Good Times, Difficult Times: Thoughts for Parashat Mikkets

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Mikkets

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Pharaoh's dreams foretold seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine. While the story relates to a situation in ancient Egypt, it also alludes to a more universal phenomenon. Societies are subject to wide fluctuations. Sometimes things go very well, and sometimes things are terrible. Wisdom teaches—as Joseph taught—that the resources of times of plenty need to be drawn upon in times of famine. When life is challenging and difficult, we need to draw on the strengths and courage of our past successes to give us the wherewithal to cope and to succeed.

Currently, Israel is in the midst of a war with Hamas. All of us are deeply concerned with the situation there, with growing anti-Jewish manifestations throughout the diaspora, and with so many other troubling issues. But we maintain hope for a better future. Below are some thoughts as we face a turbulent world.

The philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, once observed: "There are two ways to be fooled. One is to believe what is not true. The other is to refuse to believe what is true."

In the current war between Israel and Hamas, we have witnessed ugly bursts of anti-Jewish and anti-Israel hatred. Virulent pro-Hamas demonstrators believe what is not true and seek to foist their untrue views on others. They accuse Israel of "genocide," an egregious lie. Genocide is the deliberate killing of a large number of people from a particular national or ethnic group with the aim of destroying that group. Israel has no intention of wiping out all Palestinians and in fact does everything possible to avoid harming civilians. Israel is at war with Hamas (a war that Hamas started) and seeks to defeat its sworn enemies. The only talk of "genocide" in the Middle East emerges not from Israel but from Iran, Hamas and their supporters. They unabashedly call for the annihilation of Israel. They proudly proclaim their goal to establish Palestine "from the river to the sea," i.e. to entirely wipe out Israel.

Much of the anti-Israel venom arises from people who believe what is not true. But it also emerges from those who refuse to believe what is true.

Israel is the homeland of the Jewish People since biblical times. After many centuries of exile, the Jewish People was successful in returning to its land and establishing a vibrant, modern country. It sought peace, it seeks peace, and will always strive for peace among all its neighbors.

The Muslim Ottoman Empire controlled the land of Israel from the 16th to early 20th century. During all those years, no one called for or created a Palestinian State with Jerusalem as its Capitol. From 1948 to 1967, Jordan controlled the West Bank and Egypt controlled Gaza. During that entire period few, if any, called for the establishment of a Palestinian State in those territories. Only after Israel took control of these areas in 1967 did a growing chorus of voices call for a Palestinian State “from the river to the sea.” Those who march for Hamas refuse to believe what is true: that the Palestinians never had a State in the land of Israel, and that Israel has a historic, legal and moral right to its own land.

When hatred prevails, dialogue and mutual respect become increasingly unlikely. The result is continued hatred, continued violence, continued suffering. The conflict between Israel and the Palestinians need not be seen as a zero sum game, where only one party may win. It can be—and should be—framed as a win-win opportunity where both sides can gain peace and prosperity for their people. The real enemy is hatred. Until that hatred can be uprooted, people will continue to believe what is not true; and refuse to believe what is true. The result is more hatred, violence, and suffering.

In 1939, when Rabbi Benzion Uziel became Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel, he delivered his inaugural address in Hebrew and then added words in Arabic. He appealed to the Arab community: "We reach our hands out to you in peace, pure and trustworthy....Make peace with us and we will make peace with you. Together all of us will benefit from the blessing of God on His land; with quiet and peace, with love and fellowship, with goodwill and pure heart we will find the way of peace."

Rabbi Uziel’s offer and challenge remain our hope for the future of Israel, the Palestinians, and all the Middle East.