us: “The whole world is a very narrow bridge (precarious); but the essential thing is not to be afraid, not to be afraid at all.”

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