

Responding to Hate: The Perennial Challenge, The Perennial Choice

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Rabbi Neil S. Cooper

Yesterday I began with the questions: Where are we? And where are we going? Today, however, I am a bit nostalgic and would like to return to the beginning, to the sermons and messages which I delivered as I began my tenure as your rabbi some thirty years ago. I wanted to look at where you and I have been, to re-consider some of the perennial themes and problems we have confronted. I begin with the topic of Israel in 1991.

In 1991 I entered the High Holidays with the excitement about this vibrant and prominent community, mixed with an equal amount of apprehension and trepidation about the enormity of the job I had accepted. (What was I thinking?!) And I arrived, immediately following the Gulf War with Iraq with a realization forced upon us by those SCUD missiles fired at Israel: a reminder of Jewish vulnerability.

Residing just below the surface of our sense of pride and security as Jews in this country, was the reality that Israel could be hit and might not be invincible. I recalled that feeling from the Yom Kippur War, eighteen years earlier, when Israel came within a hair's-breadth of defeat and destruction.

In my sermons over those first High Holidays, I spoke of Israel's vulnerability, about those who hate us, and of the need to re-double our commitments to support the Jewish State. But, in response to that sermon, immediately after the holidays, I received lesson #1 about our sophisticated, intelligent, and diverse community. I got "schooled", early on, in what diversity of opinions would look like here and, for the first time, was confronted by congregants harboring sentiments which felt less like constructive criticism and more like the kind of anti-Israel sentiments one might hear from our detractors. One former member took exception to my support of the Jewish State, telling me that he considered Israel's treatment of the Palestinians, similar to the treatment of European Jews during WWII by the Nazis. That conversation, did not end well.

Beyond that extreme example, for better or for worse, over the past thirty years I have gotten used to receiving criticisms of what some have seen as my reflexive support of Israel. Many of those critics, understandingly, have migrated to other congregations where criticism of Israel is more acceptable and, perhaps, expected.

The irony in all of this, however, is that, as a frequent visitor to Israel who has spent a great deal of time there, there is a lot about Israel that I cannot stand. There is a lot which makes me angry. There are aspects of Israeli society and policies which belie the promises made in Israel's own Declaration of Independence, particularly in its treatment of Israeli Arabs. One sees it in the streets, at checkpoints and shopping at the local supermarket: Arabs are treated differently and "different" here means "worse". There is no question that Israel must improve its relationship with the Arab population within her borders.

There are other aspects of Israel which I find objectionable and even infuriating. I am angry and deeply offended at Israel's treatment of Conservative rabbis and Conservative Judaism in general, and all of the rabbis and streams of Judaism not associated with Orthodoxy. And then there is the over-bureaucratized and inefficient administrative and political processes, not to mention its generally annoying societal norms. Can't stand them! But there is a world of difference between criticizing Israel's policies, or Israel's leaders or Israel's bureaucracy and questioning Israel's right to exist.

Shortly after my arrival here, the vulnerability of Israelis needed to be considered once again, when the next threats arrived in the form of the first and, later, the second intifada. Suddenly busses were being blown to bits while packed with riders traveling to or from work or school. Suddenly, Israelis were walking down the street, fearing that an innocent looking man or woman approaching from the other direction, or shopping in a supermarket next to someone, or sitting in a movie theater in front of someone who might, without warning, draw a knife and start attacking, resulting in carnage and death. Israelis have lived with constant threats of murder, mayhem, and destruction.

I remember those days and those who took me to task, even then. They were sorry, they said, for the loss of life, but had the temerity to assert that Israel had brought these attacks upon

herself because of Israel's repressive policies related to the Palestinians. (Another conversation which did not end well).

The army of Israel, of course, is among the most powerful, well-trained, and skilled in the world. Yet even the IDF could not provide protection from random acts of violence and a culture of terrorism which now seemed pervasive. Now, armies were not the only soldiers. Now, all Israelis, by definition, were considered warriors against the Palestinian Freedom Fighters. Any, and all, Israelis were considered legitimate targets. And as diplomatic and negotiated solutions were proposed and rejected, most notably the Oslo Accords, prospects for peace diminished and fuel for future confrontations, large and small, would be stockpiled, waiting for the right moment to be ignited.

