Op Eds on Israel and the Jewish People

View PDF



Rabbi Marc D. Angel is Director of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. These op ed pieces are included in issue 45 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute.

Op-Ed Pieces by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Is the American Dream Imploding?

(This piece appeared in The Jewish Journal of Los Angeles, March 13, 2024.)

My middle name is Dwight.

That name symbolizes a great American story.

My grandparents, born in Turkey and the Island of Rhodes, arrived in the United States in
the first decades of the twentieth century. They settled in Seattle, Washington, in the emerging
community of Judeo-Spanish-speaking Sephardic Jews.

My mother’s father was a barber. My father’s father had a shoeshine stand. They arrived
in America with little money, little formal education, but great courage and hope. They left
impoverished communities in the old world to raise their families in the land of freedom and

opportunity.

Like most immigrants of that time, my grandparents wanted their families to adapt to America. Their children attended public school and grew up as a transition generation between the old world and the new. My generation were full-blooded Americans.

I was born in July, 1945, and named after my maternal grandfather Marco Romey. But my mother added a middle name, Dwight, after General Dwight David Eisenhower. I was named after an American hero. I was an organic part of American life.

In school, we pledged allegiance to the flag of the United States every day. We learned about Washington and Jefferson and Lincoln. They were our forefathers. Our relatives served in the American military. Our mothers and aunts knitted clothes for American soldiers. We were in America not as guests but as equal members of society,

My generation, almost all the grandchildren of immigrants, were well educated, hard-working and sincere believers in the American Dream. We were better educated and more affluent than our grandparents—exactly as they had hoped would happen. Our goal was to be constructive members of society and to contribute to the ongoing flourishing of America.

With our children and grandchildren, we thought that the American Dream would continue to thrive and expand. But it seems that American society is increasingly marred by anti-Semitism, racism, and violence. The virus of hatred has infected political life, universities, and

businesses. The virtues of America are often under-appreciated while the sins of America are highlighted and exaggerated. America is undergoing a spiritual, social, and political implosion. It has become difficult to feel that we are “one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.” The forces of hatred and divisiveness have become more brazen.

My middle name is Dwight, and I am proud to be a bearer of the American Dream. My name symbolizes the dream of immigrants to identify with America, to become full-blooded Americans. America is at risk of losing that dream. It needs to restore confidence and pride in America as a bastion of freedom and opportunity, a land where people of all religions and races

can feel safe and secure, where everyone can work together for the betterment of society as a whole.

Let us not forget the American struggles for freedom, democracy, and opportunity. Let us build on the American Dream for ourselves and for our future generations.

I want to believe in that future, sure as my middle name is Dwight.

The Hatred Syndrome
(This piece appeared in The Jewish Link, April 11, 2024.)

It is a strange feeling to be hated by people who don’t know you and don’t want to know you. It is perplexing to hear people calling for your death and the death of all your people without ever considering your humanity, your goodness, your contributions to society.

Haters don’t see their victims as fellow human beings. They create and foster ugly stereotypes. They promote outrageous conspiracy theories that dehumanize their targets.

Hatred is an ugly thing. 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 compassionate societies are instead diverted to hatred, weaponry, death, and destruction.

We have always been aware of an undercurrent 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.

I suspect that many of those spewing hatred of Israel and Jews don’t even know Israelis or Jews in person. They don’t hate actual Jews; they hate stereotypes of Jews. They are indoctrinated with propaganda and are fed a stream of lies about Israel and about Jews. The haters are steeped in their hateful ideology and are not interested in civil dialogue and relationship with actual Jews and Israelis. They know little or nothing about the connection of Jews to the land of Israel going back thousands of years, from biblical times to the present.

So why do so many haters take aim at Jews and Israel? Some of this hatred stems from anti-Jewish religious teachings. Some of it stems from jealousy at the phenomenal

success of
such a tiny group. Some people spew hatred as a way of making themselves seem important, as
though picking on Jews somehow makes them appear stronger and braver.

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.” Many people poison their own lives with
hatred and only feel truly alive and validated when they express hatred of others.

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.

All who stand for a civil society must not be intimidated by the haters, bullies, and supporters of terrorism. The syndrome of hate eats away at the foundations of society. It must not
be allowed to prevail.

