

Je Suis Charlie: It's a new day ... or is it?

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Dear Friends,

There is a poignant midrash which explains how Abraham came to be known as the first Hebrew. The midrash suggests that the word "Hebrew" has a root which means "across" or "on the other side." Abraham, the father of the Jewish People, the first Hebrew, became our Patriarch by standing on the other side. When the whole world stood on one side, Abraham stood on the other. It has been that way ever since.

From the time of Abraham, on more occasions that one can count, we have stood on "the other side" and been perceived by the world as a People which stands apart. And often, the qualities of separateness and distinction have made it easy for non-Jews to point to the Jews as a People which is different, apart. We have been easy prey for our detractors. We are easy to demonize. We are, it appears, easy to hate.

One could not help but be impressed by the fact that a million people gathered this week in Paris in a show of solidarity. With flags and signs which read "Je Suis Charlie," the throngs had come to Paris, to the Plaza of the Republic, to demonstrate unity and support in the wake of the horrific terrorist attacks in Paris. According to the news, which I watched from Israel, switching between the BBC and the Israeli coverage, there was a sense that "things had changed," that "today is a new day."

At the front of the crowd were the leaders of dozens of nations, walking arm in arm, creating a scene reminiscent of the Freedom March of Selma, Alabama in the early 60s. In addition to the leaders of the countries of Western Europe and leaders from African nations, Prime Minister Netanyahu from Israel, and even Mahmoud Abbas, the leader of the Palestinian Authority, insisted on being seen at the front line of the march. Everyone, it seemed, wanted to appear as if they were "out in front," leading the movement. It seemed as if everyone wanted to make the point that they were the real Charlie! They are the ones, the real ones, who oppose Radical Islam.

I could not help my cynicism from surfacing as I watched the events unfolding. Anxious as I am for the world to recognize Radical Islam for what it is, I wondered if the “Million Charlie March” would, in fact, finally focus its attention on terrorism and the unrepentant murder of innocent people. Although I listened carefully, I did not hear that message. What I heard, all I heard, was “I am / Je suis Charlie.”

As the commentators on the BBC gushed over how many people had shown up, they were anxious, as well, to point out that the murderous rampage against the magazine staff and the Jews at the kosher market was perpetrated by a “fringe group” of Moslems, not the kind of “moderate Moslems which characterize the vast majority of Moslems in France.” The vast majority of Moslems in France, we were reassured, are moderates. (This statement, intended to placate the nerves of every concerned person, did not persuade me to relax. One must consider the fact that there are well over 1 billion Moslems in the world. If, at the “fringes” of Islam, there is only 1% of the entire Islamic population, that 1% would equal ten million people. The fact that only 1%, of Moslems identify with the radicalized fringe of Islam, 10 million people world-wide, is not a comforting thought).

As I watched the march, as I watched all of the world leaders standing together in the front of the crowd, I was moved by the all-too-rare realization that we are capable of being united by our common sense of humanity, by our common concern for all life and by our shared desire to live with each other in peace. The March in Paris made a powerful, purposeful statement to the world: “today is, indeed, a new day.”

At the same time, however, it occurred to me that the deeper question in France is neither about how many people came to support “Charlie” nor about the number of Radicalized Moslems in the world. What is important is not that “today is a new day.” Rather, what is most important is that tomorrow must be a “new day,” as well. With this new spirit of solidarity, will all the marchers, and the assembly of world leaders who stood this week with the victims and who proclaimed their opposition to terrorism, be willing to stand up to Radical Islam and terror tomorrow? I would like to be persuaded to say yes but, from all I can see, I must say no.

In the news reports which have been printed since the march, the good will and sense of solidarity which seemed to permeate the crowd, has already dissipated. Already, Arab leaders have renewed their relentless verbal attacks on Israel. The sniping has returned so that in this “new day” we can already see the return of the familiar lies and distortions, utilized by so many, to justify hatred and enmity. Within days of the attacks, the terror perpetrated has been relegated to history so that,

once again, “we can return to our familiar practice of demonizing Israel and planning for the next terrorist attack.”

While assurances and sympathies were offered by President Hollande, and delivered to the Jewish community in the Central Synagogue, French Jews have already started to pack in preparation for their moves to Israel. And, Baruch Ha – Shem / thank God, we have a strong and well-fortified Jewish Homeland to receive them.

There is no doubt that our world needs a new day, a new approach, a new level of comprehension which can allow a different narrative to be told, a narrative which replaces words like “militants” and “rogue forces” with words like “Radical Islam,” “evil” and “terrorist.” As we extend our heartfelt condolences to the friends and families of the “Charlie” staff who were killed, to the families and friends of the four Jewish and the other victims, we are painfully aware of the need for that new day.

Unfortunately, the renewed denigration of Prime Minister Netanyahu and the further threats against the state of Israel, confirm that the “new day” for which we yearn has either passed before we knew it had arrived or it has yet to arrive. And the forecast for tomorrow remains static: next week will be the same as last week, this year much the same as last. There is no “new day” yet in sight. The story told in the future, to my chagrin, will sound very much like the one we have told over and over again for centuries past. It is the same as the story told at the beginning, when Abraham stood on one side and the rest of the world stood against him on the other.

B'Shalom,

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