I spoke out in what I considered to be, carefully measured terms, with comments I thought would be important and valuable to convey. But again, some were quick to point out the imbalance of my position, how I expressed concern for Israel but not for the plight of the Palestinians. I do not remember the words I used when I responded to these challenges. Allow me to use this moment, therefore, to respond in the clearest way I can:

I am deeply concerned about the plight of the Palestinians. They deserve better treatment within Israeli society. They deserve more attention and more help addressing the unique problems of Palestinian society. Israeli Arabs need an Israeli government willing and able to improve their economic opportunities, provide greater access to education and create programs so that they can be integrated more fully into Israeli society. I am not proud of the fact that their towns have been neglected and must be upgraded with modern and improved infrastructure and with services which the rest of Israel has come to expect. Israel must do this, not only because it is the right thing to do, not only because the disparity in living standards is so glaring, but because caring for the Arab Israeli population is in Israel's best interest.

Israeli Arabs and their leaders have had little to lose in their confrontations with the State of Israel. They have little to recommend self-restrain in opposing Israel and the Israeli government, because, they reason, how much worse can our situation become. That must change. And I hope the new coalition will be successful in addressing these pressing needs so

that the Israeli Arab population will want to avoid confrontation rather than risk losing a more comfortable and satisfying way of life.

But here is the other point I wish to make loud and clear: it is not my responsibility, nor my job, to advocate for the Palestinians or for anyone other than the Jewish People and Israel. We live in the arena in which it is the Jewish People are called upon to fight. And I fight with Israel and the Jewish People. And I have advocated strongly for both. And that advocacy has never been more important.

My friends, for the past thirty years I have used the High Holidays each year to speak about Israel not because I am blind to her flaws and not because I am blind to the many ways that Israel could and should improve her image, her behavior or her commitment to the values which were stated explicitly when Israel declared its independence. Reading the sermons I have delivered about Israel, year after year, has reminded me, and reinforced within me, the absolute necessity of the support of Israel by America and by American Jews.

I have spoken about Israel because Israel is the national homeland of the Jewish People.

I have spoken about Israel because Israel provides for the Jewish people the unique opportunity to help build a Jewish State, guided, and inspired by Jewish values and Jewish Tradition, a state which brings pride to the Jewish People, light, and hope to the world.

I have spoken about Israel because there is no place in this world, not today or at any point throughout world history, which would make it their priority and their promise to take care of the Jewish People other than Israel.

When WWII began, Jews had nowhere to go. No country would take us. No army would defend us. And we know how that ended up. And it is up to us and only us, the Jewish People, to assure that will never happen again. And, it is our moral responsibility, given all that we have endured, to extend our hand to the Afghanis, some of whom are arriving in this country. We know how they must feel. We know what it is

like to have no where to go and no one. We know that this world must respond to them differently than it responded to us.

Shame on the world for turning away from us while 6 million of our people were exterminated. Shame on those countries which refuse now, again, to receive those escaping death and seeking asylum.

But, when it comes to the Jewish People, shame on us if we do not make certain, working daily, if need be, to assure that, no matter the challenge or threat, there will always be a safe place for Jews in this world. Shame on us if there should ever be a time when we are not there to care for our own people.

And shame on us if that promise is not kept.

In speaking about Israel, however, another topic is inextricably part of the discussion. The topic of hate seems unavoidable.

Israel came into existence located geographically with five Arab countries touching its borders, none of which wanted Israel there and all of which professing hatred of Israel. And that hatred of Israel has remained. Since the founding of the State of Israel in 1948, the list of countries which have professed their hatred of Israel, in various forums and occasions, isimpressive. Hatred of Israel is ensconced as a permanent fixture in the United Nations. No country in the world, not Iran, Iraq, China, North Korea nor any other brutal and evil dictatorship has been singled out for defamation, criticism and delegitimization more than Israel. In fact, all the UN Security Council resolutions criticizing all other countries **combined** does not approach the number of times the UN Security Council have censured Israel.