Rav Nahman of Bratslav taught: The whole world is a narrow bridge (precarious), but the
essential thing is not to be afraid, not to be afraid at all.

Thoughts on Israel and the Jewish Future
(This piece appeared in The Jerusalem Post, April 30, 2024.)

In the short term, things look very difficult. Israel is in the midst of military confrontations with Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran. In spite of the remarkable achievements of the
IDF in Gaza, the war lingers on with no clear end in sight. Israel faces increasing international

censure from the United Nations, the International Court, and from political leaders around the world. American college campuses are rife with anti-Israel activity. Radical Hamas supporters unashamedly call for the destruction of Israel and the murder of Jews.

We all feel the pain and the pressure. We are going through a protracted nightmare. And it won't likely get better in the short term.

But the crisis will pass, sooner (hopefully!) or later. How can things change for the better in the long term?

Israel must conclude its war in Gaza as quickly and effectively as possible. It must work with allies to put into place a responsible Palestinian leadership that will eschew ongoing warfare and that will work peacefully with Israel for the benefit of all. It cannot ignore the Palestinian issue or let it fester endlessly.

Israel has taken great strides forward through the Abraham Accords. The more Arab and Muslim countries recognize Israel, the more secure Israel becomes. Formal diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia would be a potential game changer in the Middle East. Aside from the political and economic benefits, it would undercut the hateful voices that call for Israel's destruction. It would make it clear that Israel is strong, creative, and a genuine partner with other nations seeking a harmonious region.

While short-term challenges must be faced courageously, we need to focus on long-term

resolutions of problems. It isn’t realistic to expect that the deep hatred of our enemies will
dissipate overnight. The ugly anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism that have exploded in recent
months will not suddenly cease. But visionary leadership can help us move gradually and
intelligently beyond the problematic status quo. In spite of all the battles and threats, we need to
formulate sensible strategies to bring us to a lasting peace.

We need to be strong to defend ourselves from our enemies; but we need special strength
and blessing to work for and attain peace. Indeed, it may well be more difficult to achieve peace
than to win wars.

“The Lord gives strength to His people, may the Lord bless His people with peace.”

Beyond Victimhood: A Positive Jewish Message
(This piece appeared in The Jerusalem Post, May 29, 2024.)

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, the Jewish media were quick to report
that this was the highest number of Jews murdered in a single day since the Holocaust.
In attempting to combat anti-Semitism 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 anti-Semitic 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 anti-Semitism. 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 anti-Semitism 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, but 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 the Jewish
people. 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.

Refining Our Messaging on Anti-Semitism
(This piece appeared in The Jewish Journal of Los Angeles, August 20, 2024.)

We are rightfully concerned with anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism, and we are quick to
publicize every instance of malice and injustice against our people. Our media decry the spread
of Jew-hatred. Our various spokespeople lament the increase in anti-Semitic acts, especially
since October 7.

It is important to expose and combat anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism with all our might.

But is our messaging unwittingly actually leading to an increase in Jew-hatred?

In his book, Subliminal, Dr. Leonard Mlodinow discusses a surprising phenomenon.
Public service announcements sometimes backfire. For example, some ads urge visitors to
national parks not to litter. In one controlled study, an ad denounced littering—and this resulted
in less littering. But another ad included the phrase “Americans will produce more litter than
ever.” This ad actually led to an increase in littering. Dr. Mlodinow points out that the subliminal
message of the latter ad is that it’s really okay to litter; everyone is doing it! (pp. 170–171).

When people are constantly told that anti-Israel sentiment is rampant, subliminally at
least some of them will think: It’s okay to hate Israel, lots of people do. If people are given
statistics that anti-Semitic or anti-Israel acts are increasing dramatically, at least some of them
will conclude that if so many people hate Jews and Israel, it’s okay for me to do so also.
Publicizing anti-Israel and anti-Jewish behavior can be a double-edged sword. We need
the world to know what’s happening and rally good people to fight the injustices against us. But
by highlighting how many people hate us, we actually may be encouraging closet anti-Semites to
come out into the open with their venom. The more visibility anti-Semites have, the more they
create a snowball effect drawing others into the hatred syndrome.

