Anti-Semitism? Thoughts for Parashat Emor

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Emor

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

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 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."

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.

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 eight 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.

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."

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.

We have drawn strength from the powerful teachings of our Torah. In this week's parasha we read that "you shall have one manner of law, as well for the stranger as for the homeborn; for I am the Lord your God" (Vayikra 24:22). Deep within us, we know that God has created all human beings and expects everyone to be treated fairly.

Current manifestations of anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism are ugly and painful, but we must take the long view of things. This isn't the first period of Jewish history when 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.