



The Parsha in Practice

The Light vs. the Flag

Earlier this week, we were shocked to hear of the breach of the North Shore Hebrew Academy High School's website and of the abhorrent, Anti-Semitic material that was posted to the site and sent to students and faculty. None of these images or messages were new, innovative, or different as Anti-Semitic rhetoric goes, but this feels altogether different this time, because it targeted our community. We are often under the illusion that somehow, Anti-Semitism is "their" problem (whoever the "they" is), not ours, but these illusions disappear as we now find it in our backyard and in our inbox and see firsthand how well the forces behind it know how to find us.



As Chanukah wanes away¹, it's important to remember that Chanukah - like Purim before it - was created by the Rabbis as a celebration of victories against Anti-Semitism. The respective threats of the Purim and Chanukah stories were different, but the vilification and intolerance of Jews and Jewish practice have long been the fuel that has flamed the Anti-Semites. [The famous picture](#) above, taken in Germany in 1932 reminds us that this is not a new issue, nor is it one that will soon be resolved.

It appears in our Parsha as well. Towards the end of Mikeitz, after Binyamin is finally brought to Egypt, Yosef is emotionally overwhelmed seeing him and has a difficult time maintaining his composure and so he escapes into another room to weep. He cleans up, returns, and then orders that a meal be served:

וַיִּשְׂמוּ לוֹ לְבַדּוֹ וְלָהֶם לְבַדָּם וְלַמִּצְרַיִם הָאֲכָלִים אֹתוֹ לְבַדָּם כִּי לֹא יוּכְלוּן הַמִּצְרַיִם לֶאֱכֹל אֶת־הַעֲבָרִים לֶחֶם פִּיתוּעָה הוּא לַמִּצְרַיִם:

¹ As if this year wasn't strange enough, now the calendar is conspiring against us. Parshat Mikeitz is almost always Shabbat Chanukah, but is not this year. When the last day of Chanuka falls as it does today, on a Friday, we have Asara b'Tevet on a Friday (next week), Purim on a Friday (and on Shabbat in Jerusalem), and Shabbat as Erev Pesach.

They served him by himself, and them by themselves, and the Egyptians who ate with him by themselves; for the Egyptians could not dine with the Hebrews, since that would be abhorrent to the Egyptians.

We presume that Yosef ate alone because that was the way of royalty, or because he feared he would lose himself again, but why did the Egyptians find it abhorrent to eat with the Jewish children of Yaakov? Why couldn't they tolerate eating together? Reasons abound. To some, it was specifically about the menu. The meat that Jews would eat was a sacrilege to the Egyptians who would worship the cattle. To others, it was the career that the Jews choose, shepherding cattle, which the Egyptians found offensive. To yet others, it was the arrogance of the Egyptians that did not allow them to eat with these foreigners. Honestly, does it even matter?

There's something remarkable about how long we've been debating the same questions: Why are there those who hate the Jewish people? Why won't they sit at our table and what will it take for them to finally let us sit at theirs? Is it really just the Kosher food that gets in the way?

From the time of Yosef till today, it doesn't seem that we've yet succeeded in answering these questions. We are still occupied with trying to figure out whether Anti-Semitism is a bug of the system, or a feature. There is no question that activism, education, and partnerships can help, but perhaps part of living a Torah life and living with the goal of shining the "light unto the nations" is about being under the spotlight, and under the harsh analysis of those who will create double standards where nothing the Jews does is ever "good enough." Clearly, this moral and ethical light also casts an unwelcome glare on others as well, and they simply can't tolerate it.

This seems to be what the Gemara in Shabbat (89a) means when it explains: *"What is the reason it is called Mount Sinai? It is because it is a mountain upon which hatred [sina] for the nations of the world descended because they did not accept the Torah."* It's the Torah itself that is identified as the root of Anti-Semitism. It is its goal of reflection, of change, of self- and world-improvement that we are to work towards that bring resentment and hatred. It's not a particular action that brings hate, it's our particularistic mission that does.

I believe that Anti-Semitism isn't a stubborn bug, it's a frightening feature. While we might be able to mitigate it somewhat, we need to unite together as Jews to ensure that we are never flanked and offer gratitude for those individuals and communities who align with us in battling this hatred. Most of all, we must remember the line written on the back of the picture above by Rachel Posner (who took the famous picture as well): *"Death to Judah' so the flag says. 'Judah will love forever,' so the light answers."*

Shabbat Shalom,

Shmuel Ismach