In another of his books (Emotional), Dr. Mlodinow writes about psychological contagion.
Research is being done about “the spread of emotion from person to person or throughout an

organization or even an entire society” (p. 184). When crowds get fired up against Israel and against Jews, the hatred can become “contagious.” It is difficult to combat this type of psychological contagion; but just condemning it will not make it disappear.

We fight the anti-Semites and anti-Zionists by strengthening our own communities; by insisting on prosecution of hate crimes; be electing pro-Israel officials; by working with good people to foster civil society. But we also have to promote positive messaging to the general public.

Instead of constantly publicizing the increase in anti-Jewish words and deeds, we ought to be emphasizing the many millions of people who admire and support Israel and Jews. Instead of giving front page attention to anti-Israel “celebrities” we ought to highlight the pro-Israel voices and reserve the bad actors for the back pages.

The overwhelming majority of the public abhors terrorism. They resent “activists,” i.e., haters who block highways, disrupt college campuses, vandalize businesses, attack innocent individuals on the basis of religion, race, nationality, or other reasons. Instead of the media showering so much attention on the haters, we should be demanding even more attention on those who promote civility, mutual respect, and intergroup cooperation.

We certainly must condemn and fight anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism. But our messaging must be positive and must draw on the goodwill of millions of people who appreciate the values of Israel and the Jewish People.

An Israeli Peace Initiative

(This piece appeared in The Jerusalem Post, August 25, 2024.)

Maimonides described messianic times as an era when Israel would simply be left alone in peace. In his Mishneh Torah, in the “Laws of Kings and Wars” (12:4), he writes: “The Sages and the prophets did not yearn for the messianic era in order to have dominion over the entire world, to rule over the gentiles, to be exalted by the nations, or to eat, drink, and celebrate. Rather, they desired to be free to involve themselves in Torah and wisdom without any pressures or disturbances, so that they would merit the world to come.”

Imagine a time when Israel—and the Jewish People as a whole—would not be subject to hatred, violence, terrorism, or war. Imagine a time when we could devote all our energies to our minds and spirits, to maintaining a righteous and prosperous society. Unfortunately, we still live in an unredeemed world, and the messianic dream seems further away than ever. But we must not give up on this goal.

At present, Israel is engaged in conflict with Hamas, various Palestinian terror groups, Hezbollah, the Houthis, and, of course, Iran. The Jewish State is also confronted with a growing number of countries that are choosing to recognize a Palestinian state without due concern for Israel’s vital interests. Jews in the Diaspora are facing anti-Semitism in the media, on college campuses, and by pro-Palestinian mobs.

How can we dream of a time of peace when our current reality is very far from being

peaceful? The answer is that we must not abandon our dream, regardless of all the negative
elements in our world. We must envision and work for a new era of peace.

However, it appears hopelessly naïve to speak of peace at a time like this. The haters are
not interested in peace, unashamedly calling for the annihilation of Israel and the murder of
Jews. Islamic fundamentalism and Palestinian nationalism fan the hatred. Iran uses its power and
money to foster violence against Israel. The animosity seems intractable.

Does it make sense to plan for the “day after” when that day seems so remote? On the
other hand: Does it make sense not to plan for the “day after”?

Our real enemy is hatred.

It is hatred that fuels Iran, Palestinian terrorists, and anti-Semites in general. It isn’t likely
that we’ll be able to eradicate all hatred, but we can make inroads and turn the tide.
Dr. Leonard Mlodinow of Cal Tech, in his book Emotional, discusses “psychological contagion” through which attitudes are transmitted. He reports on research regarding “the spread
of emotion from person to person or throughout an organization or even an entire society” (p.
184). A psychological climate emerges that draws people into the “contagion.” Certain ideas and
attitudes take on a snowball effect. The contagion cannot be staunched unless a powerful
“counter-contagion” takes hold.

When crowds get fired up against Israel and against Jews, the hatred is “contagious.”
Haters are emboldened when others are drawn into their group. The more haters, the more people

are driven to commit violent acts and speak malicious words.

Israel needs to undertake a serious peace offensive.