This focus on Israel is not simply a response to perceived crimes perpetrated by Israel. This is a response to a country which is the homeland of the most hated most people in all human history. The hatred of Jews and Israel is a reflection, I believe, of the overall index of hate in this world. Jews may be the first, and most hated, in all of human history, but we certainly are not the only, or the last who shall be hated. Those who hate do not limit their hate to only one

people or one nation. And, no matter how one measures hate, we are witnessing today, a hatred index which is increasing nationally and internationally.

Whether speaking, over the years, of and condemning Apartheid of South Africa, neo-Naziism, tribal wars in Africa, not to mention racism, discrimination and attacks against the LBGTQ+ community, and let us not forget good old-fashioned Jew-hatred, hatred is a constant, dominant and deeply troubling theme which finds a place, it seems, in every corner of this world. We have witnessed the global re-emergence of virulent hate groups and philosophies. Hatred has been a motivating, galvanizing and energizing force in many societies, including our own.

In January, the Capital Building in Washington DC was stormed and occupied by a group of people, seemingly disconnected from one another in many ways, but unified by a single, deep-seated emotion: hatred. Hatred for the United States. Hatred for the electoral process. Hatred of anyone not, in their estimation, a real American. Hatred of Arabs. Hatred of Jews. The list seems endless.

We have watched, televised for all to see, the deliberate killing of blacks, the unprovoked and racist attacks on Asians and on immigrants. And, again, we have seen a precipitous and unmistakable rise in anti-Semitic attacks. Those attacks, according to the ADL, out-number the hate crimes committed against all other “hated groups” combined. Half of American Jews report feeling less safe and more threatened as Jews today than ever before in this country.

Hatred, as you know, comes in many forms. The white-hooded gatherings of White Supremacists are blatant examples of hate. But more dangerous, I believe, because they are subtle and can be easily, if not willfully, over-looked, are the more socially acceptable forms of hatred. We have become a society overly-tolerant of police brutality, and of racism within the ranks of law enforcement and many others in US cities large and small.

And now, anti-Semitism has become main-streamed. Anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism bring strong, inspiring, and respected voices to the campuses of many universities and other forums. Political leaders and academics have tried to convince us that anti-Zionism is not anti-Semitism, but the distinction escapes most serious observers.

If academics and politically-far-left individuals were not expressing the hatred of Israel alone, one might be able to consider their points worthy of response and discussion. One might consider a speaker to be a person integrity if Israel is one of many countries criticized, rightly or wrongly, for real or imagined human-rights, abuses and their excesses. Were academics, mainline Protestant churches or political leaders in Europe incensed at the gross injustices committed by the most repressive regimes in the world, they would call for demonstrations and international outcries against Iran, China, and Russia. But that is not the case. When one country or one people is singled out for abuse and hate, while other countries and peoples are given a free pass, that criticism is discriminatory and unbalanced and, to my mind, anti-Semitic. And, if you think I am exaggerating, ask yourself how many churches you know that have put in new, enhanced security systems in their buildings and hired security guards to monitor who comes and who leaves?

A demonstration was held here in Philadelphia, at the start of the summer, in support of Palestinians and Hamas in the eleven-day war. Palestinian supporters had boarded their bus on the way to that demonstration. And that bus passed in front of our synagogue, on Remington Road. Needless to say, no route to Center City includes a trip down Remington Road. That circuitous route was taken only to bring the bus to the front of our synagogue. As they drove by, with Palestinian flags and pro-Palestinian signs flapping in the wind, they shouted at those in our parking lot, anti-Semitic epithets, along with their suggestions regarding what should happen to the Jews and, perhaps in the meantime, what we should do to ourselves.

