

Antisemitism

The Midrash recounts the following story:

A Jew passed in front of Hadrian [the Roman Emperor] and greeted him. The king asked, 'Who are you?' He answered, 'I am a Jew.'
He exclaimed, 'Does a Jew dare to pass in front of Hadrian and greet him!' He ordered, 'Take him and cut off his head.'
Another Jew passed, and seeing what had happened to the first man, did not greet him.
The king asked, 'Who are you?' He answered, 'A Jew.'
He exclaimed, 'Does a Jew dare to pass in front of Hadrian without giving greeting!' He ordered, 'Take him and cut off his head.'
His senators said to him, 'We cannot understand your actions. The one who greeted you was killed and the one who did not greet you was killed!' He replied to them, 'I do not need your advice about killing the people I hate'
[Lamentations Rabbah 3:20]

Why do so many people hate us Jews? Why do so many people hate us Americans?

Legions of scholars and pseudo-scholars have written mountains of books on the subject, providing us with 1,001 reasons why we ourselves are to blame for antisemitism. We are told we Jews are hated because we are greedy, domineering, scheming, deceitful, unscrupulous, clannish, arrogant, because we don't accept Jesus, because we killed Jesus, because we don't accept Muhammad, because we care for no one but ourselves, because our claim to divine chosenness infuriates others, because we are a convenient small and vulnerable scapegoat during hard times, because we incite fear by being too different, because we refuse to assimilate, because our loyalties are divided, because too many of us are on the left (or the right) of the political spectrum, because we support the State of Israel -- an illegal, bloodthirsty, and genocidal colonialist power. We

are told we don't interact enough with others and explain ourselves, and ignorance leads people to believe the most outrageous accusations against us, such as the blood libel or plots to take over the world. We are told most people believe there is no smoke without fire, and that if so many people hated the Jews for so long, there must be good reasons for it, and they might as well join in, etc., etc., ad nauseam.

There are two strong reasons to believe that these alleged reasons are, by and large, pretexts. First, antisemitism predated most of them. Second, other groups, perceived to be just as "guilty" as the Jews on many of these counts, were not hated, or at least not as consistently or to the same extent. Did you ever hear of anybody hating the Amish?

The real cause of anti-Semitism is staring at us right in the face in this week's Torah portion, Toldot. It is near the very beginning of the Torah, in the story of the patriarch Isaac, the first person born Jewish. Let me quote directly:

Then Isaac sowed in that land, and reaped in the same year a hundredfold; and the Lord blessed him.

And the man became rich, and gained more and more, until he became very wealthy.

He had possessions of flocks, and possessions of herds, and large numbers of servants. And the Philistines envied him.

And the Philistines stopped up all the wells which his father's servants had dug, in the days of Abraham his father, and filled them with earth.

And Abimelech [king of the Philistines] said to Isaac, 'Go away from us; because you are much mightier than we are.'

And Isaac departed from there, and encamped in the valley of Gerar, and dwelt there.

(Genesis 26:12-17)

So, to summarize, Isaac lives peacefully among his neighbors, then, through hard and honest work, becomes fabulously wealthy and powerful. So his neighbors hate him, then harm him by depriving him of water – the very source of life – and finally expel him.

There you have it, the *only* reason for antisemitism, right at the beginning of the Torah, in the story of the very first person born Jewish. Jealousy. Envy of those who are perceived as more

successful, more prosperous, more intelligent, who have more of the qualities or achievements perceived as desirable. Antisemites never acknowledge this reason because it makes *them* look bad, and Jews don't publicize it for fear of exacerbating antisemitism. That's why you don't hear much about it.

This reason is not the same as the so-called "disparity of wealth among the nations", that is often bandied about. The division of the world into the haves and the have-nots is a myth. The Earth is rich in natural resources almost everywhere. The real division in the world is between the well-managed and the mismanaged. There are plenty of countries that enjoy prosperity and achievement in spite of being poor in natural resources. Israel comes to mind. And there are even more countries that are basically rich, yet whose people live in squalor, poverty and ignorance, because of corruption, oppression and mismanagement on the part of their leaders.

Jealousy is deeply rooted in human nature. As the old Jewish saying goes, "We anger God with our vices and men with our virtues". So important is the need to control this feeling that the Torah found it necessary to include, right up there in the Ten Commandments, "You will not covet."