It has demonstrated its amazing military prowess and must continue to be as powerful as possible. At the same time, it can help create positive “psychological contagion” that will draw people to its vision for a peaceful future.

Israel has already made dramatic strides forward with the Abraham Accords. It would be significant if Israeli leaders would publicly meet with the leaders of the Arab countries included in the accords. The world needs to see that Israel and Arab nations respect and cooperate with each other.

People need to sense that a wider network of peaceful relations is possible. The world also needs to hear from Israeli Arabs who are demonstrating allegiance to Israel and working with Israeli Jews to build a better society. Israeli Arabs are successful in so many ways. Their stories are very important.

Israel and Saudi Arabia have been considering a path toward mutual recognition. If this can be achieved, it will be a dramatic step on the path to a wider regional détente.

At present, the ayatollahs have firm control in Iran, but it is possible that, at some point, the opposition will rise and topple the regime. If Iran can be freed of Islamic fundamentalist rule, there can be an opening for civil relations with Israel. We must make it clear—loudly and often—that we have no interest in war with Iran.

As Israel promotes a serious peace initiative, it will need to relate to the Palestinian
people. The status quo of ongoing terrorism and war is certainly not in the interest of Israel, and
not in the interest of the Palestinians. It does seem almost impossible at this time to find a
responsible Palestinian leadership that will negotiate reasonably with Israel; there have been so
many failed attempts in the past. But our long-term vision must transcend the current realities
and plan strategically for a long-term détente with the Palestinians.

A serious peace initiative is in Israel's interest. It will help turn back the anti-Israel and
anti-Semitic psychological contagion and replace it with a growing respect and support for Israel
and the Jewish people.

Maimonides taught that our goal for messianic times is simply to be left in peace, to be
free of hatred and wars. We need to keep this goal in mind—and work to bring this vision into
reality.

Blessings and Curses

(This piece appeared in The Jerusalem Post, October 31, 2024.)

"And I will bless them that bless you, and anyone who curses you I will curse" (Bereishit
12:3).

God called on Abram to move from his birthplace and to set off for a new land. Abram
was to lay the foundations for a righteous society that recognized the One God

and that
repudiated all forms of idolatry. God promised Abram that he would be a blessing to all the
families of the earth.

Setting new standards of faith and morality, Abram would attract followers. But he would
also be the target of enemies who resented his teachings. So God reassured Abram that God will

bless those who bless him and curse those who curse him. God's promise is echoed in the
blessing later given to the Israelites by Bilam: "Blessed be everyone who blesses you, and cursed
be everyone who curses you" (Bemidbar 24:9).

Throughout the history of our people, surely there have been many who have been
blessed by their blessing us. Many millions of people have led happier and more meaningful
lives by their attachment to the Hebrew Bible. Many have blessed, and have been blessed by, the
many contributions of the Jewish People to civilization.

Likewise, throughout history, there have been many who have cursed us and have
committed every sort of atrocity against us. But in what ways have they themselves been cursed
by God? It sometimes (often?) feels that the haters are not subjected to the wrath of God. In our
own times, we see anti-Semites/anti-Zionists eagerly cursing and threatening us. Although we
are blessed with a strong State of Israel and a robust diaspora community, the enemies are
relentless. We wonder: In what way is God cursing those who curse us?

Perhaps God's blessings and curses are not externally imposed, but are

consequences of
people’s own choices in life.

The Torah presents two paths for humanity. The positive essence
of Judaism teaches us
to choose life, love our fellow human beings, serve the Lord faithfully. All who attach
themselves to these ideals are themselves blessed. They live constructive, love-filled lives. Their
faith strengthens them in good times and bad.

But those who curse us and our teachings are thereby choosing a destructive way of life.
Their hatred poisons their lives. By cursing us and what we represent, they actually bring a curse
upon themselves.

When the State of Israel was established in 1948, the Arab world exploded in hatred of
the Jewish State. In all these years, Palestinians and supporters have invested billions of dollars
in weaponry, tunnels, anti-Israel boycotts. What is the result of all this hatred? Instead of having
a peaceful and prosperous Palestinian society, the Palestinians are cursed with an ongoing legacy
of hatred, violence, and loss of life. They have raised generations of haters rather than
generations of those who choose life, who bless Israel as a partner in peace and prosperity.
More generally, those who curse and hate Israel thereby undermine their own lives.
Instead of devoting their energies, talents and resources in constructive ways, they embrace a
negative way of life.