There is no reason to target American Jews if this conflict is only about Israel. But those on that bus knew instinctively that Israel was an extension of Judaism, that because synagogues are bastions of support for Israel, Jews are legitimate targets of hate. So, in case someone asserts that anti-Zionism is not anti-Semitism, share with them the path taken by that bus. The demonization of Israel and the hatred of Jews it brings with it, finds a way to infect every city and state, including our own.

There is a saying about the weather: everyone talks about it, but no one does anything about it. This cannot be said about hatred. There are no quick fixes, of course. But here are things we can do to address the issue of hate in this world, a hatred which began with Cain and Abel and continues to this day.

At the beginning of the summer, we hosted an afternoon of socializing with the members of the Mt. Hermon Baptist Church. Located on the other side of City Ave., our members and those of the church might just as well lived a thousand miles apart. But, through my friendship with their Pastor, Bishop Hayward Clemmons Smith, we connected our two communities. Our respective membership committees got together, found a date, agreed on a location at which we might gather...not just as Jews and Christians, not as blacks and whites. Just a gathering between people.

What occurred was impressive, unusual, and astoundingly simple: something to eat, something to drink and a place to gather. And the result, what emerged was a sense of commonality between people of faith, a sense of connection between people who love their respective communities, and the facilitation of camaraderie between people. All of this made for a pleasant afternoon. And all of this illuminated a profound message which we all understood.

V'ahavta li-rei'echa kamocha / embrace your neighbor as you would like to be embraced.

Arguably, the most important and fundamental lesson of the Torah, this a lesson on which people of any faith or of no faith, should be able to agree.

This verse brings to mind the protracted war between Palestinians and Israelis. It reminds us that we must, somehow, put behind us the past and ask ourselves the toughest question there is:

Do we want to be right, or do we want peace?

We can remind ourselves and the world, until we are blue in the face, that we are right, that the Palestinian leadership has, time after time, rejected us, so we need not return to them with anything other than disdain. But being right has not, and will never, bring peace. Peace will not emerge from hate. Peace will not come from being right. Peace emerges when two enemies are able to say: enough, when enemies are able to embrace.

When the Torah tells us: *ve'ahavta le'rei'echa kamocha*, the Torah is telling us to choose. It is that simple and that profound. Yet, from the black community, the Asian community, the Jewish Community and the LBGTQ+ community, the realization of that message is something quite remote.

I conclude with two stories:

First is a beautiful Chasidic story of a distraught student who approaches his rabbi. The student relates to the Rebbe his experiences, trying to bring this message of loving your neighbor, to the world, but he found very few people interested in his message:

I have tried here, in our shtetl, but had not success. I went on to the next town and the next, but I no one was interested. I went from country to country, and, still, I could not find anyone who would join me. What should I do?

The Rebbe listened intently and finally responded: My son, you have done well to take upon yourself the mitzvah of loving each other. Unfortunately, you have been walking in the wrong direction. All you need to do is to turn around. You must choose a different path until you find those who will listen.

To bring that concept of "*ve-ahavta*" into our world, to fundamentally change the world and find peace, we must choose a different path, a path of acceptance, a path which enables us to embrace, a path that inspires hope.

And second: a man and his son are on their home from a long day of work. They have earned just enough money to provide a meager meal before going to sleep. But as they approached their home, a beggar appears: Please, he said, I have nothing to eat. Can you spare any money

for me? Without hesitation, the man puts the money from himself and his son into the beggar's hand.

When they arrive at their home, the son is livid: How could you? Now we have no food!

The father smiled and said: My son, a person can live for three weeks without food. A person can live for three days without water. But a person cannot make it through the night without hope. I did not give him money. I gave the beggar hope.

My friends, this world has brought the Jewish Community to the arena of hate, animosity, and mistrust. When faced with hate and violence, we must and will stand strongly against it and be prepared to defend ourselves against those attacks. But we can also look for a different path. Some adults are just too old to learn, but I put my faith in children. We can teach our children to choose not to hate. We can teach our children how to embrace. We can teach them to take the path of hope, to give hope, to choose hope. And that decision, that choice, for us and our children, is in our hands.