Jews and Americans are prime victims of this phenomenon.

Jews are perceived as successful -- not always individually, to be sure, but certainly as a group:

- Material wealth is the most visible aspect of this success, but it is not the only one.

- Jews also possess intellectual wealth: Only one person in 350 is Jewish in the world, yet one Nobel Prize in 3 or 4 goes to a Jew. So Jews are getting Nobel prizes at a rate 100 times higher than you might expect given their small numbers.

- Jews exhibit military prowess -- tiny Israel victorious against large and mighty Arab armies

- Jews exhibit economic prowess -- Israel's meteoric rise in the world of modernity and technology

- Jews enjoy disproportional representation in the professions (physicians, lawyers, accountants, teachers, researchers, etc.), disproportional representation among holders of college degrees,

disproportional representation wherever revolutionary ideas are brewing, and the influence that comes with all these achievements. -And the biblical teaching that the Jews are the "chosen people" only exacerbates this feeling of jealousy.

Rising anti-Americanism in the world drinks from the same source. A nation cannot be the world's only superpower, the world's richest nation, the world's most technologically advanced nation, a fairly generous and sharing nation, a nation where freedom and democracy reign supreme, a nation that, while not perfect, contains within its institutions the seeds for continual improvement and renewal, without inciting envy and enmity. Those who believe that the United States (or Israel, for that matter) will be more loved and respected throughout the world if only it would change this or that policy are dangerously deluded.

Unfortunately, jealousy is the most intractable of all grievances, because no amount of goodwill and generosity can alter it. As the saying goes, "No good deed goes unpunished". Any initiative, any form of interaction, however well-intentioned, can, and will, be viewed as patronizing and condescending. It may even exacerbate it. People are proud and resent what they perceive as pity, handouts, or charity. This is all the more true if their own country or ethnic group was dominant in the past: It's tough to be a has-been. This goes a long way towards explaining the attitudes and actions of some European countries or the Islamic world.

So what can be done to prevent matters from reaching the boiling point?

Act humble? Not only would this be contrary to human nature, but others would see through it. There is much wisdom in Golda Meir's tongue-in-cheek comment, "Don't be so humble. You are not that great." Certainly, being careful to eliminate the appearance of arrogance or cockiness would help, but only at the margin, because the root cause would still be there.

Reduce achievement? "Dumb yourself down"? This is so contrary to human nature that it is not worth discussing as a serious option.

Even its weaker companion, "Letting others take the credit for your achievements", is totally unrealistic.

Retreat into isolationism? Actively promote complete separation between the successful and the less successful? In today's interconnected world, this is practically impossible. Economies must always expand into new markets. Ethical concerns do not allow us to deny, say, new drugs, even to potential adversaries. Interaction also prevents dangerous misunderstandings. Finally, progress in all fields requires as much collaboration as possible.

Proselytize and conquer? Tell others: "Join us and you'll get the benefits for which you resent us so much?" For the Jews, it would mean trying to convert others to Judaism. For the United States, it would mean conquering and annexing other countries. Although such methods *have* met with partial success in history, they go against the basic principles of both groups, which include letting people make their own choices freely. And, some say, the sudden and massive infusion of outsiders in any group will change the character and values of the group.

There is only one possible conclusion. The successful must learn to live with the inevitable consequences of their success. This means, first and foremost, protecting themselves, being strong, and never letting their guard down, as they are likely to be continually attacked. They must also strive to keep their ethical principles and ideals, and not allow themselves to go down to the level of those who resent them. This includes continuing to share what they have to offer with the world. Fortunately, such a course of action is possible in the case of the Jews (thanks to Israel) and in the case the United States (thanks to its size and power).

This, too, is a form of peace. Peace is, at its root, the absence of war. One certainly hopes that it would also include friendship, love, respect, tolerance, cooperation, collaboration, civil interaction, cultural exchanges, trade relations -- but these are not essential to avoid the death and destruction that accompanies war. As the saying goes, "A cold peace is better than a hot war."

Unless ways to alter basic human nature are discovered, this is the best we can do.

In conclusion, all I can do is repeat what Joshua told the Israelites in the Book of Joshua:

Chazzak ve'ematz – Be strong and of good courage. Do not be afraid and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.
[Joshua 1:9]

Shabbat shalom.