When God assured blessings for those who bless Israel and curses for those who curse

Israel, these were not idle promises. They are fulfilled every day of the week. We surely would like the haters to re-think their destructive ways and free themselves of
the curses they have brought upon themselves and others.

Those who choose blessing and life are themselves blessed. Those who choose cursing
and death are themselves cursed.

Reclaiming Bible Zionism

(This piece appeared in The Jewish Link, December 12, 2024.)

What is Zionism after all?

The term seems to have originated in the 1890s by Nathan Birnbaum, founder of the
Kadimah nationalist Jewish students' movement. Theodor Herzl popularized the term as the
expression of the Jewish People's national aspiration to return to their historic homeland in Zion.

The term "Zionism" is often used by friends and enemies of Israel without proper reference to its historic roots in biblical times. Zionism didn't just pop up in a vacuum, as though
it was a new and artificial framework for Jews to return to their land. Although the term as a
political movement dates from the late nineteenth century, it in fact encapsulates thousands of
years of Jewish attachment to their historic homeland.

Zion is mentioned over 150 times in the Hebrew Bible. While originally referring to Mount Zion, it came to refer to Jerusalem and then to all the land of Israel.

Rabbi Dr. Henry Pereira Mendes, who was associated with the historic Spanish and

Portuguese Synagogue of New York from 1877 to 1937, advocated what he called “Bible
Zionism.” He was proud of the fact that Theodor Herzl asked his cooperation in organizing the
Zionist movement in the United States. Dr. Mendes was elected vice-president of the Federation
of American Zionists and a member of the actions committee of the World Zionist Organization.
He believed that Zionism had the goal of establishing a Jewish State founded upon the principles
and ideals of the Jewish religious tradition. In a letter to Haham Gaster of London (July 21,
1903), Dr. Mendes wrote: “Here is true work for Zionists: to keep Hebrews true to Jewish life,
Jewish law, Jewish sentiment.”

Dr. Mendes taught that “Bible Zionism” aspired to go beyond simply providing a homeland for Jews. It had a universal message and goal: “Peace for the world at last and the
realization of reverence for God by all men. These are the essentials for human happiness.
Zionism stands for them.”

We rarely hear about “Bible Zionism” from Israeli political leaders, media, or the various
Zionist organizations worldwide. But wouldn’t it be nice if leaders and opinion makers reclaimed
“Bible Zionism” and reminded the world at every opportunity of the biblical roots of Zionism?

“Bible Zionism,” as Rabbi Mendes pointed out, has a dual agenda. It stresses the national
aspirations of the Jewish People to live in their own historic homeland and foster their religious
and cultural traditions. The prophet Isaiah foresaw that Jews will “come to Zion with songs and
everlasting joy upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow

and sighing will
flee away” (Isaiah 35:10). He taught that “Zion will be redeemed with justice and those that
return to her with righteousness” (1:27).

But “Bible Zionism” also points to the ultimate victory of justice and righteousness for
Israel and the entire world. Isaiah taught that many people shall come to Zion “for out of Zion
shall go forth Torah and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem” (Isaiah 2:3). Isaiah looked to the
day when “the nations shall see your righteousness and all kings your glory” (62:1–2). The
prophet Zechariah (8:3) taught that the Lord has returned to Zion and that “Jerusalem shall be
called the city of truth and the mountain of the Lord of hosts the holy mountain.” Zion was to be
a bastion of truth, justice and wisdom for the entire world.

Recent months have seen ugly manifestations of anti-Zionism throughout the world. The
haters have distorted the meaning and mission of Zionism. We need to embrace “Bible Zionism”
in every forum to set the record straight.

The Psalmist sang (122:6): “Pray for the peace of Jerusalem; they who love you will
prosper; peace be within your walls, prosperity within your palaces.” Just as those who love and
support Zion will be blessed, the Psalmist warns (129:5): “May all who hate Zion be put to
shame and turned back.”

