Beyond Victimhood: A Positive Jewish Message

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Beyond Victimhood: A Positive Jewish Message

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

The Holocaust, understandably, haunts the Jewish people. We can never forget the millions of Jews who were tortured and murdered by the Germans and their collaborators. Whenever a crisis erupts that threatens Jews, there is an almost visceral reaction to call up the memory of the Holocaust.

After the Hamas massacre of Israelis on October 7, Jewish media was quick to report that this was the highest number of Jews murdered in a single day since the Holocaust.

In attempting to combat antisemitism in New York, a program was initiated to bring all eighth-grade students to the Museum of Jewish Heritage, where they could learn about the Holocaust. When international leaders visit Israel, a visit to Yad Vashem is almost always part of the itinerary.

The prevailing wisdom is that when people – especially young people – learn about the horrors of the Holocaust, they will become more sympathetic toward Jews and aware of the dangers of religious and racial hatred. With more knowledge about the Holocaust, it is assumed that people will be less prone to antisemitic attitudes and behaviors.

The various efforts at Holocaust education have had a positive impact on many. And yet, Holocaust education – unless handled very well – can have negative consequences. For those steeped in anti-Jewish hatred, the Holocaust may actually encourage their antisemitism. They view Jews as a despised minority group that is an easy target for hatred and violence. They see that millions of Jews were

systematically slaughtered while much of the world stood aside. In the minds of rabid Jew-haters, the Holocaust is an ideal, not a disaster.

While maintaining the memory of the Holocaust is surely very important, we need also to project a positive image of Jews, Judaism, and Zionism. Much of the antisemitism we face today is directly related to anti-Zionism. We need to focus on conveying the historical connection of the Jewish people to our land going back to biblical days.

Even after being exiled from the Land of Israel several times over the millennia, in the last instance at the hands of the Romans in 70 CE, the Jewish People have continued to live in, pray for, and dream of a return to their historic homeland.

After nearly 1,900 years, the Jews gained sovereignty over their land with the establishment of the modern State of Israel. This is one of the most amazing adventures in human history. For an ancient people to return to their historic homeland and build a dynamic, democratic society is an unprecedented story of courage, faith, and persistence.

Our story is truly inspiring and full of hope, spirituality, creativity, courage, and resilience. Despite all the hurdles we have had to face – and still face – the Jews are a strong and vibrant people. We need to tell our story in a confident voice – not as propaganda, not in sound bites – in a sophisticated and intelligent way that will convey the power of the Jewish experience.

The re-emergence of a sovereign Jewish state is a remarkable historic achievement. Yet, as we know, it has not been received with love or understanding by many in the Arab world. In particular, we face those who foster the Hamas ideology that negates the Jewish right to our own land.

The goal of the haters, by their own admission, is the destruction of Israel. And while wars on the battlefield can achieve military victories for Israel, ultimate victory will come only when the ideology of hatred is defeated. Just as Israel devotes so much courage and brilliance to its physical defense, it needs to devote equal – and more – courage and brilliance to fighting the murderous ideology that has infected many beyond Hamas.

To combat this ideology of hatred, we need more than Holocaust education.

We need a powerful, positive presentation of Jewish history, Jewish connection to the land of Israel, Jewish idealism, and Jewish striving for peace and mutual understanding.

We would do well to remember the prophecy of Isaiah (42:6) who relates God's wondrous promise to the people of Israel that they will become "a light unto the nations." We need to focus on the light; on what we have given, are giving, and can give to the world.

Isaiah (51:3) foresaw a time like ours when the wasteland that was Israel turned into a beautiful and thriving country: "For the Lord comforts Zion; He comforts all her waste places and makes her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the Lord; joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song."

That is Zionism, that is Judaism, that is the aspiration of the Jewish people.