As for us, we must heed the words of Isaiah (62:1–2): “For the sake of Zion I will not
hold my peace, and for the sake of Jerusalem I will not be still, until her righteousness goes forth
like radiance and her salvation like a burning torch.”

Surprised by Anti-Semitism/Anti-Zionism? Yes and No

(This article appeared in The Jewish Journal of Los Angeles, December 23, 2024.)

Although Jews have faced anti-Semitism from time immemorial, it always comes upon us as something new. It surprises us. We don't understand it.

We strive to be good people, good citizens; we are kind-hearted and generous. We devote ourselves to the education of our children, to the betterment of society, to justice and compassion. We have our share of faults along with all other human beings; but by and large, we are a good, responsible, hard-working community.

And yet, no matter what we do, people hate us! They don't see us as individual human beings but as a vast stereotype. They don't care if we are religious or not religious; if we are liberals or conservatives. If we are Jewish, they are against us and want to hurt us.

It was once thought that the establishment of the State of Israel would bring anti-Semitism to an end. After all, Jews would then have a feeling of security in the world, a safe haven where no one would bother us.

But the Jewish State has simply become a new target for the anti-Semites. They now couch Jew-hatred for hatred of "the Zionists." Anti-Semites don't have a problem with Hamas firing thousands of missiles at civilian centers in Israel; but when Israel responds by bombing the enemy, Israel is immediately condemned and vilified by the haters. For the anti-Semites, Israel is always wrong regardless of what it does or doesn't do.

Happily, there are many millions of people who feel warmly toward Jews and the Jewish
State. Happily, many millions of people admire the accomplishments of the State of Israel in the
face of so many obstacles; they respect Israel's right—and obligation—to defend its citizens.
But when we see outbreaks of blatant anti-Jewish violence, anti-Jewish rhetoric, anti-
Israel demonization—it surprises and pains us! In spite of thousands of years dealing with anti-
Jewish hatred and persecution, we still are not used to it. We somehow think that humanity will
improve, will judge us fairly. We grow optimistic at any sign of peace and understanding, mutual
cooperation, and solidarity.

We keep telling ourselves that most people are good and that reason will ultimately
prevail. The haters will eventually overcome malice and violence; they will realize the value of
peaceful and respectful cooperation. In a world of over seven billion human beings, surely there
must be room for the infinitesimal presence of 15 million Jews. In a world with so many
countries, surely there must be room for one tiny Jewish State that wants nothing more than to be
able to live in peace and security.

But the anti-Semites and anti-Zionists don't really care. They don't want to be reasoned
with; they don't want to listen. They have their agenda of hate.

Saul Bellow, the American novelist who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1976, wrote in his book To Jerusalem and Back: A Personal Account: "…There is one fact of Jewish
life unchanged by the creation of a Jewish state: you cannot take your right to live

for granted.
Others can; you cannot. This is not to say that everyone else is living pleasantly and well under a

decent regime. No, it means only that the Jews, because they are Jews, have never been able to
take the right to live as a natural right.…This right is still clearly not granted them, not even in
the liberal West."

Bellow's complaint is not new. Jews throughout the generations have had to face the
same stark reality: Jews, because they are Jews, cannot take the right to live as a natural right.
That's the sad part of the story.

But that's not the end of the story. Even if there has long been hatred and violence
directed against Jews…we are still here! We continue to live, to thrive, to hope.
The late Jewish thinker, Simon Rawidowicz, wrote an essay about "Israel: The Ever-
Dying People." He noted that Jews have often felt that theirs was the last Jewish generation.
Jewish survival seemed hopeless. But although we were "ever-dying," we were in fact ever-
living! We often felt despair; but hope and persistence prevailed. Jews found ways to overcome
all who would decimate us.

Although current manifestations of anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism are ugly and painful,
we must take the long view of things. This isn't the first period of Jewish history where Jews
faced viciousness and violence. It likely won't be the last period either. But long experience has
taught us to stay strong, stay confident, stay positive. The challenge to our generation is to stand
tall as Jews, to stand strong on behalf of Israel.

And we do look forward to a time when humanity will overcome the disease of anti-
Semitism. Meanwhile, we recall the words of Rav Nahman of Bratslav: All the world is a narrow
bridge; the essential thing is not to be afraid, not to be afraid at all.